

THE QUILT AS TEXT:
READING WOMEN'S CULTURE IN AMERICAN SHORT STORIES (1845-1988)

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To Brian and my mother

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Some theoretical accounts of the genesis of writing have emphasized the parallelisms that exist between the pen and the penis and interpreted literary production following the model of Biblical Creation according to which both God and the writer *father* their respective creations—universe, written text—using their phalli.¹ Thus, “the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman* 6). This explanation excludes women, who lack the phallic generator, from the production of written texts, reducing their participation in literature to that of literary objects, a passive role which they have always been allowed to play.

Theoretical issues aside, women’s access to the pen has been hindered by a series of socio-economic and cultural barriers which men did not have to face. Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One’s Own* that, in order to create literature, it was essential for a female to have a certain amount of money, which stood for “the power to contemplate,” and a lock on the door, which represented “the power to think for oneself” (101). Woolf wrote from the point of view of an affluent, white, upper-middle-class woman and, from such a privileged position, took for granted, among several other things, that women *could* write. This has not always been so. As I will explain in chapters one and three, poor

¹ Also inspired by biological processes, the childbirth metaphor represents an alternative explanation. Used by both men and women to explain their creative process, the childbirth metaphor differs from the above theory in that it does validate women’s experience. Although very popular among French proponents of *l’écriture féminine*, some feminist scholars have argued that body-linked images always exclude one sex and that the childbirth metaphor in particular does not emphasize women’s intellectual potential because it divides creation into male production (an activity of the mind) and female procreation (an activity of the body) (Friedman, “Creativity” 74-75).

educational opportunities thwarted the ambitions of many American females, preventing them from expressing themselves through the pen.

Furthermore, for most of the 1800s the prevailing ideology, the so-called ideology of the separate spheres and the concomitant cult of True Womanhood, prescribed compulsory submissiveness and domesticity for females. Since writing not only requires some self-assertion on the part of the author but also implies a certain degree of public exposure if the work is finally published, women who created literature in nineteenth-century America openly challenged and undermined the basic principles on which the prevalent definition of womanhood rested. As a consequence, nineteenth-century women writers were made to perceive their literary ambitions as a denial of their femininity. When women finally took the forbidden pen in considerable numbers, their literary contributions were disparaged by the male rulers of a canon which favored the themes male literature explored at the expense of silencing those of women's works. Taking into account these determinants, few nineteenth-century American women were able to produce conventional, written texts.

It is my belief that those women who could not leave a penned record of their lives used quilts as surrogate texts in which they explored their unique vision of the world. Quilts are the texts that we would find if, following Alice Walker's advice in her celebrated essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," where she claims that women have expressed themselves through their gardens and their quilts, we looked "low" instead of "high" (46). In this dissertation I will not only explain that American women resorted to actual quilts in order to express themselves but also, and more importantly, I will show how in their fiction quilts figure prominently as a metaphor for a text through

which it is possible to read different aspects of women's culture. I will, in summary, claim that American women authors have blurred the dividing line between text and textile by using quilts as surrogate texts where they comment on the issues that concern females most directly.

I will make an attempt to read women's culture through fictional quilts, through women's own texts rather than through texts written about them. In literary criticism this approach may be relatively innovative, but in fiction produced by females it is not. As early as 1845, Annette devoted her short story "The Patchwork Quilt" to explaining her own experiences as a female through the different scraps she had incorporated in her quilt. In spite of this, quilts remained largely ignored as texts until quite recently, when the feminist movement and the emergence of women's studies departments started to focus on unconventional ways to approach women's lives.

For several reasons, the research done by feminist critics has proven essential for this dissertation. On the one hand, without the efforts they made in order to recover women's texts that the process of canonization in American literature had sentenced to oblivion, many of the works I have used would have been totally unavailable. On the other hand, I am particularly indebted to those critics whose academic essays have pointed out the relationship between the needle and the pen, between sewing and writing. Articles such as Elaine Showalter's "Piecing and Writing" and Elaine Hedges' "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work," as well as Judy Elsley's book *Quilts as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting* have proven invaluable in helping me understand different critical viewpoints regarding women's sewn artifacts.

These works have decidedly been a source of inspiration for my own research but I have not consciously tried to follow any of their individual approaches to needlework. Unlike Showalter's article, this dissertation has not been conceived to explore the relationship between a particular variety of needlework and the various forms that American women's writing has adopted through the different historical periods. In fact, I have chosen to concentrate exclusively on the short story. This dissertation also differs significantly from "The Needle or the Pen." Hedges' article relies on both fiction and non-fiction, whereas this study is limited to one genre. Also, while Hedges' analysis concentrates on problematic relationships between women writers and the needle, my intention is neither to idealize the quilt as an empowering tool nor to portray it as a symbol of women's subordination in patriarchal society or as the antagonistic force that female litterateurs had to defeat—or at least flee from—so as to demonstrate their intellectual seriousness. Finally, Elsley's book, whose title may deceptively induce one to see similarities between her arguments and mine, is a structurally quilt-like study which includes several chapters which do not revolve around quilts in literature. Furthermore, it explores in detail a variety of contents—personal experiences with quilters, information on renowned quilts and their specific political uses—which could only occupy a marginal space in a study of quilts in fiction.

In my analysis, which concentrates on quilts in short stories, I particularly try to demonstrate that the fictional quilt can be interpreted as a metaphor for the written text and, therefore, offer invaluable information on women's culture. It is my intention to show that through fictional quilts it is not only possible to study the difficulties women faced in order to create a text(ile) but also to analyze some of the topics that have most

frequently emerged in women's fiction. Moreover, I intend to prove that, paralleling feminist efforts to revive silenced women's literature, female writers created short stories where characters claim, rather than make, quilts as texts through which they seek access to their cultural heritage as women. Because quilts represent a text(ile) whose relevance has traditionally been determined by women's social position and, therefore, has been largely overlooked when not outright ignored, quilts constitute a text that has often managed to escape patriarchal control. Consequently, a study of works which feature this type of text(ile) should be able to offer a version of women's culture from the inside.

An analysis of female culture through quilts can be justified by the fact that needlework has traditionally been an integral part of women's lives. Norma Johnsen notes that "[e]ven at the end of the nineteenth century, most apparel was homesewn, and all girls were taught needle skills. Consequently, writing women often clothed their literary visions in the woven materials that covered furniture, adorned beds, and dressed bodies, rather than borrowing the whales, forests and ledgers that inspired men" (43). Quilts were incorporated into women's fiction because they were part of their female cultural background. Thus, by studying quilts one is directly gaining access to women's culture. In addition to that, shared etymological origins between words such as *text* and *textile* or *fabric* and *fabrication* seem to indicate that the construction of elements made with cloth is relatively similar to the creation of word-based stories, a reason that would also justify interpreting a textile as a text.

By arguing for the textuality of quilts, I do not intend to question or rewrite traditional accounts of Western culture, but simply to add a different perspective, one that uses quilts rather than traditional documents as the major source of information, one that

privileges the private accounts of women's lives instead of public events. In order to elucidate all these ideas, I have selected a corpus of fourteen short stories which span from the mid nineteenth to the late twentieth century. Twelve of them were written by women and two, George Washington Harris's "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" and T. S. Arthur's "The Quilting Party," by males. The decision to include short stories written by men about an artistic form that has traditionally been considered female has at least a double purpose. On the one hand, I seek to provide contrast between literature created with a female audience in mind and fiction intended for a male readership—that is, between short stories written for more or less experienced quilters, who were fully aware of the relevance quilts had in women's lives, and those composed for readers situated outside the community of needlewomen who lacked any practical quilting knowledge. On the other hand, the inclusive, agglutinative nature of quilts seemed to require the incorporation of fiction written by men, especially if we bear in mind that males were sometimes taught how to sew before the cult of True Womanhood turned needlework into an inherently feminine activity and, therefore, metamorphosed it into a gendered practice from which men were mostly excluded. Some males, including President Calvin Coolidge, who did all the piecing for a "Tumbling Blocks" bedcover his wife eventually quilted, sewed even in the late 1800s (Schabel 11).

The earliest of these fourteen short stories, Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt," was published in 1845. The latest ones, Bobbie Ann Mason's "Love Life" and Paula Kay Martin's "The Quilt Addict," came out in 1988. Thus, this corpus roughly comprises a period of time that spans from the emergence of the cult of True Womanhood to the relatively recent present, including both the revival quiltmaking underwent in the late

1900s and those decades of the nineteenth century in which quilting flourished due to a combination of improved availability of materials and women's confinement in domestic spaces. However, chronologically speaking, the short stories could be divided into two major groups, one formed by those works published either in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and another one which included those literary pieces which came out in the late 1900s.

The first group would comprise all the short stories with the exception of "Love Life," "The Quilt Addict," and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," which are separated from the other ones by almost half a century. This initial group, which is not featured as such but as a set of three different sections, corresponds with the decades in which the cult of True Womanhood swept the United States, highlighting the breach between male and female roles and relegating women to the domestic realm, where in the midst of a thriving women's culture sewing became the quintessential female activity. It also includes those short stories published at the turn into the twentieth century, when a series of socio-cultural, political, and economic changes weakened the influence of the cult of True Womanhood and eventually led to the collapse of a separate women's culture. Despite being published in 1917 and 1929, respectively, Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" and Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "The Bedquilt" are also part of this first category because both are set in an earlier time. Fisher chose "the old-time New England days" as a setting for her plot and Glaspell based her story on a murder that had occurred in 1900.

The short stories written by Mason and Walker differ from this first category not only in that they were published almost half a century later than "The Bedquilt," but also in that they do not focus on the creation of a text or on its immediate reception, as all the

short stories published in the late 1800s or early 1900s do. They do not treat the quilts as present but as past. Instead of portraying quilts as a text that is being produced, they feature quilts which were created at some point in the past and are now claimed or sought as the key that grants access to one's cultural heritage and to one's identity. Although "The Quilt Addict" features an active quilter, this short story illustrates the impact that a theoretical claiming of quilts, that is, the incorporation of needlework as an empowering tool in the feminist discourse, had on the production of needlework.

The corpus, which has been chosen for its thematic relevance, constitutes an amalgam of short stories written by authors from very different cultural, socio-economic and even geographic backgrounds, none of whom belong to the American canon in its most conservative version. In fact, some of these short stories have contributed to the emergence of extra-canonical space formed by a series of texts which for several reasons were considered deviant. These anomalous works ultimately contributed to the implosion of the canon itself. In some of these short stories feminists saw values that opposed the dominating, patriarchal viewpoint of canonical American literature. In *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice*, Charles E. May lists "A Jury of Her Peers" among the best-known stories revived by the feminist movement and women's studies departments, together with "The Yellow Wallpaper" and novels by Kate Chopin or Edith Wharton among others (81). Mary Wilkins Freeman's "An Honest Soul" and Fisher's "The Bedquilt" have also received considerable critical attention, as have Walker's "Everyday Use" and Mason's "Love Life."

The critical visibility of recent works such as "Everyday Use" and "Love Life" is partially derived from the role the feminist movement played in validating the

fictionalization of female experience. In “A Jury of Her Peers,” “An Honest Soul,” and “The Bedquilt” feminists have discovered heroines that not only show early, often covert, signs of rebellion against the strictures of the patriarchal system but also an unrelenting need for self-expression, a commitment to literary excellence that could not be deterred by the extremely adverse circumstances in which women had to produce text(ile)s. However, reducing the corpus to a series of short stories which depict characters who, despite their limitations, are exceptionally defiant or determined, especially if compared with the average female of the times, would imply ignoring the lives of ordinary women and, therefore, remaining equally oblivious of mainstream female culture. For this reason, I have included works which are relevant to the theme of this dissertation but have received little critical attention because they either do not necessarily meet modern standards of literary excellence or do not specifically support the feminist agenda.

The study of these short stories will be carried out in the last chapter of the dissertation. The first and shortest chapter is devoted to explaining some of the reasons that make it necessary to resort to texts other than the written so as to gain access to women’s culture as well as to explaining the relationship between text and textile. I will argue that, besides being inherently textual, quilts were sometimes made to express certain feelings or to narrate a story. I will also note that, because quilts were associated with women’s issues, they were considered irrelevant or harmless and, thus, women were allowed to articulate messages through them that might not have been tolerated if conveyed in writing, where they would have posed a direct threat to the patriarchal system. The relationship between the non-hierarchical structure of the quilt and its

importance in opposing the individuality of male texts will also be accounted for. Finally, in this first section, I will also explain why this dissertation is limited to one genre.

In the second chapter I will try to show that American women have expressed themselves through quilts from colonial times to the present, even though the popularity of this type of needlework art has suffered a series of ups and downs. It is my intention to show that, although some upper-class females started quilting in colonial times, it was not until the nineteenth century that quilts began to be made in significant numbers by women of all socio-economic backgrounds. Quilts allowed those females who were targeted by the cult of True Womanhood to demonstrate both their adjustment to that ideology and their need to overcome the restrictions it imposed on their development. Through quilts, pioneer women tried to fight their isolation and to satisfy their craving for color, female slaves expressed their marginality, and white middle-class women illustrated their rejection of social evils such as slavery or alcoholism. I will also try to account for the quilting void that occurred in mid-twentieth-century America and to explain the revitalization of quilts in the late 1900s. The purpose of including this chapter is at least three-fold. On the one hand, I intend to demonstrate that quilting is a form of expression that is uniquely linked to American females, who have turned a foreign craft into a distinctively American art. This intimate connection between quilts and US women would partially justify reading American women's culture through a text(ile) which they have developed. On the other hand, the textualization of fictional quilts can be more easily understood if we take into account that actual quilts have been used as texts by American women who were barred from the written text and had few other channels of self-expression available to them. The literary use of fictional quilts as texts can thus be

interpreted as a reflection of the textual use real quilts received. Finally, since my approach is cultural as well as thematic, this second chapter constitutes a source of background information on cultural issues which affected the production and reception of quilts and may explain some of the changes that have occurred in quilt history.

In the third and largest chapter I will study the textual use of quilts in fiction. This chapter is divided into four major sections, the first three devoted to the analysis of nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century works and the fourth one to short stories published in the 1970s and 1980s. In the first of these sections, which is comprised of Eliza Calvert Hall's "Aunt Jane's Album" and George Washington Harris's "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," my intention is to demonstrate that quilts have been an intrinsic part of women's lives and are, therefore, absolutely necessary texts in order to understand female culture. The second section studies Mary Wilkins Freeman's "An Honest Soul," Kate Chopin's "Elizabeth Stock's One Story," Alice MacGowan's "Gospel Quilt," Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "The Bedquilt," and Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers." Through these five short stories, I will try to demonstrate that the creation and reception of quilts parallels the construction of a written text. In the third section the analysis will focus on exploring the development of a given topic, that of women's relationships or female community, from the mid to the late nineteenth century using Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt," T. S. Arthur's "The Quilting Party," Freeman's "A Quilting Bee in Our Village," and Marietta Holley's "Miss Jones' Quilting" as a literary basis.

The final section includes Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," Bobbie Ann Mason's "Love Life," and Paula Kay Martin's "The Quilt Addict." Unlike the short stories studied in the previous chapter, these works were published in the late twentieth century, when

the feminist movement started reviving women's texts that had been sentenced to oblivion within the American canon. Paralleling this process, "Everyday Use" and "Love Life" feature two characters who are interested in claiming and reviving their foremothers' text(ile)s rather than on making them. "The Quilt Addict," on the contrary, portrays an active quilter whose work is conditioned by the impact the politicization of the quilt had on quilt production.

Throughout the dissertation I will use some specific vocabulary related to quilting which should probably be explained in this introductory section. In addition to words such as *quilt* and *quilting*, terms such as *piecing*, *patchwork*, *appliqué* or *knotted*, as well as the denominations for different types of bedcovers will consistently reappear in the coming sections. Quilt names such as "log cabin" or "crazy quilt" will be explained in chapter two, where I will also offer a detailed explanation of the word *quilt* and its usage. Here I will limit myself to explaining that a quilt is a three-layered cloth bedcover which consists of a top, usually decorated; a back, generally solid; and a filling in between. Once the top is pieced, that is, once the different scraps it consists of are joined into an overall design, it needs to be attached to the two other components. In order to join the three layers, the bedcover can be quilted—kept in place by means of patterned stitching—or, like Minnie Foster's quilt in "A Jury of Her Peers," knotted, that is, sewn at the corners of each patch. The terms patchwork and appliqué refer to the main categories of quilted bedcovers. According to Schnuppe von Gwinner, "[p]atchwork means nothing else than sewing small pieces of cloth to and on each other" so as to form some design (19). Appliqué is a technique in which pieces of fabric which form certain

patterns or figures are cut and attached to a background fabric after being narrowly turned under to form a hemmed edge.

CHAPTER ONE

1. SOME CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE WRITTEN TEXT, NEEDLEWORK, AND THE SHORT STORY

The relationship between *text* and *textile* begins as an etymological one: both words derive from the same root, the Latin word *textus*, which means *tissue*, *weave* or *literary style*. Therefore, in contemporary English *to weave* something is both to “form (fabric) by interlacing long threads in two directions” and to “make (facts, etc.) into a story or connected whole” (*Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*). This semantic relationship between the terms was revitalized with the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970s. In their attempt to recuperate “lost” literary works written by women and as part of their larger aim of calling attention to women’s culture, feminists appropriated “[t]he repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, net, knot, and tat” and transformed it into their own theoretical discourse, brimming with “metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web” (Showalter, “Piecing” 224). It is in this broad context that the critical textualization of the textile took place, bringing quilts to the fore.

On the one hand, quilts represent a universal text in the sense that, for centuries, they have been accessible to American women of all races, classes, and social statuses, regardless of their level of formal education. Unlike the written text, whose production and consumption require a degree of literacy that not all females achieved, quilts have been used by both literate and illiterate women to express their view of the world. On the other hand, quilts have been interpreted as the quintessential women’s text, one that with its multi-centeredness, egalitarianism, and cooperative nature opposes the linearity and individualism of the prototypical male text. This latter meaning has not only been emphasized by feminist critics but also by some women writers, who regard their own

oeuvre as a block on the quilt they are writing in conjunction with other *littérateurs*, past, present, and future. In this chapter I will analyze some of the multiple connections between written texts and textiles in relation to women's peculiar position in the literary realm. The choice of genre will also be explained. I will argue that short stories, with their unity, brevity, and adaptability to women's fragmented time, strikingly resemble quilt blocks.

It is not my intention to maintain that all American women were forced to textualize quilts because they were barred from the written text. Besides contradicting evidence, this line of argument would result incoherent in a dissertation whose basic skeleton is composed of short stories written by women. Although in the early twentieth century Virginia Woolf popularized the invisibility of women writers through a fictional construct called Judith Shakespeare, critics have, since then, challenged the inexistence of women's literature. In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers claimed that "[l]iterature is the only intellectual field to which women, over a long stretch of time, have made an indispensable contribution" (xi). Nina Baym elaborated on the topic in her groundbreaking essay "Melodramas of Beset Manhood." Baym avers that "the critic who goes beyond what is accepted and tries to look at the totality of production in America quickly discovers that women authors have been active since the earliest days of settlement. Commercially and numerically they have probably dominated American literature since the middle of the nineteenth century" (64). Finally, in *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas notes that such preponderance was particularly notable around the mid-nineteenth century. According to her, "the sales of all the works by Hawthorne,

Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman in the 1850s did not equal the sales of one of the more popular domestic novels” (96).

This numerical preponderance led Nathaniel Hawthorne to complain against “a damned mob of scribbling women,” who, in his view, was distracting readers from the works of “serious” authors like himself (Weatherford, *Milestones* 84). Apparently, the belief that women writers were absorbing a large share of the reading public remained deeply ingrained in the imagination of male authors until well into the twentieth century. In 1921 novelist Joseph Hergesheimer evoked Hawthorne’s remark with a bigoted comment arguing that “the country’s literature was being ‘strangled with a petticoat’” (Ehrhardt 14). The fact that Hawthorne was a bestselling writer both in 1850 and 1851 demonstrates that these assertions were, at least partially, biased and unjustified (Weatherford, *Milestones* 84). It is true, however, that the literary panorama changed throughout the nineteenth century, becoming much more permeable to women’s contributions than it had been at any earlier time in American history.

On the one hand, even though women’s writing was hardly ever openly encouraged, it was acknowledged that, given certain preconditions, a female may have to resort to a literary career as a means of earning a living. Male writers often had either other sources of income that allowed them to devote their time to the pen or additional professions that supported their writing ambitions. Unlike them, women saw in literature one of the few financially-rewarding options they were not completely excluded from in the nineteenth-century American economic system (Showalter, *Literature* 46-47). In fact, some of these women writers of the 1800s took to the pen to compensate for deficient provision on the part of their male relatives. According to Moers, “[t]he father, brother, or

husband who could not or would not work, and left the entire or major support of a large household to his womenfolk, was responsible for the writing of many best sellers by American women, and a few masterworks” (85). Among the most outstanding examples of women who wrote to support their families, Moers mentions Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

On the other hand, changes in the reading public itself also facilitated the absorption of women’s contributions to nineteenth-century American literature. The most relevant of these shifts consisted in the emergence of a mass of readers who disdained theological treatises such as the Bible in favor of less grave subjects:

‘Reading’ in its new form was many things; among them it was an occupation for the unemployed, narcissistic self-education for those excluded from the harsh school of practical competition. Literary men of the cloth and middle-class women writers of the Victorian period knew from firsthand evidence that literature was functioning more and more as a form of leisure, a complicated mass dream-life in the busiest, most wide-awake society in the world. They could not be altogether ignorant that literature was revealing and supporting a special class, a class defined less by what its members produced than by what they consumed. When the minister and the lady put pen to paper, they had ever in their minds their reading counterparts; the small scale, the intimate scenes, the chatty tone of many of their works complement the presumably comfortable posture and domestic backdrop of their readers. (Douglas 10)

These shifts in the predominant reading public and the collateral lightening of reading materials were not accomplished overnight. Instead, the process took several decades and involved additional changes in the gender and background of those who produced literature. According to Ann Douglas, the sentimentalization and feminization of

American literature began in the early decades of the nineteenth century with the relaxation of theological discourse and the adoption of literature as an indoctrinating tool. Ministers were responsible for this initial step which, in Douglas' analysis, ended in the 1840s when literature, emancipated from its subordination to theology, became an end in itself. At that point, women, for whom religious principles were a mere inspiration, replaced ministers as popular writers (85).

Douglas asserts that the first generation of female authors was notably influenced by ministers, with whom they sometimes had familial ties. On the contrary, the second generation no longer relied on the advice of the cloth and derived authority from the support of their predominantly female reading public (86).² By the 1850s the prevalence of women on both sides of the literary spectrum had become a matter of concern among male writers:

As early as mid-century, it was clear to a perceptive observer like the fashionable writer Nathaniel Willis who it was that ruled the literary world: "It is the women who read. It is the women who are the tribunal of any question aside from politics or business. It is the women who give or withhold a literary reputation. It is the women who regulate the style of living. . . . It is the women who exercise the ultimate control over the Press." (Douglas 103)

As noted above, Hawthorne made his censorious remark about the producers of literature at about the same time as Willis complained about its consumers.

As a consequence of its reliance on the backing of a mass of average women, and, in particular, because of the lack of support from female cultural elites and the male

² Douglas cites Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Lydia Huntley Sigourney as first-generation writers and Susan Warner and Fanny Fern as second-generation ones (86).

establishment, “feminine literary sentimentalism became by definition lowbrow” and engaged in a spiral of debasement that would eventually lead to “its present degraded position as the staple of the poorer religious press, saccharine greeting-card poetry, and the weakly soulful lyrics of certain popular singers” (Douglas 87). Although condemned by serious writers, sentimental authors were enormously popular among the readers of women’s magazines, which in the nineteenth century boasted a much larger readership than any of the periodicals men directed (Douglas 229).³

This progressive lightening of reading materials from deep religious treatises to more enjoyable fiction paved the way for the appearance of works by many of the women writers featured in this dissertation. In fact, at least part of the works some of them produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth century belong to the category of sentimental fiction. However, very few of the fictional pieces I analyze could easily be classified as such. Unlike Annette’s “The Patchwork Quilt,” which is clearly one of them, short stories such as Freeman’s “An Honest Soul,” Fisher’s “The Bedquilt,” and Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” have been considered fictional masterpieces by feminist critics, who have argued that these literary pieces perfectly illustrate quintessential women’s experiences and values.

Furthermore, arguing for the textualization of the textile on the basis of women’s exclusion from the written text would also contradict the literary achievements of many of the female authors I study. Besides contemporary success stories such as those of Bobbie Ann Mason or Alice Walker, authors such as Marietta Holley, Mary Wilkins

³ Ellen Moers asserts that “[t]he harshest criticism of trashy books by lady writers came from women writers themselves,” who in their zealous attempt to distinguish their works from those of the sentimental writers attacked books which have stood the test of time, such as *Jane Eyre* (42).

Freeman, Susan Glaspell, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher enjoyed both popularity and critical respect in their own times. Both Mason and Walker are in good standing with the literary establishment. Mason publishes in the reputable *New Yorker* and Walker has won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple*. Among those who published in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, Holley was popular to the point of being offered a \$14,000 advance in 1893 for *Samantha at the World's Fair* (Gwathmey 29). Under her pseudonym "Josiah Allen's Wife," which *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (1941) described as "a household word" for most of her career, Holley published the 1887 bestseller, *Samantha at Saratoga* (Ross 12). Fisher published both in popular women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and in the more renowned *Harper's*. In Depression times *Woman's Home Companion* offered her a \$30,000 advance for a work she had not yet written (Ehrhardt 54). Freeman, whose old maids have been praised by feminists for their independence, was nominated for membership to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1917 (Glasser, *Closet* 199). In recognition of her literary achievements, the doors to the American Academy of Arts and Letters carry the inscription "Dedicated to the Memory of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and the Women Writers of America" (Glasser, "Freeman" 41). Finally, Glaspell, who received the Pulitzer Prize for her play *Alison's House* in 1931, is considered the mother of American drama (Ben-Zvi, *Glaspell* 1).

Taking into account these authors' achievements and all other women writers' literary production, the textualization of the textile will not be argued on the premise of the absence of female written texts. It will be contended, however, that writing has traditionally been a male-dominated activity which relegated women to a secondary

position. Furthermore, it will be claimed that female writers have been subjected to a series of both internal and external pressures, peculiar to their gender, that have attempted to silence their voices. Some women, those for whom the constraints posed by the pen proved insurmountable, were forced to channel their creativity towards alternative means of expression, such as quilts. Many of the more privileged, those who were able to produce written texts, had to negotiate the boundaries between womanhood and authorship over and over, and, once the apparent contradiction implied in being both female and a writer seemed to be solved, had to find their place in a tradition that was defined in male terms. Some of those, I will argue, resorted to the quilt as a metaphor for a set of inherently female characteristics and as a text that allowed them to obliquely express ideas that might not have been accepted if posed directly.

The supposed numerical predominance of women writers over male ones should not lead one to argue that women have dominated the literary scene in the United States. Far from enjoying a respected position in that scene, the American woman “has entered literary history as the enemy” (Baym 69). This means both that fictional women literally embody the enemy-figure, the antagonist, the social conditionings that hinder the development of the male hero, and that the contributions of female authors have been denigrated. In the best of cases, when not ignored as trashy best-selling fiction, women’s achievements have been judged according to male standards and relegated to an inferior position. As Rosemary Magee asserts in *Friendship and Sympathy: Communities of Southern Women Writers*, in the past “the times and the customs and the individuals dictated that women were not full-fledged members of literary society” (xix). As a

consequence, she concludes, female authors were often regarded as minor writers whose works did not spark the emergence of any literary movement (xviii).

In fact, women's access to the written text was hindered by a number of factors, briefly mentioned here, which will be explained in more detail in chapter three. First, women lacked the educational opportunities men enjoyed. Many were illiterate; the majority of the others, those fortunate enough to be able to read and write, received basic formal training which hardly ever surpassed the high school level and which, therefore, rendered them ill-qualified to compose literary works, not to mention masterpieces. Second, the set of cultural beliefs which prevailed during the heyday of the cult of True Womanhood did not especially encourage women's writing. On the one hand, the self-assertion implied in writing clearly opposed the selflessness and submission expected of every True Woman. On the other hand, women writers who had their works published were also charged with unwomanliness because the public exposure publishing involved contradicted True Women's supposedly inherent domesticity. Finally, once women overcame these cultural barriers and began to produce significant amounts of quality fiction, their development as writers was hampered by the creation of a literary canon which, consciously or unconsciously, excluded their contributions by defining as paradigmatic American qualities a set of values such as independence, dominance, or individuality, defended in male literature and indirectly objected to in many women's works, which extolled the importance of interpersonal relationships and communities.

In fact, most women's literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth century opposed the flight from social structures the quest novel depicted, both by privileging the home as a setting and by emphasizing the importance of domestic activities. As Nina

Auerbach points out in *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, in women's literature of the 1800s and early 1900s "[i]n almost all instances, the male quest is exchanged for rootedness—a school, a village, a city of their own" (8). The special connection between women and homes has been studied in detail by bell hooks, who in *Yearning* describes houses as women's special domain and as places where nurturance and healing takes place (41). As a consequence of this deep attachment to the domestic realm, fiction written by females tended to expatiate on themes, like housework, which male canonizers either ignored or openly rejected.

As early as the 1910s, Henry Holt, Dorothy Canfield Fisher's editor, warned her about the power men had over literature and about the subsequent need to adjust her female topics to male tastes. While revising Fisher's *The Bent Twig* (1915), Holt suggested that she discard one fifth to one fourth of the version she had turned in and, not coincidentally, he recommended she eliminate "descriptions of domestic activities, for he said, 'There is a good deal of a good housekeeper's interest in domestic affairs that will not interest a good many of your readers, especially those who are going to form public opinion; for the majority of them, being men, are presumably not interested in such affairs'" (Washington 75).

To borrow Holt's expression, many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women writers struggled to be "good housekeepers." As a consequence, they were responsible for a number of extremely time-consuming activities which interfered with the normal development of their creativity. Females were expected to perform a broad set of tasks which triggered constant interruptions of the creative process. In fact, around the mid-nineteenth century few women writers enjoyed the solitude and temporal continuity

that a room of their own could provide. Those who did “obsessively reminded their readers of the incessant flow of interruptions which was their daily lot: a just reminder of the obstacles they faced and overcame, yet also a hint of the multitudinous nature of their indispensability” (Douglas 77). For these authors using their literary careers as a shield to protect themselves from the responsibilities women had to assume in their daily lives was inadmissible and unladylike. Elaine Showalter links this obsession with fulfilling their domestic roles to the “feminine writers” and argues that “[o]ne of the distinguishing characteristics of the feminine novelists is the seriousness with which they took their domestic roles” (*Literature* 61).⁴ Despite this assertion, the demands of motherhood and domesticity upon women writers and their impact on the creative process remained valid for most of the twentieth century. Sylvia Plath’s attempts to assert herself, to occupy the central subject position that poetry reserves for the writer, came into conflict with her responsibilities as a mother. Fully aware that “there is no better way to stretch the day than by working late at night when human claims upon one’s time are still,” Plath did most of her literary work around four in the morning, right before her child woke up (Moers 12).

The most direct result of these claims upon women writers is the fragmentation of their time. It is commonly acknowledged that constant interruptions and domestic or familial demands break women’s time and prevent them from concentrating on one task for a relatively long period of time, such as that necessary to develop one’s creativity in a traditional way. Female litterateurs have openly recognized not only this temporal

⁴ In *A Literature of Their Own* Showalter defines “feminine” writing as “a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles” (13). For her, “feminine” writing represents the first stage of women’s writing.

fragmentation but also their determination to overcome the negative consequences it had for their literary ambitions, as one of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1850 letters illustrates:

Since I began this note I have been called off at least a dozen times; one for the fish-man, to buy a codfish; once to see a man who had brought me some barrels of apples; once to see a book-man; then to Mrs. Upham, to see about a drawing I promised to make for her; then to nurse the baby; then into the kitchen to make a chowder for dinner; and now I am at it again, for nothing but deadly determination enables me to write; it is rowing against wind and tide. (qtd. in Moers 4)

This fragmentation can be analyzed in relation to quilting. In fact, Elaine Showalter argues in "Piecing and Writing" that "piecing is the art form which best reflects the fragmentation of women's time, the dailiness and repetitiveness of women's work" (228). Quilts are a compound of different-size fragments; they start as scraps, fragments of cloth, which are then linked into blocks, still small but larger than the scraps. Finally, the blocks are joined into a quilt, the biggest unit of all. This defining fragmentation of the quilt parallels the fragmentation of women's time. Since quilts, despite being an overall whole, join diversity and fragmentation, their making inevitably needs to be approached as a series of small steps which produce discrete units. It is because quiltmaking can be easily divided into clearly differentiated, relatively small steps or parts that quilting perfectly fits into the rhythms of a woman's life, into the fragmented nature of women's time.

This connection between quilts and women's time does not exhaust the reasons that justify arguing for an intimate relationship between quilts and American females, and, therefore, would not suffice to defend the textuality of quilts. In the United States the

centrality of quilts as texts in women's lives derives from a much broader set of reasons which will now be expounded. In fact, in order to understand the importance of quilts as texts it is necessary to take into account the socio-cultural, historical, and economic barriers which females had to overcome so as to attempt the pen. It has already been briefly noted that women lacked the educational opportunities men enjoyed; that, because few career options were available to them, they were economically disadvantaged in relation to males; that women's access to the pen was hindered by socio-cultural beliefs that equated womanhood with selflessness and domesticity, ideals which openly clashed with the self-assertion and public exposure implied in writing; and that the controllers of literature that created the American canon discriminated against women and the values their literary production defended. Finally, it has also been argued that, in addition to these externally imposed barriers, women's literary careers were also hindered by internal pressures such as the inherent fragmentation of female time as well as the difficulties implied in harmonizing family life with a literary career. It is within this context, acknowledging how complicated it was, and, to a lesser extent, still is, for women to have access to the written medium that quilts become key texts, necessary to understand their socio-cultural and historical experiences.

Virginia Woolf, who in her ground-breaking *A Room of One's Own* wrote about some of the obstacles literary women encountered, explained the impact so many restrictions would have had on a gifted woman:

[A]ny woman born with a gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had

tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. (48)

Despite Woolf's ominous comments, gifted women survived. They did so because they managed to redirect their artistic impulses towards fields in which their creativity was welcome. In "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker updates Woolf's quote to fit the lives of eighteenth-century black women and mentions gardening and quilting as two of those fields. Therefore, quilts became an accessible text for all those women for whom the aforementioned pressures, internal and external alike, represented insurmountable barriers which literally excluded them from the written realm.

In this sense, quilts as texts were welcome by a relatively significant number of American women living mainly, although not exclusively, in the nineteenth or early twentieth century who were illiterate and, hence, unable to leave a penned record of their lives. In fact, quilts became *the* text of the average nineteenth-century American woman because few females recorded their lives in writing. For a large part of the 1800s the mere existence of a written document (be it correspondence, a diary, essays, or fiction) penned by a woman testified to the privileged socio-cultural position such a female occupied. Quilting, on the contrary, required no such elitism on the part of its practitioners; because of their non-written nature and the fact that oral and practical domestic instruction sufficed to produce them, quilts were accessible to all females, regardless of their level of formal education. It is for this reason that many women used actual quilts as texts.

All quilts are textual in that, consciously or unconsciously, they record a story. On the one hand, all quilts are inherently narrative: behind every one of them there is a story which encapsulates the reason why it was made, the way in which the pattern chosen relates to that reason, the choice of materials—what was recycled, what purchased, and why—etc. bell hooks’ grandmother Baba, who “did not make story quilts” because she “believed that each quilt had its own narrative,” endorsed this idea (*Yearning* 120). On the other hand, some quilts are purposely narrative—that is, they are intentionally created to narrate a story; many try to combat the blurring and erasing effects of the passage of time by depicting historical episodes, others narrate biblical passages aimed at instructing illiterate people. Harriet Powers’ quilts, which feature relevant scenes of the biblical account of universal creation, belong to this category. Finally, quilts further relate to the narrative function in that they foster the emergence of oral stories; recycled materials trigger memories of past lives and thus encourage conversations. bell hooks claims that her grandmother, who used quilts as “maps charting the course of our lives,” enjoyed sharing quilt stories. As hooks remembers, “she would tell me about the particulars, about what my mother and her sisters were doing when they wore a particular dress. She would describe clothing styles and choice of particular colors” (*Yearning* 120-21). Quilting institutions such as bees also served as privileged settings for initiating conversations; they provided women with a safe environment in which to share their private concerns and at the same time they functioned as improvised auditoriums for public issues such as suffrage campaigns.

In addition to being accessible to women of all levels of education, inherently or purposely narrative as well as an excuse for story-telling, quilts represent a particularly

apt text for women because they are situated outside patriarchal control. For most of its history, the production of quilts remained free from male interference. The fact that quilts were considered domestic artifacts and quilting a women's activity situated both object and process outside the male world and, therefore, rendered them inaccessible to the patriarchal lens. As men neither made nor controlled the production of quilts, they had no impact on the process as a whole. Hence, women were able to candidly express ideas in quilts that would have been interpreted as a threat to the patriarchal system and, for that reason, potentially censored, if openly conveyed in writing.

The more difficulties females had to access the pen, the more widespread this textual use of quilts was. Consequently, as a larger number of women could write in the 1900s than in the 1800s, it is easier to trace women's cultural and historical experiences through quilts in the former century than in the latter.⁵ The second chapter of this dissertation will address this issue and try to demonstrate that Deborah Harding's claim that "[q]uilts, their traditions and transitions, reflect the history of the country" is accurate (60). Quilts, it will be argued, reflect, if not the history of the entire country, at least the history of its female half. It will be shown how women used quilts as a nonverbal record of their own view of the world, where they expressed their rejection of slavery and alcoholism, cast symbolic cloth ballots before they were legally enfranchised, highlighted the crucial role religion played in their lives or, among many other things, fought against the isolation of the American prairie. Harriet Powers will be used to illustrate how illiterate women, whose contact with the world was exclusively visual and oral, overcame

⁵ Although illiteracy was more widespread in previous centuries, quilts were too scarce to offer valuable information about women's lives. For more information on this issue see section 2.2.

their educational limitations in order to create textual masterpieces that were not written but quilted.

Besides actual quilts, fictional ones also function as texts. They were particularly useful for a number of women writers, who, although more privileged than their illiterate sisters, approached the written text beset by the apparent contradictions implied in being both female and an author. These women, who suffered from the anxiety of authorship Gilbert and Gubar theorized about in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, tried to solve their inner conflicts by resorting to varied strategies such as publishing anonymously or internalizing male criticism that defined women's writing as effortless. Thus, some women writers presented their own literary production as the result of a trouble-free process which could not compare to the artistically demanding work male writers were supposed to do. However, the use of a pseudonym, which shielded the author both from general criticism and negative reactions on the part of relatives, was the most recurrent of all strategies. Many of the female authors who resorted to a pen name tried to minimize the conflict between womanhood and authorship by posing as males.⁶ Others adopted women's names and exploited their femininity to their own ends. Marietta Holley and Eliza Calvert Hall fall into this category.

Hall, whose real name was Eliza Caroline (Calvert) Obenchain, switched from Lida Calvert Obenchain to Eliza Calvert Hall, depending on which denomination best suited her particular goals. She borrowed her grandmother's last name, Hall, to bridge the gap with her relative's generation, which was the thematic source of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, and, as Lida Calvert Obenchain, she wrote newspaper articles defending

⁶ Gilbert and Gubar aptly demonstrated that such a strategy replaced the anxiety of authorship with an identity crisis which could result just as crippling (*Madwoman* 66).

women's suffrage. "Standing behind the respectability of her married name," Judy Elsley explains, "she argued lucidly, rationally, and persuasively for women's independence" ("Uncovering" 155). Marietta Holley also used a pseudonym to advocate women's rights in her fiction while protecting herself from criticism.

Holley published most of her oeuvre as "Josiah Allen's Wife." As Kate H. Winter effectively expounds, Holley's "choice of name was a shrewd one, disguising Holley herself and making her outspoken protagonist—a woman's rights advocate—seem less threatening than the zealous suffragists, thereby gaining a new audience for their feminist arguments" ("Holley" 224). "Josiah Allen's Wife" stood for straightforward Samantha, Holley's alter ego and the protagonist of most of her stories, including "Miss Jones' Quilting." Holley emphasized Samantha's femininity and, thus, her harmlessness, not only through her pen name but also by describing at length how her protagonist fulfilled her domestic responsibilities, thus satisfying the expectations of those who thought that women should restrict themselves to the domestic sphere as well as those who interpreted these long explanations as a cover for Samantha's revolutionary beliefs (Gwathmey 41-43). Conscious of the success of her strategy, Holley did not present herself as an independent author in her Samantha stories until the publication of *Miss Richard's Boy* (1883), in which, for the first time, she added her signature and photograph (Winter, "Holley" 227). Despite this public exposure of her own identity, Holley continued to shield herself behind "Josiah Allen's Wife" until the publication of one of her last works, *Samantha on the Woman Question* (1913). It was then that her own name appeared as author, replacing a pseudonym she had effectively used for several decades (Curry 77).

The use of quilt metaphors could be interpreted as one of these strategies that tried to minimize the anxiety of authorship female writers felt, especially in earlier times. As women's activities such as quilt-making were considered trivial and irrelevant, the literary use of one of them would either be considered harmless, innocuous to the patriarchal system, or simply go completely unnoticed. As their illiterate counterparts had done with actual quilts, women authors exploited the loophole this situation created to express ideas through fictional quilts which would have been unacceptable if unmasked. In her analysis of "Sally Ann's Experience," one of the stories included in *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, Judy Elsley terms the use of this loophole as "the language of the quilt," which consists in the ability "to speak one's truth in ways that will be understood by those who choose to listen without being denounced by those that may oppose it" ("Uncovering" 164).

It is often difficult to differentiate this utilization of quilting images as a strategic tool that allowed women to surreptitiously convey potentially objectionable ideas from a use that simply tried to highlight women's cultural heritage by incorporating female-related images into fiction.⁷ Through these incorporations, women writers validated female activities, confronted the male values defended in the American literary canon by emphasizing new ideas (nurturance, cooperation, egalitarianism, etc.), and, among other

⁷ Although she does not directly mention these two categories, Elaine Hedges does include examples that can clearly belong to one group but not to the other in "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work." There Hedges argues that nineteenth-century female writers resorted to a defensive approach to writing which included comparing it to sewing because they felt "the need to apologize, to allay male fears of female ambition by assurance that one's work was merely an innocuous extension of domesticity" (341). In order to prove her point, she resorts to a wide number of written materials. However, Hedges' examples of an "apologetic" use of needlework are restricted to non-fiction pieces—letters, prefaces, introductions—which openly relate or compare writing to sewing. In fiction, on the contrary, where one term (quilting) replaces the other (writing) without ever including a specific explanation elucidating the reasons that triggered the substitution, differentiating between both categories is sometimes an arduous task. Among others, stories like Mary Wilkins Freeman's "An Honest Soul" and Alice MacGowan's "Gospel Quilt" are, I believe, open to both readings.

things, set the basis for a literary tradition of their own. For these authors, the actual quilts women made with cloth scraps, as well as quilting institutions such as bees, represented the ideal text they should aspire to: with their multi-centeredness and cooperative nature, quilts embodied community, a gathering of women where no dominant center stood out, and, therefore, a challenge to the individualism men defended in their literature. Moreover, quilts allowed women to define their self-fashioning not through the radical process of individualization men needed to find self-identity, but through relationships and communities, an innovative form of development which had not been studied as a distinctive pattern until quite recently (Groover 5).

Within this context of female cooperation, women writers began presenting their own work as a block on a metaphorical quilt which they were creating with the literary contributions of other female authors, present, past, and future. Thus, quilts also came to represent feminine literary production in general, the immense “collective and colorful story ‘coming from a multitude of different perspectives’” which Alice Walker considers all female writers, both black and white, are collectively composing (Lauret 24). In a panel discussion at Furman University, the writer Josephine Humphreys expressed the same idea. “I like to know,” she said, “that there are other writers with whom I am not racing and that we like each other’s work. That we are in some ways working towards the same end” (Magee 326). Her words seem to validate Walker’s allusion to a collaborative women’s story.

Because of the wide use of quilting images that their jargon incorporates, feminist critics should be included in the same category as those female writers who tried to vindicate women’s cultural heritage. Feminists have adopted the pieced quilt as “one of

the most central images of the new feminist art lexicon” and the act of piecing as “the metaphor for the decentered structure of a woman’s text”—that is, they interpret pieced quilts as a direct equivalent of women’s writing, characterized by multi-centeredness and the lack of a single climactic moment (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 161). Even smaller units or shorter steps have found new meaning within the feminist vocabulary. For instance, feminist critics have appropriated the deconstructive act of tearing fabric, in which they see “a singularly appropriate place to begin because *being torn* is so familiar an experience for women” (Elsley, “Nothing” 164). For critics such as Judy Elsley, “[q]uilmaking turns being torn into tearing, turns object into subject,” and therefore parallels the process of female self-fashioning (“Nothing” 167). Feminists have also recuperated a quilting institution such as the bee and transformed it into the embodiment of women’s collaborative approach to writing, which in turn opposes the traditional image of the male writer who works in isolation and engaged in a fierce competition with both his literary predecessors and his contemporaries (Hillard 113).

Finally, with the relatively recent emergence of fields such as women’s studies, scholars have claimed the quilt as a text because it has proven a useful tool to understand women’s lives. Unlike those academics who focus their attention on the events history records—invasions, wars, military victories and defeats, outstanding public events—, researchers of women’s history, “herstory,” tend to be interested in more private accounts that traditional versions of history have overlooked. These researchers have come to the conclusion that, because women often expressed their experiences in their needlework, “the quilts themselves offer a nonverbal history that in many ways speaks more directly and more poignantly than any written or photographed historical record” (Johnson xi).

The historical information quilts provide does not necessarily oppose conventional historical accounts; it often complements them. If history narrates great deeds and the lives of those who occupied the socio-economic center, these new versions concentrate on hitherto unimportant events and the lives of those who lived on the margins. In this sense, quilts represent not only a text that yields invaluable information to those who concentrate on the analysis of women's culture, but also a vital source for those interested in widening the scope of what the history of the United States might include. Baltimore quilts, for example, portray relevant events in the history of the city and therefore have an enormous documentary value. When dealing with women's lives, friendship quilts, which will be analyzed in detail in chapter two, also yield important information, similar to that censuses gathered about men but failed to incorporate on those who, like most women, were not the head of a household (Hillard 119).

As seen so far, the reasons that justify arguing for a textual reading of quilts derive from the multiple connections between this type of textile and written texts: both *text* and *textile* share an etymological origin; actual quilts were one of the few texts available to illiterate women in nineteenth-century America; they narrate stories, reflecting the ideal of non-hierarchical and cooperative writing many female authors aspire to; and they represent a valuable historical text. There remains to be explained the choice of genre and its connections with quilts. As poetry and drama have traditionally been considered the most unfeminine of all genres, they were discarded from the very beginning. Fernández-Morales has called drama "the most male-dominated of the literary genres, both in its printed form as dramatic literature and in its public aspect as representation on stage" (163). Because the nineteenth century associated females with

domesticity, the decidedly public nature of dramatic literature rendered it a decidedly inappropriate genre for women writers. In fact, writing plays had been practically forbidden to women until the 1900s. As Sharon Friedman notes in “Feminism as Theme in Twentieth-Century American Women’s Drama,” “[p]rior to the twentieth century, unless a woman had friends or family in the theatre, or connections to secure financial backing, she had little hope of having her play produced. The theatre, after all, is part of the public domain” (69). According to some, female playwrights’ reliance on males persisted even in the twentieth century.

In an essay on Susan Glaspell, the only one of the writers studied in this dissertation whose lasting fame rests on her achievements in the theater, Ann Larabee suggests that Glaspell’s dramatic writing required the backing of a male figure. To prove her point, she alludes to Glaspell’s own account of how she had started writing plays because her husband George Cook “forced” her to and to the fact that she only produced two plays—one of them in collaboration with another male, her second husband Norman Matson—when she lost that male backing (97-98). “For Glaspell,” Larabee notes, “Cook owned the very structure of the stage and of public life. Cook was the public stage” (98). After Cook’s death, Glaspell composed mostly novels, whose public nature was less conspicuous than that of plays.

Lyric poetry was considered an even more unwomanly literary genre. It presupposed that the woman poet would occupy a central position by becoming the “I” of the poem—that is, the subject rather than the object of literature, as well the lens, the “eye,” through which human experience was focalized. In this sense, lyric poems have been defined as particularly dangerous for women because they “encouraged both

excessive introspection and artistic ambition” (Tallack 222). Female poetry was only praised when it stood out for its femininity, which, ironically, seemed to compromise its quality. If it searched into the soul of the writer as male poetry was supposed to do, it tended to be openly criticized and condemned. In *Shakespeare’s Sisters*, Gilbert and Gubar note that, in addition to positioning the writer as a subject and requiring too much introspection, lyric poetry was considered unsuitable for women because its composition required a level of education that females hardly ever attained. They also assert that it produced few financial rewards in comparison with the novel (xxi). Therefore, since it could not solve a dire economic situation, one of the few contexts in which female writing seemed to be justified, taking the pen to write lyric poems was regarded as totally unacceptable.

Novel writing by women, on the contrary, tended to be more easily justifiable, although hardly ever openly encouraged. In addition to the economic rewards it generated, the production of novels on the part of women seemed to be relatively legitimized by the fact that, unlike poetry, novels depicted a tangible world in which transgressions could be easily detected and morally sanctioned (Tallack 223). Moreover, the novel was considered to be the best writing genre for women because of the preference they were supposed to have for “the staple of fiction”—sentiment and romance—and because it was believed that females “had a natural taste for the trivial” which led them to get involved in other people’s lives (Showalter, *Literature* 82).

However, many women writers, beset by a multitude of other responsibilities, found the effort required to produce a novel overwhelming and the demands of the short story much more bearable. It is probably for that reason that “the dominant genre of

American women's writing has been the short story, the short narrative piece" (Showalter, "Piecing" 229). In fact, the short story is directly linked to sketches and journals, the writing formats women most commonly used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁸ As Elaine Showalter notes in "Piecing and Writing," "[b]efore 1850, the standard genre of women's writing was the sketch or piece written for ladies' magazines or albums" (229). Sketches were supposed to be short, subjective, humble in their pretensions, and concerned with picturesque or minor themes. Convention had it that a sketch could be produced in one sitting with little or no effort on the part of the writer, who considered the feeling that inspired it more important than the actual writing itself (Douglas 238).

Furthermore, the sketch was normally published in women's magazines, the friendliest setting for female writing for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Due to the extraordinary amounts of money companies poured into magazine advertising, editors were able to attract fiction writers, who were essential to the periodicals because their "[s]tories drew consumers, who often read magazines for relaxation or entertainment" (Zuckerman 82-83). Most magazine stories were—and to certain extent still are—made to order; commercial; controlled in advance by editors who determined their length, subject matter, and tone; and conceived to be discarded after entertaining their readers rather than planned for lasting fame (Pratt 110). However, many were masterpieces created by renowned writers who some shrewd editors—some of them

⁸ I am not trying to argue that female short stories derive from journal entries or magazine sketches, but that these two formats, which were commonly used by women, have a greater resemblance to the short story than to any of the other literary genres. Despite the theoretical controversies that emerge when trying to elucidate the genealogy of the short story, sketches are never mentioned as its seed. Charles E. May's *Short Story Theories* (1976) and *The New Short Story Theories* (1994) give wide coverage to the different approaches both academics and writers themselves have taken regarding the origins of the short story.

writers themselves—managed to attract with a mixture of personal skills and economic incentives (Zuckerman 82-83).⁹

In fact, the relationship between short stories and magazines in the United States was so intimate that Éjxenbaum argues that the development of both was closely connected, even though he also notes that the proliferation of women’s magazines in nineteenth-century America did not lead to the consolidation of the short story (83). This fact may be partially determined by the hegemony of women writers in the early stages of the genre. According to Susan Koppelman, “a careful study of the history of the short story genre makes it clear that women writers predominated in the early years of its development, creating the bulk of the stories written from the 1830s to the 1880s” (x). Two of the reasons that justify the preference for the short story are the numeric prevalence of female practitioners of that genre for half of the nineteenth century as well as the connections between short stories and other predominantly feminine writing formats, such as the magazine sketch.

In addition to that, the short story seems to be an appropriate vehicle of expression for marginal voices, be they so because of their national origin, social status, race, or gender. According to Charles E. May, as early as the 1920s, the short story was presented as the most suitable format for depicting the heterogeneity of the American character, which due to the decenteredness, chaos and unevenness of life in the United States could only be caught in glimpses (*Artifice* 111). Four decades later, Frank O’Connor highlighted the relationship between the socially marginalized and the short

⁹ Theodore Dreiser edited *Delineator*, one of the six women’s magazines with the largest readership—the so-called “Big Six”—from 1907 to 1910 (Zuckerman 46-47).

story by claiming that, unlike the novel, which for most of its history had presupposed the existence of a heroic figure, the short story had never had a hero (86).

In *Re-Reading the Short Story*, Clare Hanson makes a gender-based interpretation of this connection between the short story and the marginal and reaches the conclusion that this genre was especially appropriate for expressing stigmatized subject matters such as those of women's literature. According to her, because "[t]he short story has offered itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks—writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the ruling 'narrative' or epistemological/experiential framework of their society," it "has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women" (2-3). Although this postulate is applicable to all the women writers featured in this dissertation owing to their preference for female themes, it is especially appropriate in an analysis of Mary Wilkins Freeman's and Bobbie Ann Mason's short fiction, as they depict extremely marginalized characters. While Freeman tends to concentrate on old maids whose age, material dearth, and spinsterhood situate them at the very margins of their society, Mason focuses on the lives of uneducated, working class characters who are equally unfit for being in the center.

The ability of the short story to accommodate the voices of those who do not occupy the center relates it to quilts, which have worked throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a welcoming medium for the marginalized voices of women and as an appropriate channel for their presumably unimportant experiences. In addition to that, short stories and quilts also resemble each other in that designing and making a quilt block is similar to the process implied in writing a story because both are easily adaptable to the fragmented nature of women's time. The amount of time required to create a quilt

block is relatively short, just like the composition of a short story is much more bearable for a female than “the sustained effort of a novel [which] might be impossible for a woman whose day was shattered by constant interruption” (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 153). Furthermore, this brevity of the short story and the reduced size of blocks make them suitable components of units larger than themselves, like a collection of short fiction or a quilt.

In this sense, a further connection can be pointed out between some collections of short stories and certain types of quilts. When critiquing collections of fiction published by Mary Wilkins Freeman and Bobbie Ann Mason, scholars have noted a certain degree of thematic repetition which suggests that their stories are variations on a relatively limited number of major topics. In Freeman’s fiction this “‘sameness,’ even monotony” is normally associated to the troubles of her starving New England elderly women while in Mason’s production there seems to prevail the transient-resident dichotomy (Marchalonis 1; Hill 86). Collections such as those of these two writers, where the thematic variation between one story and the next is slight, evoke certain types of quilts, particularly Baltimore album quilts, whose blocks, despite their noticeable differences, are strikingly similar in pattern.

Besides explaining the choice of genre, in this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of quilts as texts taking into account women’s peculiar relationship with the written text. It has been argued that up to the 1900s women’s access to writing was conditioned by poor educational opportunities as well as by socio-cultural beliefs that interpreted female authorship, the self-assertion attempting the pen implied,

and the public exposure writing meant as signs of unwomanliness. It has also been noted how, when women finally started writing, they were discriminated against by canon-makers who disparaged not only their works but also the feminine or domestic values they defended. These obstacles barred a number of women from the written text and forced them to redirect their artistic impulses towards more welcoming texts such as quilts, which invariably contain a story. In addition to that, some quilts were specifically made to narrate a series of events or express certain feelings, while others trigger storytelling. Besides, it has been explained how for some women writers quilts worked as strategic texts which allowed them to articulate what might have been considered unacceptable or a threat to the patriarchal system. Because of its multi-centeredness and non-hierarchical nature, women writers and feminist critics alike have adopted the quilt as an ideal women's text which emphasizes community and relationships while defying the individualism of male texts. Finally, the choice of genre has been defended by arguing that the short story has, like quilts, traditionally been considered an appropriate channel for marginalized voices such as those of women, as well as by noting how both short story and quilts fit into women's fragmented time.

CHAPTER TWO

2. THE QUILT AS TEXT: A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

2.1. ORIGINS: QUILTS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE AMERICA

In his influential *The Pieced Quilt* (1973), Jonathan Holstein succinctly defined a quilt as “a cloth sandwich, with a top, usually the decorated part, a back and a filler in between” (9-10). Broadly speaking, his definition is accurate. Any textile artifact qualifies as a quilt as long as the three basic components Holstein mentions—a top, a back, and some sort of padding or filling—are present *and* linked to each other by means of stitches. In fact, what differentiates a quilt from other three-layered textile products is the quilting itself, the stitching that joins its components in order to prevent the filling from shifting.

This broad definition contrasts with “common usage [which] has restricted the term to refer to a bed covering” (Litton 243). Therefore, although the term “quilt” could allude to any “cloth sandwich,” it is generally used to refer, exclusively, to quilted bedcoverings. Whether the term is used in its broad or restricted sense, a quilt is made following a method that *The Pieced Quilt* summarizes into five distinct steps. According to Holstein, quilters first produce a top based on a preexisting pattern or on an original design. When dealing with non-solid quilts, this is the most time-consuming, but also most creative, step. Once the top is completed, the quilting frame is prepared, the material for the back is attached to the frame and, over it, the filler is spread. The final step consists in stretching the top and quilting the three layers (11).

In America, this method has supposedly been used for centuries and, yet, only an extremely reduced number of quilts from the colonial period have survived. This means that making generalizations about early quilts is a dangerous enterprise that may easily

lead to inaccuracies. As Patricia J. Keller points out, we might be trying to approach the average, the commonplace, when only the exceptional is extant:

Those quilts, tops and patches which survived have managed to do so for a variety of reasons which act as “filters” and serve as potential modifiers to our understanding of what the entire universe of quilted bedcoverings might have actually included. Informants frequently stated that particular quilts had been preserved due to a perceived high quality of workmanship, because of extraordinary design properties, and because of personal or sentimental associations evoked and represented by the textiles, such as familial relationships, events, or passages in the owners’ or makers’ lives. These values sometimes removed quilts from daily use and contributed to the textiles’ long-term survival. (57-58)

Despite the scarcity of data on quilts, it has been possible to trace the ultimate origins of the tradition of quilting and to certify that they are *not* American. Preserved quilted materials found in Asia, Africa, and Europe predate anything America produced. Jonathan Holstein argues in “American Quilts” that “[t]he precursor of the quilt was most likely a bag made of animal skin or cloth stuffed with some organic substance such as straw, grass, or feathers and used as a mattress or cover” (120). According to him, this “form survives in the ‘eiderdown’ or ‘comforter’ of Northern Europe and is commemorated in the word *quilt*, which comes from the Latin *culcita*, a stuffed sack” (120).

If, in the restricted sense of the word, its *formal* precursor is European, the *technique* of quilting has been traced further east, to Asia, which “is generally regarded as the cradle of patchwork and appliqué,” even though similar textile forms can also be found in Africa (Gwinner 23). Tradition has it that the Crusaders are ultimately

responsible for the introduction of these techniques into Europe, but this assertion is difficult to corroborate as no early European quilted textiles have survived. How quilts made it from Europe, where patchwork became popular in the sixteenth century, to America is an issue that divides the academic community. In “American Quilts,” Holstein firmly states his conviction that “[w]hen the first settlers arrived in the New World early in the seventeenth century they *undoubtedly* had quilts with them” (121; emphasis added), but Elizabeth Smith Schabel argues that neither written records nor remaining evidence can prove this assertion (1).

What scholars do not dispute is the undeniable role the United States played in the development of quilting or the rootedness of quilts in American culture since the early nineteenth century. It is generally agreed that even though “[p]atchwork and quilting as forms of needlework have been known for hundreds of years [. . .] it was left to the women of North America to develop them, in ways which had never been known before, into a unique art form” (Betterton 5). U.S. women have generated thousands of different patterns, ranging from the use of two solid sheets to highlight the beautiful stitching that connects them to appliqué designs. They are particularly responsible for the use of small geometric fabric scraps to create an outstanding amount of original patchwork compositions whose American provenance is unquestioned. In the United States quilts are much more than mere bedcoverings; they have become “a design phenomenon of great interest and [. . .] of singular importance” which is unmatched anywhere else in the world (Holstein, *Pieced Quilt* 8).

Two dominant theories have been devised to elucidate why American women took up quilting with such eagerness. One proposes utility as the main reason, while the

other defends that massive quilting arose in response to the lack of alternative channels for women's creativity. Until the early 1980s the former was the dominant explanation. The latter has gained supporters since then, but because of the scarcity of early quilts both rely more on suppositions than on real evidence.¹⁰ Renowned quilt scholars such as Jonathan Holstein and Schunuppe von Gwinner, as well as lesser-known ones such as Susan Behuniak-Long, claim that American women started quilting because need made it an appealing activity. Their arguments revolve around the functionality of making patchwork when faced with a shortage of money and fabric:

The block-style was the result of a functional approach to the solution of a problem. Bedcovers had to be made, and in quantity. Money was scarce and whole cloth expensive. So from otherwise useless scraps of cloth salvaged from clothesmaking and worn-out cloth articles, the American woman pieced together a useable piece of fabric which became one side of a quilt. (Holstein, *Pieced Quilt* 49)

This theory is supported by the fact that the earliest available patchwork quilts are made of linsey-woolsey, a durable fabric mixing coarse wool and a cotton warp. Such indelicate material would both disqualify them as showpieces and emphasize their durability and consequent functionalism. This argumentative line is also supported by the high effectiveness of quilts as insulators as well as by the enormous demand for bedcoverings in the first centers of settlement, especially in New England and the prairie, where it has been estimated that up to five quilts per family member were necessary to withstand the gelid winters (Showalter, "Piecing" 223).

¹⁰ In "American Quilts," Holstein's figures of surviving early quilts are: from the seventeenth century, none; a handful from the eighteenth; and some from the early nineteenth (133).

Scholars such as Elaine Hedges propose an intermediate path between those who argue for the utilitarian provenance of quilts in America and those for whom quilting originated as a creative outlet.¹¹ In “Small Things Reconsidered: Susan Glaspell’s ‘A Jury of Her Peers,’” Hedges contends that “[q]uilts were utilitarian in origin, three-layered bed coverings intended to protect against the cold weather. But they became in the course of the nineteenth century probably the major creative outlet for women—one patriarchally tolerated, and even ‘approved,’ for their use, but which women were able to transform to their own ends” (102). Virginia Gunn, on the other hand, radically challenges the arguments that support the practical origin of quilting practices in the United States. Her article “From Myth to Maturity: The Evolution of Quilt Scholarship” is a review of pivotal treatises on American quilts which indicts early quilt scholars for their inaccuracies and their tendency to interpret past phenomena from the point of view of present realities:

[Early scholars] began the intertwined myths which usually identify patchwork quilts as distinctly American textiles which have been important parts of the American scene since the earliest colonial days when women of every class and background pieced together the tiniest fragments of precious scarce textiles by candlelight in order to make warm bedcoverings to protect loved ones. (195)

Because of these deficiencies in the theories that explain the origin of quilts in the United States from a utilitarian point of view, another postulate to account for their genesis has been devised in the past three decades. For its supporters, Roderick Kiracofe and Laura Fisher, among others, “contrary to the long-cherished notion that American

¹¹ In the late 1970s Holstein qualified his earlier assertions and argued for the middle-way Hedges propounds.

quilting came about as a reaction to hard times and from a practice of frugality, women's primary reason for making quilts was to satisfy the need to make something beautiful" (Kiracofe 236).¹² This thesis was probably influenced by the work of feminist critics who tried to revitalize women's activities and also by women writers such as Alice Walker, whose characters, barred from traditional outlets such as writing or painting, tend to channel their creativity towards everyday activities like quilting. Despite of the role the rise of feminism and the increasing visibility of women's writing played in validating quilts as a source of expression, the importance of quilting when faced with no alternative vehicles for one's creativity had been thoroughly accepted before the feminist discourse pointed it out, especially when the researched subjects were rural women of the past:

There were few ways in rural America for women to express their creativity. For many generations quilts were perhaps the main outlet for the American woman's feeling for color, line and form, and the quilts produced were often the brightest design in the rural home. Although such intricate sewing might seem tedious to people today, much testimony exists to the great pleasure women had in their quilting; it was a relief from the considerable drudgery of the workday." (Holstein, "American Quilts" 125)

Furthermore, some material and aesthetic choices seem to support the creative theory. Although, as noted elsewhere, the use of a sturdy material called linsey-woolsey in the earliest surviving patchwork quilts would contradict the creative origin of quilts, a study of all the different subgroups of quilted bedcoverings, including appliqué and solid

¹² The publication date for these authors' works on quilts shows that support for this theory comes mostly from the late twentieth century. Kiracofe's *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort (1750-1950)* was published in 1993. Fisher's article, included in Duke and Harding's *Quilts*, came out three years later.

quilts, would alter the spectrum of materials employed, yielding a radically different panorama and revealing that most eighteenth-century quilts used fine materials that were not warm. This lack of warmth has led scholars to argue that early quilts were not utilitarian, that few of them were designed in order to recycle a given fabric and that most were “made as showpieces, which explains why they have survived at all” (Kiracofe 47-48).

Scholars who champion the creative origin of quilts also use the evidence provided by the many extant solid quilts, whose mere existence shows that cloth was not only not recycled but especially purchased for their construction, as well as aesthetic criteria visible in other early quilts to support their theses. Color combinations and consistent fabric use in colorful quilts and the elaborate quilting present in solid ones discard functionality as the primary reason for making such items. For these researchers, “[t]he care with which colors were put together, and the intricate stitchery of the quilting itself that was put into many old quilts, is further proof that quilts were to their makers what canvas and oils were to the Impressionist painters” (Kiracofe 236-37). In some states, like North Carolina, it has been firmly established that the first surviving quilts were made for decorative purposes.

However, the data an analysis of a state like North Carolina may yield might not accurately reflect the conditions which determined the emergence of quilting in regions with a stronger quilting tradition. It is safe to assume that regional differences existed from early colonial times and that those dissimilarities may account for the two opposite theories that try to explain the origin of quilts. Even someone like Jeannette Lasansky, who in “Myth and Reality in Craft Tradition” argues that thinking of quilts as a way to

save scraps is “[t]he major myth about nineteenth- and twentieth-century quiltmaking,” admits that “[t]he degree to which this is myth or reality will vary a great deal from region to region and within the country” (115). However, Lasansky qualifies her position by arguing that in areas with a strong quilting tradition from early times, the quilted bedcover “was not a true scrap quilt from the time there are extant examples left” (115).

2.2. THE COLONIAL PERIOD: SCARCITY AND ELITISM

Quilts are among the household items that most readily come to mind when dealing with the colonial period in the United States. As Jonathan Holstein points out, “[q]uilts are tokens of our pre-industrial past, the homestead which exists in fact or myth, and the hand skills which our ancestors practiced as a matter of course, symbolic of virtuous household industry” (*Pieced Quilt* 7). The existence of a set of quaint quilts in every colonial American house is deeply ingrained in the popular imagination. Evidence, however, seems to suggest that this is false. In *The American Quilt*, Kiracofe argues that even though the information on early quilts is “sketchy,” it is possible to assert that seventeenth-century quilts were commonly imported and hardly ever homemade, a luxurious item affordable only to the most affluent (4-5).

In the eighteenth century the ownership of quilts became increasingly more common, but only a handful of them survived and most of the extant examples have either ceremonial meanings or high value. Although a small fraction of eighteenth-century quilts belong to the utilitarian type, were completely pieced, and made of common, durable materials such as linsey-woolsey, the vast majority falls into two other categories. The first consists of solid wool quilts, elaborated with whole pieces of cloth

and quilted following intricate patterns. The second comprises the various types of show quilts, ranging from specimens that feature central floral medallions or framed scenic centers to those that develop from a white background to which figures cut from chintzes are applied.



Anna Tuels'
Wedding Quilt
1785
Maine

Unknown
maker

Note the
intricate
quilting and the
consistent use
of same-color
fabric

Source: *History
of the
Patchwork
Quilt*, p. 82

Given the scarcity of colonial quilts still available today and their elite status, it has been questioned whether the average colonial woman quilted at all. Some scholars have suggested that, as colonial women's work was not only approved but also considered a "civil duty," they might have been too overworked to have time to quilt (Kiracofe 46). In fact, the inexistence of a representative amount of colonial quilts and the high status of those that have survived has led scholars to claim that in that era

quilting was not as widespread as contemporary popular imagination has it. Furthermore, the heavy presence of British fabrics and designs that extant examples depict confirms that by 1776 no genuinely American quilting tradition had developed. The influence of British standards on American quilts was not restricted to bedcoverings. Far from being a unique phenomenon, it must be interpreted as part of a larger process of cultural and economic exchanges between mother country and colony. Most of the early artifacts colonial Americans made in the New World were copies of European models. As a consequence of such widespread imitation, even in the late eighteenth century, few differences were noticeable between a wealthy colonist and an affluent British person (Gwinner 77).

The progressive distance from British models did not originate from a conscious attempt to avoid foreign influences but from a combination of economic and geographic factors. Rich settlers could take advantage of a wide variety of available imported fabrics, but lower incomes barred many other more modest colonists from access to expensive British textiles and left them at the mercy of their own inventiveness. The same is true of those whose adventurous spirit led them to settle frontier territories. These early pioneers increasingly “depended on finding their own raw materials and fabrics, especially when they moved farther west and settled far from the great seaports such as Boston” (Gwinner 77). Socio-economic and geographic determinants such as these will eventually lead to a complete departure from the British tradition which affected both the quilters and the patterns. While in Britain only the middle and upper bourgeoisie quilted, women of all classes would quilt in the United States. Patterns, which were regional in the mother country, spread all over the American territory as more and more western land was

settled. Most importantly, the particular work conditions and available materials in the New World provided quilts with a distinctively American look: the appliqué and pieced quilts of the mother country developed into geometrically patterned quilts, a much more practical and effective way of making quilted bedcovers. But that process took decades to complete. Meanwhile, the English rule did not hesitate to resort to its political supremacy and legal machinery so as to guarantee the underdevelopment of the American textile industry necessary to maintain a market for British products.

Judicial regulations had an enormous impact on the development of the earliest stages of quilting in the United States. British legislators understood well that limiting the production of American cloth paved the way for the importation of European textiles and they acted accordingly: they devised restrictive laws banning colonists from textile machinery and knowledge. Textile workers were absolutely prohibited from emigrating from Britain and, in America, the possession of a spinning wheel, an illegal artifact until the eighteenth century, was punished with having one's right hand cut off (Gwinner 78-79). These harsh British-imposed rules regarding technology coupled with the indigenous scarcity of materials to keep the American textile industry in an embryonic state during the eighteenth century. The problem of a dearth of cloth in the United States was an old issue dating back to the first settlements, where colonists struggled to find textile fibers they could use. In Philadelphia, for instance, "[t]he situation developed to the point that the inhabitants [. . .] swore not to eat lamb any more." In order to alleviate this situation, that city's local government offered incentives to those that increased their production of sheep. In other areas legislation played a less persuasive and more coercive role, ordering each family to spin "[t]hree pounds of wool, flax or cotton" per week and warning them

that “a fine of twelve pence was [to be] levied for every lacking pound.” Despite these well-intentioned efforts, fabric continued to be imported in considerable amounts as late as 1774 (Gwinner 77).

Imported materials, which were heavily taxed, and the early illegalization of American textile manufactures resulted in high prices that only a privileged minority could pay and those, in turn, led to the development of home production. According to Terri Kettering, spinsters provided a large part of the cloth that was needed in the United States until well into the first quarter of the nineteenth century (128). Homespun was particularly popular during the War of Independence when the Daughters of Liberty contributed to the boycotts on British goods spearheaded by the Sons of Liberty by making homespun so as to avoid having to purchase fabric from new English textile mills (Weatherford, *Milestones* 25).

The coexistence of national (mostly homemade) materials and imported British cloth is perfectly visible in late-eighteenth-century quilts. Many of them were made using a combination of domestic and imported weaves. When economic issues did not interfere, English cloth was preferred for the appliqué or patchwork elements of the top and American materials were usually employed for the back of the quilt (Gwinner 84). This ubiquitous amalgamation of materials from different origins as well as the lack of an indigenous quilt design tradition could lead one to argue that no genuinely American quilt dates from the colonial period. This situation changed during the nineteenth century.

2.3. THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

2.3.1. Towards an American Quilt Tradition

Scholars doing research on pre-Revolution quilts face more questions than answers. Handicapped by the extremely limited number of surviving colonial quilts, their theories often remain unproven hypotheses. While some argue that it was the scarcity of cloth that led American women to recycle all available scraps and to construct a utilitarian quilted bedcover, others aver that quilts arose as a way of channeling female creativity. Because of the limited number of early quilts that have been preserved, these theories are relatively difficult to corroborate. To complicate things some more, given the political, cultural, and economic dependence of the United States, which did not exist as an independent entity, but only as a part of the British Empire, it would be problematic to speak of American quilts, in the strictest sense, given their dependence on British materials and design traditions.

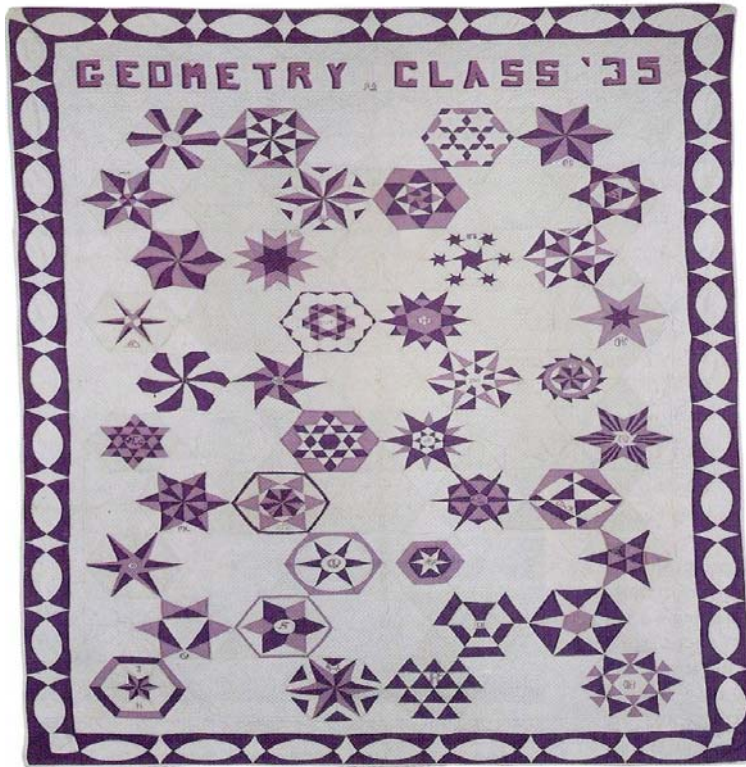
This bleak panorama changes radically when studying the nineteenth century. The lacunae faced by researchers on colonial quilts are replaced with proven facts derived from a variety of sources of information, from extant quilts themselves to written records, as well as photographs. It has been demonstrated that women from very different socio-economic and regional backgrounds quilted in the nineteenth century and that they made both practical, everyday quilts and more intricate ones, sometimes called show quilts. Evidence also indicates a progressive distance from British weaves and designs that eventually culminated in the development of a unique American quilt tradition. Most of the techniques, patterns, myths, and superstitions related to quilts originated in the 1800s. As Jonathan Holstein points out, “[w]hat we have is largely the product of the later

nineteenth century.” That includes quilts that “were meant to be used as simple bedcovers, those with extraordinary quilting and minimal visual interest, those of great visual interest and—the rarest—those that combine both superb craftsmanship and important visual aspects” (Holstein, “American Quilts” 133).

Women quilted frantically in the 1800s, covering beds with pile after pile of quilts and, what is more significant, turning quilting into a “specifically American feminine art form” (Showalter, “Piecing” 223). Because quilting became such a central activity for women in the nineteenth century, this period is crucial in order to comprehend not only the history of quilts themselves but also their role in the development of a distinctive women’s culture. I would argue that by looking at female involvement with quilts and, especially, by interpreting quilts as women’s texts, it is possible to approach women’s history—herstory—from a female point of view. It is my intention to demonstrate that an analysis of the types of women who quilted, the materials they used, the patterns they chose, and the reasons that led them to this form of needlework, yields information about American women that traditional (male-oriented) versions of history have ignored.

Sewing activities were deeply ingrained in the educational system that prevailed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Girls were taught various needlework arts both at home, where part, if not most, of women’s education took place, and in girl’s schools, where sewing represented a large part of the curriculum. Customarily, children started learning through the use of stints—that is, they were assigned a certain amount of work to be completed in one day, when they were two or three years old. By the age of five “extraordinary numbers were proficient” (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 16). Evidence indicates that many youths finished their first quilt (frequently a baby quilt) with or

without the help of adults by that same age, a practice which did not die in the nineteenth century.¹³



Geometry
Sampler
1935
Pawnee,
Oklahoma

Quilted by Mrs.
L. P. Saunders

Source:
Gatherings, p.
40

Sometimes sewing activities in general and quilting in particular played stellar roles in more bookish versions of education. Quilting patterns were often used to teach proportions and geometric figures. Once again, this tradition outlived its nineteenth-century origins and in 1935 Kathryn Cunningham’s high school geometry students were assigned to piece quilt blocks depicting some geometric figure. All the blocks were later assembled together and quilted into “Geometry Class ’35,” a sampler quilt embroidered with its makers’ initials. Featured in *Gatherings: America’s Quilt Heritage*, “Geometry

¹³ A baby quilt, sometimes also called a crib quilt, is similar to all other quilts in design and technique. It only differs from them in size. Baby quilts are much smaller than the average quilted bedcover.

Class '35" is, in Kathlyn Sullivan's words, the best example of Ms. Cunningham's "innovative method of helping her students understand geometry" (40). This "innovative" nineteenth-century technique is only one of the two ways in which quilts and formal written education related to each other; quilting simplified scholarly subjects and scholarly material facilitated the construction of quilts. Just as piecing could be used to help students grasp the basics of geometry, learning how to write allowed women to sign their names or copy magazine poems on their quilts. Many mathematical exercises practiced in classrooms could also be put into practice when making quilts.

The role of quilts designed with geometric shapes in schools is one of the many lines of argumentation that could be pursued to describe the progressive distancing of these quilts from British models and to explain their process of Americanization. In truth, the existence of geometric patterns alone would suffice to demonstrate the emergence of an indigenous quilt design tradition in the United States, even though the Americanization of quilts constituted a much more comprehensive phenomenon that affected not only form but also function, in addition to material choice. Nonetheless, as Terri Kettering points out, the substitution of geometry-based block quilts for British whole-cloth patterns represents the most visible sign of departure from foreign practices:

The whole-unit design, common in English and early American quilts, waned in importance and was eventually replaced by a design of repeating identical single blocks, which usually were of a geometric pattern. Even quilts which didn't rely on repeating blocks did depend on a geometric ordering of the quilt as a whole unit. This reliance on linear divisions and a repeating geometric pattern is the germ of the unique American quilting style, and we see this blossom into myriad examples as old patterns were adapted and new ones were developed. (131)

However, for a number of reasons, whole-cloth quilts, many of which were all-white, did not vanish overnight. They owe their popularity, which reached its height from the 1790s to the 1830s, to two main factors: the desire to accentuate the intricate stitchery of the quilting itself and the search for classical purity that the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum triggered (Kiracofe 64-65). Oftentimes the fabric was simply too valuable to be cut up. Whole-cloth quilts represent an anomaly whose evolution does not follow the same pattern as that of block quilts. In fact, the initial stages of the widespread use of geometric patterns coincide in time with the decline of whole-cloth quilts.

As an increasingly growing number of American women took up quiltmaking, the block style of quilting became favored because it proved more adaptable to individual needs. It allowed quilters of limited means to recycle fabric, thus fulfilling the needs of those who were not affluent enough to purchase large uncut pieces of cloth. It also suited beginners or unexceptional quiltmakers more effectively than the whole-cloth style of quilting; imperfections, now restricted to individual blocks, did not damage the overall pattern. Furthermore, working with independent blocks which could later be assembled together to form a larger unit was more manageable than handling an entire bedspread. Finally, “the block system’s inherent potential for infinite design formulations offered broad possibilities for creative expression” (Holstein, “American Quilts” 125).

Whole-cloth and block-style quilts did not extinguish the wide range of possibilities available to nineteenth-century American women. Despite the degree of proficiency necessary to execute many block-style quilts, quilters’ excellence was usually established through appliqué quilts. Made with fragments of cloth that were attached to a larger piece of fabric in order to form intricate designs, usually with flowery motifs and

curved lines, appliqué quilts were exercises in needlework competence. Considered better than any of the other two major categories, appliqué quilts constitute the largest group among early-nineteenth-century show quilts (Holstein, “American Quilts” 127).

By the 1850s not only had the three major aforementioned quilt categories arisen, but most of the patterns available today had also been invented. However, the development of an autochthonous quilt culture had deeper implications: the first half of the nineteenth century begot a number of distinctively American quilt-related superstitions and myths. Given the pervasiveness of Christianity in women’s lives at the time, many of those superstitions were religious in nature. Deborah Harding mentions that quilting on Sundays was forbidden and, as a reminder that only God could achieve perfection, quilters were encouraged to leave a flaw in their works. It was also believed that if a child slept under a “Wandering Foot” pattern, he would not return home once he left (61).

Owing to the fact that many quilts were made in connection with important stages in women’s lives, particularly in preparation for married life, a considerable body of quilt folklore revolves around the question of marriage. In *The American Quilt Tradition*, Sheila Betterton explains that, because hearts were associated to bridal quilts, “it was considered unlucky to use this motif in any other quilt” (29). Deborah Harding’s compilation of marriage-related superstitions is more intriguing. Perhaps due to the well-established association between needlework and spinsterhood and as a reminder of the privileged social status of the married woman, the superstitions Harding collected caution single girls against a number of quilting “evils” that would annihilate their chances of

ever becoming a wife. These included putting the last stitch on a quilt, making a “Lone Star” pattern, or beginning a bridal quilt before being officially engaged (61).

More deeply ingrained in quilt folklore than these superstitions was the belief that thirteen quilts (twelve utilitarian and a bridal quilt) had to be made in preparation for marriage. This idea provides further evidence of the intimate association between quilts and marriage in the popular imagination. According to Patricia J. Keller, sixty per cent of all bedcovers that were designed for a special occasion were made in preparation for marriage (60). In spite of this, in “American Quilts” and “Quilts in the Dowry” respectively, reputed scholars Jonathan Holstein and Jeannette Lasansky have questioned the universality of a thirteen-quilt dowry. Lasansky argues that the peculiar conditions of the American frontier led to the transformation of the European dowry tradition and that, as a consequence, “[d]owries that consisted solely of cash, or cash and land, became the exception and not the rule” (48). She demonstrates that the process of Americanization implied the incorporation of quilts to dowries, but the exact number of quilts included remains elusive.

In a later article, “Myth and Reality in Craft Tradition,” Lasansky elaborates on the issue. By the time she published her second essay on the topic, she termed the accumulation of twelve or thirteen quilts prior to marriage a “myth.” Lasansky, who indicts Ruth Finley’s *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (1929) for propagating the idea, uses both oral testimonies and written records from the mid-nineteenth century to challenge this popular belief (112). Based on oral information gathered in Pennsylvania and in an 1849 article T. S. Arthur published in *Godey’s Lady’s*

Book explaining that in the 1820s it was customary to set aside half a dozen quilts for the dowry, Lasansky concludes that thirteen is too high a figure to be accurate (113).

Together with the emergence of a uniquely American quilt tradition based on the use of geometric blocks, one of the most outstanding signs of departure from British conventions concerns the choice of materials. In colonial times, due to a combination of restrictive English laws and native industrial underdevelopment, the American market had been heavily dependent on foreign imports. The Revolution and all the subsequent political changes did not successfully manage to eradicate the reliance on British manufactures. The inexistence of a domestic textile industry and a deep-rooted feeling of cultural inferiority in relation to Europe led wealthy society people to continue acquiring imported British cloth. However, the vast majority of Americans, unable to purchase such expensive fabrics, were forced to depend on national hand-woven materials. Because of the ongoing coexistence of domestic and foreign weaves in the early 1800s, quilts continued to reflect an amalgamation of national and imported fabrics in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In fact, pre-1840 quilts illustrate an outstanding moderation of needlework that points to a more general scarcity of materials, especially thread (Lasansky, "Myth" 114).

The British cultural influence started to vanish steadily at the same time that the American textile industry began to flourish. Most authors cite the 1830s or 1840s as the decades in which the American textile industry achieved maturity. It is generally agreed that by 1850 domestic manufacturers could not only compete easily with English producers but also satisfy the national demand for cloth (Betterton 5). According to

Holstein, women, delighted by such plenitude, “responded with a fury of quilting which continued almost into the twentieth century” (*Pieced Quilt* 60).

Nevertheless, with the industrialization of textile production, regional differences became increasingly more pronounced. Because of the lack of reliable means of transportation, rural areas enjoyed technological advances much later than urban settings. Although before 1830 both New York and Philadelphia were active commercial centers and other smaller towns had also become prominent textile manufacturers, little of their production reached the countryside (Kettering 131). It is believed that “[m]iddle class women of the Northeast after 1830 were far more interested in the purchase of clothing than in the making of cloth” (Douglas 51). Homespun, a rarity in the average New England home of the 1850s, continued to prevail in less developed areas (Fox-Genovese, *Plantation* 121).

Although improvements in the railroad system, in particular the 1886 standardization of the width of railroad tracks, made textile products more accessible to rural women, the gap between wealthy women and lower class ones remained steady throughout the nineteenth century. When deficient means of transportation were no longer points in question, fashion issues replaced them and continued to separate women: “Changes came more slowly to country families than to those that lived in the cities; the old ways persisted longer, women’s work was harder, and fashions were slow to change. New quilt designs often took longer to reach country homes, and those designs were used long after the city woman had found new designs to stitch” (Kiracofe 75).

These inequalities notwithstanding, the 1800s constituted a period of general technological progress that affected textile production quantitatively as well as

qualitatively. Commercial dyes were developed in the second quarter of the nineteenth century to replace organic ones which did not guarantee colorfastness. These new dyes not only improved the quality of the weaves but also widened the quiltmaker's palette and her color combination options. However, in relation to quilting the most important technological development of the nineteenth century was the sewing machine, which radically altered the way in which women transformed textiles. The sewing machine enhanced the quality of quilts by making them more durable at the same time that it allowed women to reduce the time required for generating bedcoverings, which in turn increased their production.¹⁴ Some scholars have argued that the appearance of the sewing machine was crucial in the development of the block style of quilting. Kiracofe contends that "[t]he experimentation with white cottons as a way to accentuate prints, and the newly invented sewing machine all led to the development of the block style of quilt" (101).

Massively produced in the 1850s and 1860s, the sewing machine owed its initial success to shrewd business methods. Isaac Merit Singer, fully aware of the agrarian nature of a large part of the country, concentrated many of his marketing efforts on targeting rural consumers. His most effective selling technique consisted in providing ministers' wives with free sewing machines. Conscious of the social influence of these ladies, who were considered "the arbiters of taste in America's small towns," Singer soon understood that their example would easily lure average farm women into purchasing his product. His business instinct did not fail him. According to the figures provided in *Heart*

¹⁴ Several decades later, in the late 1900s, as these old quilts became quaint, other standards, alien to nineteenth century quilters, were used to judge them. In "Everyday Use," for example, Dee Johnson rejects a set of quilts her mother offers her because "[t]hey are stitched around the borders by machine" (53). Dee's negative reaction perfectly embodies those new standards. In the 1970s, rather than increasing the value of a quilt, machine use was interpreted as a depreciative factor.

and Hands, Singer sold 3,591 machines in 1858. By 1870 his sales had escalated to reach the staggering figure of 127,833 units (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 37). It is estimated that throughout that decade approximately 600,000 transactions involved sewing machines (Holstein, *Pieced Quilt* 84).

These soaring numbers had an immediate impact on the production of quilts. As commercials specified that sewing machines were valuable instruments for making bedcovers, many purchasers acquired the product with quilting in mind. Although figures fluctuate from source to source, scholars generally agree that one half to three fourths of the quilts made from 1870 to 1940 were, at least partially, machine sewn (Kiracofe 126). Furthermore, sewing machines challenged the quiltmakers' imagination by providing new avenues for their creative talents. Although it had initially been "greeted with delight as a miraculous timesaver," the sewing machine ultimately encouraged women to produce more quilts and to intensify their degree of intricacy (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 37-39).

Summarizing, the availability of materials for quilting in the first years of the nineteenth century followed parameters that did not differ significantly from colonial times. Because of British cultural influence and the technological underdevelopment of the American textile industry, most early nineteenth-century weaves were homemade. Technical innovations slowly changed this panorama. Wool, readily obtained in the domestic market, was the favored fabric until "the cotton gin eliminated the hand-cleaning process" (Holstein, *Pieced Quilt* 90). At that point cotton replaced wool and became the primary fabric. The rapid development of the textile industry and improvements in transportation made these weaves available to a growing number of

women. Nonetheless, even though differences between social classes and geographic regions became increasingly blurred in the course of the century, they did not disappear. Urban elites purchased imported textiles unaffordable to the masses and, once fine fabrics became less prohibitive, wealthy city dwellers continued to distinguish themselves by adopting quilting fashions that took time to reach rural settings.

Finally, the appearance of the sewing machine reduced significantly the amount of labor necessary to make a quilt, but it also increased production and raised standards of excellence. Perceptive marketing techniques made the new device widely available, forever altering quilting methods and the appearance of quilts themselves: fifty to seventy-five percent of the quilts made from 1870 to 1940 were machine sewn, though in varying degrees. Despite their popularity, ownership of sewing machines was not universal. Women of limited economic resources did not have access to the new technological invention until much later. Gail Y. Litton's grandmother, for example, "began to piece by machine in 1930 when Grandfather bought her a treadle sewing machine," almost a century after the commercialization of the first units (245).

The distribution of quilt patterns could be used as an additional factor to measure the successful development of a distinctive U.S. quilt culture. In Britain quilt patterns were regional and the popularity of an individual design was associated with a very specific area. In the United States, on the contrary, despite a few remarkable exceptions, regional patterns constitute special cases. Compared to the settled and relatively homogenous British population, the inhabitants of nineteenth-century America, a compound of mixed races, national origins, and religious backgrounds, were constantly on the move. For a long time, it was believed that the development of a unified national

identity depended on the erasure of the disparate elements that constituted American society, as the adoption of the melting pot as an identity symbol in the twentieth century indicates. This process of progressive nationalization also affected quilt patterns. Few of them remained regional. Among those that did, the most outstanding examples are Hawaiian flag quilts, the antique broderie perse quilts associated with Charleston, and the exquisite appliqué Baltimore album quilts.

In spite of these exceptions, the vast majority of quilt patterns underwent a process of nationalization motivated by a wide range of reasons. Patterns were exchanged among neighbors, traveled with pioneers as they resettled in frontier areas, went with brides to their new homes, and were learned in needlework schools and later mailed to relatives that had migrated westward. Improvements in transportation also contributed to the uniformity of nineteenth-century quilts because they spurred the distribution of books and periodicals which, as Margaret Bolick points out, “were particularly important because they helped create and establish the norms for female behavior and spread the quilt patterns quickly” (6).

Finally, agricultural and state fairs had a tremendous impact on the development of a unified quilt culture as well. According to Barbara Brackman, these fairs go back to 1810 Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where Elkanah Watson organized the first livestock exhibition. Fair entrepreneurs, whose main aim was to provide entertainment and education, soon understood that women’s “approval and presence was important to the fairs’ success” and, in order to secure female participation, they began to offer prizes for needlework excellence (“Fairs” 92). The Pittsfield fair offered a prize for a quilt for the first time in 1839, paving the way for most state fairs, which soon started emulating its

example. Some state fairs, namely those of Ohio (1850) and Kansas (1863), were conceived with the idea of rewarding outstanding quilts in mind and they did so from their inception (Brackman, “Fairs” 93). By the 1880s quilts and other textile items had become vital components of these state exhibits. As award-winning quilts generated a multitude of copies all over the country, fairs also helped the nationalization of patterns by providing models for imitation. As Kari Ronning points out, “fairs helped to set standards of design and workmanship as well as reflecting and transmitting fashions in quilting” (167).



Quilts at the
Finney
County Fair

1894

Source:
*Kansas Quilts
and Quilters,*
p. 26

In addition to playing a leading role in disseminating quilt patterns throughout the United States, fairs provided quilters with a sense of belonging and with a community of understanding judges; fairs “enabled women to participate in and enjoy the fruits of their

common culture” (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 63). In her article “The Evolution of Quilt Shows at Nineteenth-Century Missouri Fairs,” Carol Pinney Crabb suggests that fairs were similar to quilting bees in that both allowed quilters to be surrounded by a receptive audience. Although “[h]usband and children would do,” Crabb writes, “other women provided better—and more appreciative audiences,” especially necessary in sparsely populated states (5). Finally, before quilts were defined as art and quilt collections regularly displayed in museums and art centers all over the country, fairs were the only public places where quilters could display their work, judge and be judged by other expert needlewomen.

2.3.2. Making a Quilt: From Individual Piecing to Communal Quilting

Quilts begin with the creation of a top, which usually consists of adapting one’s materials, needlework knowledge, innovative character, and creativity to a pre-existing mold, the quilt pattern.¹⁵ Most of the patterns available to contemporary quilters, easily identifiable by the names they receive nowadays, were devised in the nineteenth century and can be grouped into different categories.

Because of the nonrepresentational nature of American patchwork quilts, these patterns tend to depict abstractly a variety of objects and ideas. Many quilt names are associated with religion and, particularly, elements, stories, and characters featured in the Bible, such as “Star of Bethlehem,” “Tree Everlasting,” “Job’s Tears,” and “Jacob’s Ladder.” Although quilt names which represent ideas are less common, a category including such bedcovers would incorporate well-known examples such as “Drunkard’s

¹⁵ Late twentieth-century art quilts represent exceptions. They prize the rupture with traditional forms and value highly the use of avant-garde materials.

Path” or “Trip around the World.” A significant number of names refer either to professional activities in general or to construction in particular. “Carpenter’s Wheel,” “Courthouse Steps,” or the ubiquitous “Log Cabin” constitute outstanding examples belonging to this category. Another important group, which testifies to the close connection between quilts and crucial vital experiences such as marriage, includes “Lover’s Knot,” “Double Wedding Ring,” and “Widow’s Troubles.” Nonetheless, the largest group of quilt names is that which deals with the American experience in its broadest sense. There are pattern names that refer to nature (“North Carolina Lily,” “California Rose”), to politics (“Whig’s Defeat,” “Democratic Rose”), to places (“New York Beauty,” “Indiana Puzzle”), and to historical moments (“Rocky Road to Kansas,” “Underground Railroad”).¹⁶

Such a bewildering profusion of names illustrates a well-established tendency to label quilt patterns. However, historically speaking, few quilts were labeled when they were first created. As Brackman explains, the ingrained belief that a quilt name emerged at the same time as the pattern it alludes to is generally false:

The names seem to be derived from oral tradition, collected by folklorists doing field work in Tennessee hollows and on Pennsylvania farms. In some cases this perception is accurate. But, unlike the names for other types of folklore such as weaving patterns or the words to Appalachian ballads, the majority of our information about quilt patterns was not collected by folklorists, amateur or scholarly, but comes to us through a commercial network of magazine editors, professional designers and mail-order entrepreneurs. (“Name” 107)

¹⁶ This classification and the examples provided are a combination of those featured in Jonathan Holstein’s *The Pieced Quilt* (58-59) and Deborah Harding’s “Quilts: America’s Folklore” (65).

The influential *Godey's Lady's Book* became the first member of that commercial network to undertake the venture of labeling quilts when it published a pattern with three different names in 1835. From that year on the practice of naming patterns became increasingly more common. However, until the turn of the century the vast majority of the patterns featured in women's magazines were either untitled or published under general headings such as "Patchwork" or "Patterns for Patchwork" (Brackman, "Name" 107). When more specific names appeared, no unifying criteria seemed to govern the choice. According to Kiracofe, in the mid-nineteenth century, "[a] pattern called by one name in one state could be called by something different in practically every other state in the Union" (137).

By the time magazines began to include patterns as an integral part of their habitual contents, labeling them became more frequent. Brackman claims both that naming quilt patterns facilitated the marketing of the items and that pleasant denominations were excellent advertising tools which made the patterns more appealing ("Name" 109). As a consequence, by the turn of the century the practice of using specific names became widespread, although standardization was still deficient. The publication of Marie Webster's *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (1915) and Ruth Finley's *Old Patchwork Quilts and the Women Who Made Them* (1929) finally helped codify the use of pattern names.

Even in the late twentieth century, names continued to attract women to quilts. Brackman reports that "[t]hose who sponsor state and regional quilt surveys report that the desire to learn a pattern name is one of the prime motivations for families to bring old quilts to be registered" ("Name" 107). People who participate in the documentation of

quilts continue the early twentieth-century tendency to use generally accepted quilt names, even though for reasons other than the strictly commercial ones that dominated in the early 1900s. As Ruth Haislip Robertson points out, the use of standardized names is now “designed for the ultimate benefit of researchers who [will] be using the material” in electronic databases (xv). Nonetheless, it is necessary to note that, when dealing with antique quilts that predate the relatively modern practice of naming quilts, the label is not historically accurate. Furthermore, quilt names fluctuate because the abstract nature of most designs encouraged multiple interpretations and as many names as readings; the older the pattern, the more likely it was to receive several names. Quilt names also changed because they sometimes showed an amazing ability to adjust to new surroundings. For instance, what coastal Cape Cod called “Ship’s Wheel” became “Harvest Sun” in areas where farmlands replaced the ocean and “Hand of Friendship” for community-oriented Quaker women (Schabel 4).

In nineteenth-century America choosing a quilt pattern and creating a top based on it were creative activities that a woman normally performed in isolation. A quilter worked on her own choosing from the vast array of previously mentioned patterns, decided whether her quilt was going to be appliquéd or not, and then “selected colors, textures, and patterns of cloth; she decided on the size and shape of the blocks and their individual parts; she chose the number, width, color, and pattern of both inner and outer borders” (Holstein, “American Quilts” 132). Later on, when she had finished her top, she looked for friends who could assist her in the tedious process of quilting. She shed her isolation and attended a quilting bee.

Quilting bees were intrinsically American institutions where women socialized while working on their quilts. In Britain mothers and daughters also got together to do the quilting, but these reunions lacked both the social transcendence and the community-making quality of American bees, which, for most of the nineteenth-century, received other denominations, especially “quiltings” or “quilting parties.” Several of the stories analyzed in this dissertation illustrate this now outdated use of the terms. T. S. Arthur’s story, published in 1849, fluctuates between both “the quilting party” of the title and “quilting,” but favors the former. Also in 1849, Friederike Bremer wrote a letter explaining that a “bee” was a gathering of women that met in order to sew (Gwinner 93). Although Bremer’s letter indicates that “bee” was becoming a popular word, it did not immediately replace its predecessors. In Marietta Holley’s “Miss Jones’ Quilting,” written almost thirty years after Bremer’s explanation, the only word for quilting bee is “quilting.” However, roughly a decade later, in 1898, Mary Wilkins Freeman adhered to the modernized version of the term in “A Quilting Bee in Our Village.”

In a world in which helping neighbors was taken for granted, quilting bees were practical social reunions which formed part of a larger network of activities nineteenth-century Americans used to perform as a group. In addition to the expected needlework and the conversation that accompanied it, bees provided food and music and were often held to commemorate important stages in an individual’s life, such as a marriage or a birth. Because of the uneven distribution of the population and the isolation of farms in prairie states and frontier areas, attending one of these events sometimes became an adventure that included traveling long distances for more than one day and spending the night at the host’s house (Gwinner 90). The willingness to endure such wearying trips

proves the popularity of quilting bees at a time when few other entertainment options were available.



“The Quilting Bee”
1984
Lenexa, KS

Elaine Darr Sparlin

Source:
Kansas Quilts and Quilters,
p. 61

Due to the festive component of quilting bees, all the members of the community participated in them, men included. As illustrated in T. S. Arthur’s “The Quilting Party” and in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A Quilting Bee in Our Village,” contact with males often remained relegated to the evening, after the women had quilted by themselves all day. Despite male attendance, quilting bees were women’s institutions; “there was never any doubt about who planned the quiltings, with their food, games, and dancing. Women were in firm control” (Fry 79). Quilting parties played a major role in nineteenth-century

women's lives because they allowed females to minimize the isolation in their lives and, most significantly, to validate their experience as women. "Quiltings" were especially important because they constituted the main sanctioned channel for female interaction. As Van E. Hillard points out, "[w]here men had the tavern or the saloon, the marketplace or the courthouse square for bonding together, women had the quilting bee" (117).

Owing to this lack of alternative avenues for establishing female communities, quilting bees were highly valued and, consequently, "[o]ne of the first things that frontier women did, after they were settled in their new locations, was to seek one another for a quilting" (Kiracofe 123). Surrounded by other females, a woman could judge and be judged by her fellow friends, earn a reputation for fine quilting, and demonstrate her outstanding abilities as a housekeeper. In a society which allowed women few opportunities and even fewer channels for proving their excellence, being admired as a quilter was one of the limited options available to those who intended to achieve some degree of recognition through socially sanctioned means.

Far from constituting fierce needlework competitions, quilting bees were female gatherings where women could learn from each other's abilities while sharing their work and knowledge. It has been argued that as the quilting progressed, and women's proximity increased as they moved from the sides to the center of the quilt, stories became more intimate. Regardless of whether this applied to all of them or not, quilting bees allowed women to share their stories with understanding listeners in a safe atmosphere, free from external pressures. In such environment, the quilt lost its materiality—ceased being a mere textile object to become "a vehicle for initiating conversation" (Hillard 117).

Collaborative quilting and intimate discussions joined women in a series of networks of friends and communities of needlewomen that resemble the whole process of quilt composition, from the union of the first two cloth pieces to the final assembly of top, filling, and back. After all, “[t]he act of quilting is the act of connecting. Pieces are stitched together, blocks joined, borders attached, and layers quilted and bound” (Behuniak-Long 166). This image of a community in which a group of females work together on a single project was recycled by twentieth-century feminists to symbolize a uniquely feminine approach to art, one based on collaboration and contrasted to the ideal of the individual male artist working isolated from the rest of society.

In fact, the ideals of reciprocity and cooperation implied in the concept of the quilting bee come into conflict with the relevance that patriarchy attaches to individualism and self-development. What is more, the importance of nineteenth-century “quiltings” also rests on the fact that they “situated women outside patriarchal authority without appearing to threaten fathers and husbands” (Elsley, *Quilts* 54). Women acknowledged this loophole in patriarchy and used it as a platform to organize. In “The Historical Significance of Patchwork Quilt Names as a Reflection of the Emerging Social Consciousness of the American Woman,” Elizabeth Schabel argues that quilting bees were the forerunners of nineteenth-century women’s clubs (2). In *Sister’s Choice* Elaine Showalter confirms that political activity took place in quilting bees by noting that Susan B. Anthony’s first spoke on women’s suffrage at a quilting bee in Cleveland (148). To sum up, in the nineteenth-century, quilting bees allowed women to fight their isolation, to establish meaningful relationships with other females while expressing their creativity and to evade, if not challenge, patriarchy.

2.3.3. Using a Quilt: Beyond Bedcovering

Most of the quilts women made in the nineteenth century were designed to be bedcoverings, sofa blankets, and decorative items for parlors or other rooms. A considerable amount, however, was used for less conventional purposes. Many raised money for various causes, unveiling the nineteenth-century woman's sympathies and concerns while exposing her political invisibility. Fundraising quilts reveal communities of neighbors, friends, and families that were ignored by censuses; demonstrate that nineteenth-century women attempted to participate in a patriarchal society that discriminated against them; and illustrate the social concerns that troubled women while uncovering their political preferences.

The emergence of fundraising quilts is associated with the popularity of "Ladies' Fairs," which were particularly common in the 1830s. Different women's organizations, variously called "sewing societies," "mission societies," and "aid societies," devoted their energies to making usually small objects such as cushions and aprons that they later sold at these fairs (Cozart 87). The fundraising quilt arose in connection with these societies and had an extraordinary development. By the mid-nineteenth century, women were extensively using quilts to raise money for various causes such as abolition, temperance, and the Civil War.

Following a pattern that, when analyzing quilts, will repeat itself over and over, fundraising quilts allowed women to dodge patriarchal strictures that attempted to limit their development as individuals without appearing to threaten the patriarchal system itself.¹⁷ Far from being considered harmful tools that could endanger the status quo,

¹⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, quilts demonstrated an astonishing potential for finding loopholes within the patriarchal system and for taking advantage of them while causing little to no commotion. This

fundraising quilts were welcome and considered socially beneficial, even though they allowed females to earn money and thus enter an economic system from which, according to the cult of True Womanhood, women were supposed to be excluded.¹⁸ Fundraising quilts became an important source of income for their makers, who raised millions of dollars for various causes during the height of their popularity, from 1850 to 1925. Especially around the time of the Civil War, quilts played a starring role in the fairs cities such as Chicago or New York organized in order to collect money for the Union.

Quilts used to raise funds are multi-patterned. Even though they tend to fall into three main categories, there is no prescribed format for fundraising quilts. One of the three groups includes those bedcovers which were not initially designed as fundraisers but were later used as such. For most of the second half of the nineteenth century, these quilts were “raffled, but by the turn of the century many churchgoers disapproved of raffling as a form of gambling” (Crews and Ronning 120). Quilts were then auctioned. The second category, including all those quilts that were devised as fundraisers but did not include signatures, were sold through identical procedures. These second-category quilts sometimes included pieces of old clothes or scraps donated by famous people with the intention of raising the final value of the item.

is particularly obvious when dealing with the relationship between quilts and politics. As I will explain in section 2.3.4., quilts allowed women to express their political sympathies and enter the political arena at the height of the cult of True Womanhood, which was specifically based on women’s domesticity and on their non-interference with social issues. However, this tendency to challenge patriarchal strictures can be seen over and over. As I have already described in section 2.3.2., quilting bees, apparently inoffensive gatherings of diligent needlewomen, were used to organize communities of women based on female parameters such as caring and cooperation. These networks would eventually threaten the status quo by arguing for women’s suffrage.

¹⁸ The characteristics of the cult of True Womanhood and its relationship to quilts are analyzed in section 2.3.4.

On the other hand, fundraising quilts that did include signatures, the third major category, made a profit by charging those who would like to have their name embroidered in them. Popular from the 1860s to the 1930s, these so-called signature quilts contained a minimum of one hundred and fifty names but could raise the figure to exceed one thousand. The names, usually embroidered in red because of its colorfastness and high visibility, were organized following a predetermined design that conditioned the number of signatures each block could lodge and their distribution. However, signatures were arranged grouping the names of relatives and friends, following a pattern that reflects the ways in which nineteenth-century people formed communities (Crews and Ronning 120). Fundraising quilts, with their neatly organized clusters of signatures, highlight once more that quilting means connecting, be it blocks, layers, or people.

The practice of using quilts to raise funds continued to flourish in the twentieth century, although in some cases fundraising quilts no longer served altruistic causes. Dorothy Cozart asserts in “The Role and Look of Fundraising Quilts: 1850-1930” that “it is not uncommon to find a fundraiser made in the teens and twenties to produce funds for a class trip of a school’s senior class” (93). Many twentieth-century fundraising quilts served the same ends as their 1800s predecessors: they were designed to support one side of armed conflicts or to relieve the suffering of war victims. Red Cross quilts, for example, a special subcategory of signature quilts, became popular during the Great War and its aftermath (Cozart 94). As Nancy Cameron Armstrong points out in “Quilts of the Gulf War, Desert Storm—Participation or Protest?,” the practice of using quilts to raise funds for war-related causes continued in the late twentieth century. Armstrong illustrates

her point by resorting to Gulf War Generals Powell and Schwarzkopf, who were asked to sign a number of quilt squares later incorporated into fundraising quilts (18).

In addition to using their needlework skills to raise funds for war relief, nineteenth-century women made fundraising quilts for other purposes, which, for the sake of brevity, I will limit to three main issues: churches; the Civil War, as well as its roots in abolition; and the fight for temperance led by the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Most scholars that do research on fundraising quilts agree that their existence and development are linked to nineteenth-century churches. Cozart argues that churches resorted to fundraising quilts more frequently and successfully than any other institutions (93). She also avers that the goals these churches tried to achieve usually had local scope, a thesis shared by Erma Kirkpatrick, who claims that village priests and impoverished families constituted the main targets of fundraising quilts (139). This strong connection between quilt(er)s and churches highlights the significance religion had in nineteenth-century women's lives.

Several reasons have been adduced to try to unravel the intricacies of this symbiosis. External pressures are largely responsible for the important role both religion in general and local churches in particular played in women's lives. As during the height of the cult of True Womanhood, the dominant discourse emphasized the separation of the two genders in as many spheres—a masculine one, linked to public spaces and activities, to commerce and aggressiveness; and a feminine one, domestic in nature and concerned with moral issues—, female spaces became limited to the church, which “has long been a central refuge for women [. . .] and has given them a sense of freedom and belonging outside the home,” and to the home itself (Warren and Wolff 4). Furthermore, religion

worked as a male-approved pacifier effectively used to counteract the longings of those women for whom the domestic scope did not seem to suffice.

On the other hand, inner factors also contributed to nineteenth-century women's affinity with the church. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues in *Within the Plantation Household* that women from the 1800s were attracted to religion because of the dangers implied in childbearing and the frailty of infants' lives. According to her, these "recurring dangers deeply informed their religious convictions, which functioned first to prepare [nineteenth-century females] to meet unexpected as well as predictable deaths" (277). Foreign observers adduced further reasons. Harriet Martineau, for instance, wrote in 1837 that American women turned to the church in order to solve their existential emptiness (Douglas 100). The conjunction of these internal and external factors led to the deep involvement of women in their churches and contributed to generating the widespread belief that most American congregations were overwhelmingly female (Douglas 99).

Therefore, fundraising quilts made under the auspices of local churches reveal the preeminence of religion and the church in nineteenth-century women's lives. However, the fact that fundraisers were used for other ends and, particularly, the goals women tried to meet with them also illustrate that for many females the church imposed too many boundaries to their development as individuals and that its scope delineated too narrow a work field for them. In truth, what lies behind women's attachment to the church and their simultaneous intention to exceed its limits is the age-old conflict between, on the one hand, the church which acts as "a central refuge for women" and gives them "a sense of freedom and belonging outside the house" and the institution which, on the other hand, divides women into virginal Maries and demoniac Eves and promotes their subjugation to

patriarchal figures. Fully aware of the limitations the church imposed on them, women embarked on far-reaching projects of social reform that did not constitute an intrinsic part of any religious agenda. However, since female involvement in social activities implied a breach with their supposedly inherent domestic nature, nineteenth-century women used their religious activities and the church's infrastructure both as a platform for those activities and as a protective shield from accusations of unwomanliness. From that platform, they fought for temperance as well as abolition.

Fundraising quilts were made in abundance for the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The WCTU, a women's association which proposed to eradicate alcoholism by replacing it with abstinence, is highly representative of the many clubs American females founded in the 1800s with religious or benevolent purposes in mind and, as such, it perfectly illustrates these clubs' common origins and women's motivations to set them up, as well as many of the strengths and weaknesses of all these organizations.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, there flourished an astonishing number of same-sex associations intended to fight as many social evils. These associations, which emerged from women's intention to solve the problems they witnessed daily despite their disenfranchisement and consequent lack of political power, played a major role in the development of the women's rights movement. The discourse underlying these clubs espoused "domestic feminism, which pursued the extension of what are considered natural and domestically nurtured traits into the public sphere"—that is, characteristics which were regarded as inherent to the domestic True Woman, such as nurturing, caring, or upright morality, were exercised in order to solve problems belonging to the public

domain. In that sense, women's societies "represented a middle ground between those women who were committed or resigned to remaining in the home and those who, like the suffragists, sought the 'radical' goal of equality with men" (Fox and Langley 176).

However, the ends nineteenth-century women's organizations tried to achieve clearly illustrate women's powerlessness within the social structure. Most of their efforts were misdirected, aimed at the effects rather than the causes of the problems. The fight for temperance is a case in point, since it focused on protecting victimized wives and children rather than on curing the alcoholics themselves. In spite of this, women's clubs managed to address a number of social injustices while freeing women from their isolation and purposelessness. In fact, women's desperate need to confront their loneliness and to relate to other women is the common denominator to all these nineteenth-century associations. In *Dorothy Canfield Fisher: A Biography*, Ida H. Washington stresses this point when she analyzes Fisher's mother's activities as a women's club's leader:

While her husband was crusading for free education and free trade, she was busy trying to bring more color and interest into the lives of women of the community around her. She said later of this time: "When I joined my first woman's club in Kansas, I could see right away what such organizations could mean to women in small towns and country districts. Didn't I know that ache to do things, see things and meet people? It's hard in this day of magazines, movies and automobiles to imagine what the average woman's life was like in those days. Before she was rescued by the club her life was bounded by the cook-stove, the chicken-coop and the crib." Her early interest in women's clubs continued; in 1898 she organized the women's clubs of Ohio into a federation and was elected its first president. (28)

In accordance with all the other women's clubs, the WCTU originated as a response to women's isolation and in an attempt to address the problems they observed around them. However, its crusade for temperance exceeded the scope of all other reform movements with the notable exception of abolition (Holman viii). The struggle of the WCTU not only intended to put an end to alcoholism, it also proposed to change women's rights in order to protect alcoholics' wives and children more effectively.

According to Jane Curry, "the WCTU was initially a praying society of Midwestern [Evangelical] women whose fervor erupted during the winter of 1873-74 when more than 60,000 women took to the streets to close local saloons, mainly in rural areas" (40). The success of the WCTU, which was formally founded in Cleveland in 1874, rested on the weighty issues it explored and on their relevance to ordinary citizens' daily lives, as well as on the work of outstanding president Frances Willard and the support of influential personalities of the period who often collaborated with it.

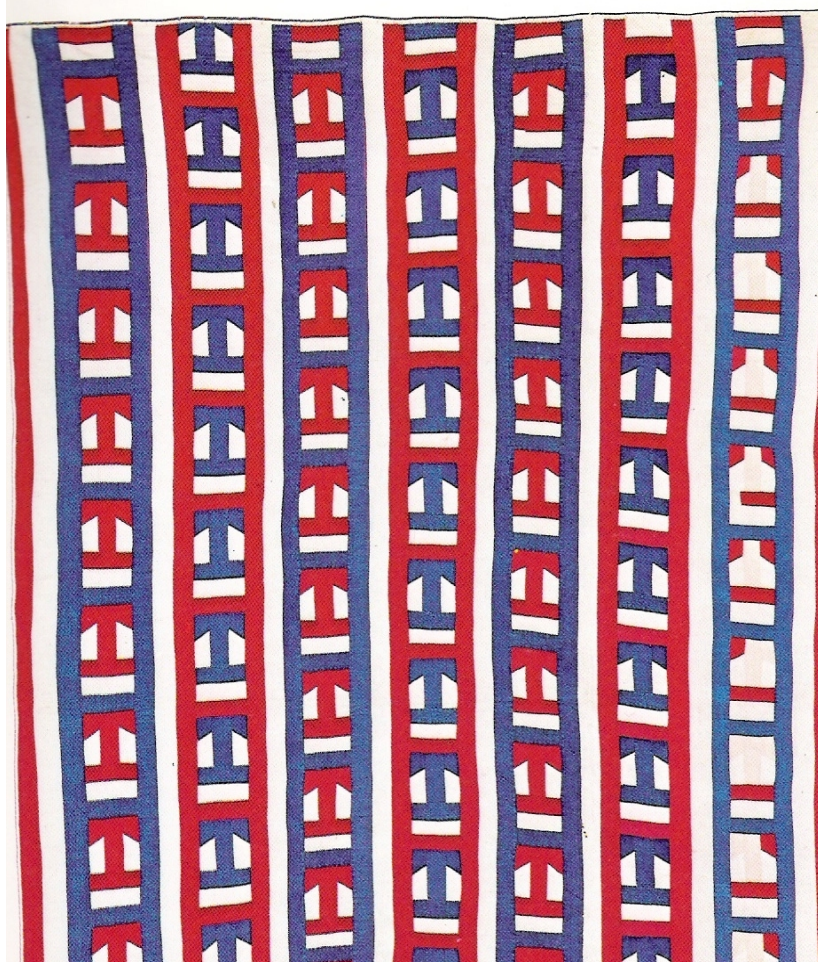
Many renowned nineteenth-century fiction writers espoused temperance. Of all of them, the most prolific and perhaps most influential was T. S. Arthur, whose best-known novel, *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There* (1854), deals with an alcoholic who destroys his life. *Ten Nights* sold around 400,000 copies and became the most famous American novel on temperance. A staunch believer in temperance, Arthur published novels on the topic until 1881, four years before he died. He directly expressed his support for the WCTU in *Women to the Rescue* (1872), which celebrates the beginning of the movement (Holman viii-ix). Marietta Holley and Mary Wilkins Freeman also penned works on temperance. The former defended prohibition and supported the agenda of the WCTU in her Samantha series, opposing "the sanctioned practice of wife

beating; the legal death of women who become wives; the total control of body, property, and children given over to husbands,” and highlighting “the need for women guards of women prisoners to protect them from rape” or “the ruin of families even unto the prostitution of daughters because of drunkenness” (Curry 47). In addition to these issues, the WCTU also strove to include battering and habitual drunkenness as grounds for divorce.

In order to achieve its objectives, the WCTU used quilts not only as fundraising mechanisms but also as symbols. The utilization of quilts in the temperance movement represents one of the best examples of how nineteenth-century American women shielded themselves behind needlework and religion when they engaged in reform campaigns that entailed political activity.¹⁹ For many of these females, the line between what constituted the public and what qualified as domestic was more blurred than it may seem to a contemporary observer. Therefore, as Dorothy Cozart points out, many believed that the use of needlework justified their involvement in the public arena:

It is important to note that the women who flocked to join the WCTU were women who believed that they, as women, were responsible for the welfare of their homes, and that saloons were an ominous threat to those homes. As good housemakers, they were also good needlewomen, so making WCTU fundraising quilts followed as a natural consequence at the time fundraising quilts were popular. (88)

¹⁹ As mentioned in previous paragraphs, religion and the church were platforms from which nineteenth-century American women crusaded against many of the evils they observed in society. Because of the public and political nature of their pursuits, these women, who were expected to incarnate domesticity itself, presented their activities as extensions of characteristics that, as True Women, they were supposed to embody, particularly a pious nature and a motherly predisposition to nurturance. Many of the associations these women formed emphasized the religious component of their enterprises by incorporating the idea of religion to their name. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union is a case in point, as is the Young Women’s Christian Association, founded in the 1860s to provide safe accommodation for women traveling on their own.



T- quilt
c. 1910
New York

Unknown
maker

Source: *The
Pieced Quilt,*
p. 173

Although fundraising quilts did not necessarily follow a predetermined pattern, many of those made for the WCTU used symbols that the temperance movement exploited continuously. “T” quilts, in which the “T” stood for temperance, became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century and combinations of blue and white, the colors of the WCTU, were favored from the 1860s to 1920, a period that approximately coincides with the heyday of this organization. While some scholars have hypothesized that the preference for blue and white quilts is directly linked to the temperance movement, others have warned that the use of indigo-blue in conjunction

with white may have been motivated by purely aesthetic reasons (Crothers 55; Kiracofe 128). The WCTU also popularized “Drunkard’s Path” quilts, a meandering design, reminiscent of the uneven way in which an intoxicated subject walks (Crothers 55).

The WCTU continued its activities in the twentieth century until it achieved its most visible objective in 1919 with the passing of the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution, which illegalized the manufacture, sale or transportation of liquor. Since the WCTU crusaded against alcoholism but focused on an array of issues that included married women’s legal invisibility, wife battering, and the impact of liquor addiction on the family, it could be argued that the agenda defended by the temperance movement survived until contemporary times, if under the new denomination of domestic violence.

In addition to supporting temperance with their fundraising quilts, women also contributed to the abolition cause, the most important reform movement in nineteenth-century America. Studied from the male point of view underlying most textbooks, women did not contribute much to defend abolition or the war that ended slavery; the widespread notion is that there were no speeches given or battles fought by females, and, of course, no women are credited with having devised the war strategies that ultimately led to the Union victory.²⁰ In fact, taking a public stance to defend abolition was often a risky enterprise for nineteenth-century women, who were expected to conform to a

²⁰ Fox and Langley have challenged this point by claiming that women’s contributions were often silenced. They illustrate their argument using Anna Ella Carroll’s story. According to them, Carroll, “a military genius whose advice was indispensable to the Union victory in the Civil War,” explained to the Assistant Secretary of War, among others, the flaws of the 1861 Union plan. She suggested that military operations concentrate on the Tennessee River rather than the Mississippi, as originally intended. Her strategy was effective but, because she was both a woman and a civilian, her identity was not disclosed until 1881, when the Committee on Military Affairs recommended that she be granted a pension. In spite of that, few history books acknowledge her contributions to the war (123-24).

domestic model. Nonetheless, some, like Sarah Grimké or Lydia Maria Child, did voice their opinions.

Child's example illustrates how difficult it was for nineteenth-century women to negotiate the boundaries between public commitment and an ideal of womanhood that stressed domesticity. After publishing several anti-slavery short stories and a longer piece entitled *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1883), Child became socially ostracized, was deprived of her library privileges, and lost subscriptions to her periodical, *Juvenile Miscellany*, which she was eventually forced to cancel. Hildegard Hoeller argues that Child was punished for transgressing the limits of what nineteenth-century America considered acceptable for a woman. She claims that “[c]ontemporary reviewers, even when hailing her precise insight into the problems of slavery, nonetheless found it, like the public, inappropriate for a woman to take on such a strong public voice in her writing. Entering the public and ‘male’ space of politics, Child lost her role as the ‘foremost lady of letters’” (42-43).

In order to avoid suffering a fate similar to Child's, women expressed their abolitionist ideas through quilts. As the threat of a civil war materialized and major cities began to organize relief fairs, quilts as well as other forms of needlework became important fundraising tools. The first of these fairs, held in Chicago in October 1863, raised \$78,000; the largest, that of New York City, \$1.2 million (Kiracofe 108-09). Crothers, who provides more general figures, argues that “[t]he amount of money raised was staggering, and quilting provided women an opportunity to participate directly in the war effort” (54). According to her, women contributed \$25,000,000 to the U. S. Sanitary Commission, which supported the Union. Fundraising quilts played a major role in some

events organized by women such as Sanitary Fairs, where a total of \$4,000,000 was raised to support the Union cause. Crothers also offers data on quilts sent to battle. As of October 1864 Sanitary Commission records indicated that its western arm had distributed 50,177 quilts among soldiers (54). Furthermore, making quilts during war times allowed women to counteract economic hardship while mitigating their anxiety for loved ones that were warring.

2.3.4. The Quilters: The Influence of the Cult of True Womanhood

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the life of American women did not differ significantly from that of their female colonial ancestors. The vast majority of them worked at home canning fresh vegetables, preserving fruit, cooking, cleaning, and producing the cloth necessary for their families' apparel, which they also made. Throughout the 1800s the progressive industrialization of the country removed many of these activities from the home and located them in factories and shops, leaving middle-class women at the margin of the economic system. Meanwhile, as many activities were professionalized, women were barred from the education that would allow them to have access to those professions and told that their place, their sphere, was the home. The cult of True Womanhood, which emphasized women's domestic nature for over four decades, had an enormous impact on quilting, which became the quintessential feminine activity.

As the century progressed, women's work outside the home lost social approval. There developed a clear-cut distinction between lower class (often foreign-born) women, who worked outside the home to earn a salary, and middle-class American females, who toiled at home to conform to the dictates of True Womanhood. A number of factors

explain the relegation of middle-class women to the home. First, throughout the nineteenth century a number of professions underwent a process of professionalization from which women were excluded.²¹ As a consequence of lack of training, work opportunities for women decreased dramatically. Second, doctors, interested in eliminating women as potential competitors and aware of the economic profit they could make, provided evidence describing women as weak and, therefore, unfit for physical work. Dr. W. W. Bliss, for example, explained “the gigantic power and influence of the ovaries over the whole animal economy of woman” and argued that her physical appearance and intellectual capacities were linked to her reproductive organs (Fox and Langley 179-81). Judicial rulings such as *Muller vs. Oregon* reinforced postulates such as those of Dr. Bliss (Fox and Langley 133).

In the midst of such an unfavorable environment, few females entered the professions. Those who, like Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell or lawyer Myra Bradwell, did try faced insurmountable odds in their path towards becoming career women (Fox and Langley 77; Weatherford, *Milestones* 79, 117). This situation changed somewhat after the Civil War as positions as teachers, social workers, and nurses opened for females. However, “[w]omen found their careers outside the home largely limited to those that could be presented as extensions of their domestic or maternal roles” (Kiracofe 150). In addition to that, supporting one’s female relatives continued to be the norm. This

²¹ In *The Majority Finds Its Past*, Gerda Lerner analyzes a number of key examples such as medicine or law. She argues that before 1750 women could act as “attorneys-in-fact” and as doctors. When specialized training became necessary to practice law or medicine, females disappeared from these professions. Lerner also notes that the number of businesswomen and storekeepers decreased in the 1800s. Finally, she asserts that the only two fields where professionalization did not exclude women were teaching and nursing, which were considered extensions of female domestic responsibilities. Lerner maintains that inclusion of women in the process of professionalization lowered the status of the jobs, which became considered low-pay and low-skill activities (18-24).

generated a number of women who “were encouraged to occupy themselves with fancy needlework as an indication of their leisured status and of the ability of their men to provide for them” (Kiracofe 143). In the late nineteenth century this combination of expert needlewomen and plenty of leisure was reflected in the elaboration of quilts which contained thousands of tiny blocks, as well as in the popularization of non-utilitarian crazy quilts filled with elaborate and time-consuming embroidery and made with fine materials such as velvet and silk, a reflection of the makers’ high purchasing power.



Schoolhouse
1880
New
Hampshire

Unknown
maker

Source: *The
Pieced Quilt*,
p. 143

Towards the end of the nineteenth-century educational opportunities for women also improved, even though higher education remained in an embryonic state. On the contrary, basic education reached a large section of the population in the 1800s, leading

to the establishment of many common schools and to a high demand for teachers. Most of these new teachers were females who settled in western territories where competition from men, who preferred farming, was scarce. According to Weatherford the number of female teachers rose by 80% in the 1870s (*Milestones* 140). This astounding increase was possible not only due to the fact that women's salaries represented one half of male ones but also to the belief that teaching was just an extension of women's responsibilities in the home, "a mere step away from cribside duty" (Douglas 76). By the turn of the century three out of four school teachers were females. Quilts reflected the increasing connection between basic education and women. As more and more women were educated at an elementary school level, and more and more females became schoolmistresses, quilters popularized the pieced "Schoolhouse" pattern, which is usually based on repetitions of slightly different small houses contained within independent blocks.

Women's limited access to education, as well as their displacement from the workplace in nineteenth-century America, were among the main causes that led to the emergence of the cult of True Womanhood. The ideal of True Womanhood, which originated around 1820 in northern areas of the United States which were undergoing a process of rapid industrialization, defended the social separation of individuals according to gender into two spheres. It tried to justify women's exclusion from the public realm, which became associated to men, politics and the workplace, while celebrating their adjustment to the domestic sphere, where, according to this ideology, they truly belonged.²² Despite its far-reaching implications, the cult of True Womanhood was, as Mary Papke has pointed out, "boldly simplistic in its commandments":

²² The ideology of separate spheres is not shared by every scholar. Fox-Genovese, for example, contends that the separation into spheres is antediluvian and, therefore, not a nineteenth-century phenomenon.

Woman, in essence, was to be preserver of culture, the sympathetic and supportive bridge between the private realm of the home and the almost exclusively male world of the public marketplace, herself the finest product of capitalism. She was to embody and to maintain social stability in a volatile time of class struggle and economic amorality/immorality through the nurturance of her womanhood self, her family, and her sense of virtue. She was also to provide a haven of beauty, grace, and refuge for the makers of this new world: her men. (11)

The ideology of the separate spheres depended on the age-old definition of women as physically and intellectually inferior to men, as well as on the separation of social exchanges into two realms, a female and a male sphere, which were based on a radical dissociation of the public from the private self.²³ Women's sphere was concerned with the private side of the individual, with the personal, and the domestic. Men's comprised the sphere of power, the political and economic arenas, and all the public aspects of an individual's life. This bifurcation of society into two spheres was concomitant with a series of economic changes that degraded women's social status. Females were excluded from a series of jobs which underwent a process of professionalization, found their business opportunities progressively restricted to stores

"Emerging bourgeois ideology," she maintains, "promoted a strict division of labor and spheres by gender as the foundation of its own legitimacy. It did not invent either the notion of division of labor between men and women or that of separate spheres, both of which have characterized most human societies." She concludes by arguing that bourgeois ideology "gave those notions new content" (*Plantation* 60). Therefore, for Fox-Genovese, what really dominated the nineteenth century was not a novel division of society into spheres but a new culturally dominant definition of what each sphere implied.

²³ Gerda Lerner differentiates very clearly between the concepts of "woman's culture" and "woman's sphere." The difference, Lerner argues, lies in whether the terms are used from a female point of view or from a male one. According to her, "[h]istorically, 'woman's sphere' is a nineteenth-century term, denoting those aspects of activity and function men determined appropriate to women. The fact that many women, through social conditioning, also accepted that definition as 'natural,' does not make it a woman's definition" (Buhle et al. 52). Although her criticism of the term "woman's sphere" seems appropriate, I have decided to use it anyway for its historical implications and widespread use within the academic community.

that served an all-female clientele, and experienced first-hand how the industrialization of the country left monotonous activities at home while it transferred skill-demanding ones to the workplace. This situation generated a loss of work satisfaction for women (Lerner, *Majority* 16-25). Paralleling these economic changes, women were deprived of legal rights they had previously enjoyed.

In addition to that, there was an increase in the gap between women of different social classes because “[w]hen female occupations, such as carding, spinning, and weaving, were transferred from home to factory the poorer women followed their traditional work and became industrial workers. The women of the middle and upper classes could use their newly gained time for leisure pursuits: they became ladies” (Lerner, *Majority* 25). Finally, the lady, and not the working woman, became the model to imitate. As under the new behavioral code dictated by the cult of True Womanhood “women could no longer be permitted to work outside the home (except among the poorest classes where the issue was simple survival),” the independent woman was no longer socially revered (Demos 14-15). On the contrary, the new model of American femininity put the indolent genteel lady of fashion on a pedestal.

As white middle- and upper-class women were excluded from the marketplace and paid labor, they were assigned new “jobs” which mainly consisted in refashioning themselves according to the guidelines of the cult of True Womanhood, procuring husbands that could compensate them for their loss of productivity, and becoming a showcase for their male relatives’ wealth. However, regardless of her husband’s success in the business world, a female could not become a True Woman if she did not excel in four basic qualities: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, from which she was

supposed to derive both her power and her happiness. A woman's inability to conform to these virtues brought about loss of reputation for herself and her family, thus undermining all of her husband's material achievements.

Piety was an essential component of the True Womanhood mix. In fact, the cult of True Womanhood rested on the notion that woman's nature was different from man's—more prone to emotions and to the irrational than to scientific knowledge. Medical data and “religious beliefs concerning woman's greater susceptibility to grace, and thus moral superiority” confirmed women's natural predisposition to religion (Papke 12). Since a True Woman's responsibilities concerned uplifting her family's morality, religiosity became crucial as a source of strength. Aware that females acted as God's agents, trying to rescue the world from its sinful state through their own suffering, most women's seminaries assured families that the education they provided was mainly channeled towards making their students virtuous, suitable for God's company (Welter 153-54). Unlike active political or social participation, involvement in religious activities was not considered to diminish True Women's compulsory domesticity and submissiveness. As pointed out when analyzing religion in relation to fundraising quilts, women used this loophole in the system in order to escape their narrow confinement in the home.

Purity was perhaps even more important than piety because “[w]ithout female purity, or virtue, paternity becomes questionable, the transfer of property from father to legitimate son becomes problematic, and therefore patriarchy is undone” (Noe 158). Furthermore, the idea that family-oriented women were virtuous was deeply ingrained in nineteenth-century society, which believed that females lacked sexual impulses. According to Faderman, in the early nineteenth century, the notion that “female venereal

appetite” might exist was “an issue which touched the very foundation of society” (152). In addition to that, lack of information, the dangers implied in the childbearing process, and deficient birth control methods did not help facilitate a fearless approach to sex on women’s part.

The ideal of purity was perhaps the defining characteristic of the cult of True Womanhood that women most willingly accepted. Although virtue implied suppressing one’s sexual instincts, “[g]iven the strains of endless pregnancies and the hardships of childbirth, it is understandable that nineteenth-century women felt no great attachment to their sexuality and gladly accepted the new, glorified de-sexualized identity white men imposed upon them” (hooks, *Woman* 31). Other females, black and lower-class ones in particular, had been automatically excluded from the ideal of women’s purity. As bell hooks aptly points out in *Ain’t I a Woman*, “[t]he shift away from the image of white woman as sinful and sexual to that of white woman as virtuous lady occurred at the same time as mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women” (32). At the same time, the number of prostitutes increased among all races. Often used as a last resort, prostitution provided women whom the cult of True Womanhood had excluded from the job market with a precarious source of income. An 1860 New York City survey concluded that in the Big Apple the ratio of prostitutes per male inhabitants was one to sixty-four (Weatherford, *Milestones* 91).

Submissiveness, the third characteristic all True Women had to exemplify, derived from religious teachings that highlighted women’s inferiority in relation to men as part of a divinely designed plan. In fact, females were advised to submit to males and “warned that if they tampered with this quality they tampered with the order of the

Universe” (Welter 159). As a consequence a True Woman was encouraged to lead a life “of submissive sacrifice, self-martyrdom, profound effacement of self for the promotion of an amoral, depersonalized world” (Papke 16-17).

The fourth and last attribute that defined a True Woman, domesticity, was instilled in women through their education in and outside the house because homemaking represented an integral part of the knowledge a nineteenth-century female was expected to possess. For True Women, the house represented a prison from which they were not supposed to escape and an altar in which they could be glorified for their adjustment to the new definition of womanhood. From there True Women were expected to care for the moral and psychological well-being of their families by surrounding them with beautiful objects such as flowers or quilts. As it was believed that a visually appealing house influenced its inhabitants’ morality positively, those women who worried about their reputations felt compelled to make aesthetically pleasing objects to decorate their home. Be they sewn, crocheted, embroidered, or quilted, needlework items, in all of their variety of forms and shapes, were considered essential to the enhancement of a True Woman’s home. In fact, during the cult of True Womanhood sewing was idealized to the point of “becom[ing] the quintessential ‘feminine’ activity, the one through which a woman most closely identified herself with her ‘sphere’” (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 24). This idealization was supported by all the agents that had turned homemaking into art, from etiquette books published in the 1830s and 1840s to mid-nineteenth-century fiction and, especially, by mass circulation newspapers and magazines which taught females how to carry themselves in the midst of puzzling social and economic changes.

Influential tastemaker Sarah J. Hale, who edited *Godey's Lady's Book* for several decades, encouraged her readers to sew because, in her view, needlework stimulated habits and moral qualities that she defined as indispensable to the well-bred woman: "thrift and industry, patience, and the acceptance of repetition and routine" (Hedges, "Needle" 342). Sewing became an extremely efficient means of instilling in girls the restrictive definition of femininity that the cult of True Womanhood favored. Providing needlework with a new culturally defined and gender-associated meaning prevented middle- and upper-class women from giving up the needle. At a time when fabrics and store-bought clothing and bedding were widely accessible to northern middle-class women, disassociating needlework from its material aspect and emphasizing its moral and aesthetic benefits compelled quilters to produce increasingly more intricate bedcovers. As Behuniak-Long points out, "[n]o longer were large quantities the goal; now the quality of the quilt was highly prized. Elaborate designs, extravagant use of fabric, tiny and profuse quilting stitches became the marks of quilting excellence" (153). Exemplary affluent women comprehended perfectly that quilting was no longer a material need but a measure of taste and, as a consequence, strived to devise fine bedcovers that could testify to their excellence as homemakers as well as transform their homes into peaceful paradises free from the threats of the changing world outside.

Therefore, during the cult of True Womanhood sewing became an effective way of narrowing women's options in life by promoting a limiting definition of femininity. According to Behuniak-Long, "[t]he model wife or daughter was one who sewed, quilted, embroidered, knitted, crocheted, and tatted items worthy of admiration. Not so coincidentally, she was also a woman who sat quietly, modestly, and patiently, and

selflessly engaged in the repetition, monotony, and routine of the women's sphere" (153-54). Quilting, however, does not seem to have indoctrinated women in exemplary True Womanhood as adequately as some other sewing activities. Although it did act as a pacifier for restless natures, it also provided a channel for thwarted creative energies, thus illustrating women's assertiveness, a characteristic that bluntly contradicted the selfless disposition that the cult of True Womanhood tried to instill in women.

On the one hand, women interiorized the need to create soothing retreats from the dangerous commercial world and used floral quilts to enhance their homes. On the other hand, quilting involved attitudes and viewpoints that came into direct conflict with the cult of True Womanhood. Quilting implied admitting that women had artistic drives and, therefore, a need for self-expression that clashed with the supposedly self-effacing nature of the True Woman. It also involved public display; reputations as efficient needlewomen, which were highly esteemed among nineteenth-century females as one of the few approved ways in which they could excel socially, were established and maintained at quilting bees and in competition with other quilters at local and state fairs. Finally, females used quilts profusely to raise money for political activities, whose decidedly public character came into conflict with domesticity, one of the four basic pillars on which the ideology of True Womanhood rested. In addition to that, some women used quilts to cast a vote they were legally forbidden to register otherwise.

The use of flowers in quilts demonstrates women's acceptance of some of the precepts imposed by the cult of True Womanhood, especially the need to transform the home into a haven. The preference for floral motifs paralleled a growing interest in botany among nineteenth-century American women (Bolick 1). Growing flowers was

easily accommodated to the dictates of the ideology of True Womanhood because it helped women demonstrate their homemaking skills while keeping them close to their assigned domestic space. In quilts, full-blown flowers were favored from 1840 to 1860, as part of a Rococo aesthetic that also incorporated flowers to fabrics and wallpaper designs (Kiracofe 133). The popularity of quilted flowers outlasted the cult of True Womanhood. At the turn of the century many were integrated into the pieced baskets typical of the colonial revival style of quilting.



Floral quilt
c. 1850-70
Indiana

Unknown
maker

Source: A
*Flowering of
Quilts*, p. 79

On the contrary, the inclusion of political statements in quilts and the use of these bedcoverings to serve political goals prove that women defied the restrictions the cult of True Womanhood imposed on their participation in public affairs. As women were not

allowed to vote until the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1920, the relevance of expressing one's political opinions through quilts needs to be understood in the context of women's political invisibility, in the midst of their disenfranchisement, and taking into consideration that petitions were their main political tools.



Political Quilt
1869
Unknown location

Elizabeth Holmes

Source:
Hearts and Hands, p. 1

The mere existence of political quilts demonstrates women's deftness at exploiting loopholes in the ideology behind True Womanhood. Although "the area in which quilting most directly and explicitly confronted the separate spheres' ideology was politics," women's quilted political statements were not perceived as a challenge to the status quo because "[q]uilting was a female-associated activity and therefore ignored as a public threat" (Crothers 51-52). Political quilts are remnants of a time when campaign

funding was not invested in television commercials and newspaper coverage, but “used to purchase and distribute buttons and lapel devices, ceramics, glassware, and textiles” (Powell 27). Women recycled campaign textiles such as ribbons and parade banners that they later incorporated in their quilts. They also designed political quilts that included embroidered political symbols. Most importantly, nineteenth-century quilters cast their votes in the only way their society allowed them to: by featuring the names of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates they favored in their quilts. Finally, when fundraising quilts were made to serve political causes such as abolition they were transformed from mere bedcoverings into political statements.

As the decade of the 1880s progressed, the cult of True Womanhood began to lose its socio-cultural prominence in America due to a number of social changes which gradually widened women’s work opportunities, their possibility of being autonomous, and their influence or power outside the female sphere. As these changes were occurring, a number of psychiatrists, led by Carl von Westphal and his disciples Richard von Krafft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis, began portraying women’s homosocial relationships as pathological problems. This process, which will be explained in detail in chapter three, derived in a gradual distancing between women and in the development of a gap in the relationship between mothers and daughters, whose fondness for each other had been an integral part of the cult of True Womanhood.

In addition to this, the ideology of True Womanhood also yielded due to its internal flaws. On the one hand, its conservatism failed to change the status quo. Although it acknowledged the dangers of the public arena, it defined the home as a retreat rather than as a weapon to fight those threats. On the other hand, it pretended to glorify

females because of their moral superiority, but created a dichotomous distribution of labor that debased women and their domestic contributions while elevating male work outside the home. Finally, “[r]eal women often felt they did not live up to the ideal of True Womanhood: some of them blamed themselves, some challenged the standard, some tried to keep the virtues and enlarge the scope of womanhood” (Welter 174). Defined as an ideal that combined domesticity, submissiveness, piety, and purity and expected to behave as angels on earth rather than humans, few women were able to refashion themselves according to such high expectations.

Furthermore, the ideal of True Womanhood gave in to the extreme contradictions it rested on. As Barbara Welter notes, “[t]he very perfection of True Womanhood [. . .] carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction. For if woman was so very little less than the angels, she should surely take a more active part in running the world, especially since men were making such a hash of things” (174). In fact, the emphasis the cult of True Womanhood put on women’s moral superiority alone would justify the destruction of the ideal itself because it came into conflict with one of its four basic pillars, domesticity. Furthermore, if women were to create and maintain a moral society, a role which they were assigned to do, it became necessary for them to be able to make a direct impact on social practices. Some females soon became aware of these contradictions and exploited them with increasing effectiveness as the century progressed.

In fact, the cult of True Womanhood suited both those women who did not perceive its inconsistencies and those who did. The former were mainly “[a]nti-feminists [who] had only to follow the code to the letter.” They quilted to create domestic paradises that proved their adjustment to the code. The latter were, primarily, “feminists [who] read

between the lines, subverting further irreconcilable contradictions, slowly moving into the public sphere and beginning pragmatic social reforms under the guise of spiritual and ethical guardianship” (Papke 17). Unlike later women’s rights activists who demonized all forms of needlework as symbols of female subjugation, these early feminists understood quilts as women’s tools that could be used to fight social evils. They quilted to prove that they were not mere housewives, to fight for temperance, and to defend abolition. In summary, they quilted to blur the line that separated the public and private spheres until it eventually disappeared.

Not all scholars accept the nineteenth-century division of society into two spheres, one public and male and the other domestic and female. Some contend that the 1800s recycled a gendered division of labor and reformulated it into a potent ideology that attempted to preserve the age-old subordination of women to men from the threat of disappearance posed by emerging bourgeois principles which emphasized individualism (Fox-Genovese, *Plantation* 60-61). Others assert that the nineteenth-century ideal of domestic womanhood promoted by mass media did not represent social reality accurately but emerged as a reaction to massive lower-class women’s incorporation to the workplace (Lerner, “Placing” 359). Because of its emphasis on domesticity, the ideology of True Womanhood excluded all working females: career women, industrial workers, yeoman women, pioneers, and African-Americans. In fact, the concept of separate spheres and the glorification of the domestic lady responded to white middle-class interests which flourished in Northeastern America for part of the 1800s. It specifically ignored the socio-economic reality of lower-class or black women.

Pioneers did not qualify as True Women either. On the frontier, economic conditions remained similar to those that had prevailed in colonial times for much longer than in the East: industrialization did not exist, female work continued to be essential for the survival of the entire family, and, as a consequence, women's social position did not differ much from that of past generations. Hence, the right preconditions for the development of the cult of True Womanhood did not exist and Western women suffered from their inability to adjust to a definition of womanhood that, as an ideal, pervaded society.

Finally, black females were ignored by the cult of True Womanhood due to both slavery, which stressed their invisibility as human beings, and "the institutionalized devaluation of black womanhood [which] encouraged all white men to regard black females as whores or prostitutes" (hooks, *Woman* 62). Despite this exclusion, hooks maintains that female slaves were indirectly influenced by the cult of True Womanhood. According to her, African-American women strived to conform to the dictates of this ideology, emphasizing modesty, virtuousness, and submissiveness in their lives, even though their status as chattel highly conditioned their efforts (48-49). hooks argues that owing to the historical devaluation of their womanhood, black females were denied the possibility of becoming True Women even after emancipation:

Everywhere black women went, on public streets, in shops, or at their places of work, they were accosted and subjected to obscene comments and even physical abuse at the hands of white men and women. Those black women suffered most whose behavior best exemplified that of a 'lady.' A black woman dressed tidy and clean, carrying herself in a dignified manner, was usually the object of mudslinging by white men who ridiculed and mocked her self-improvement efforts. They reminded

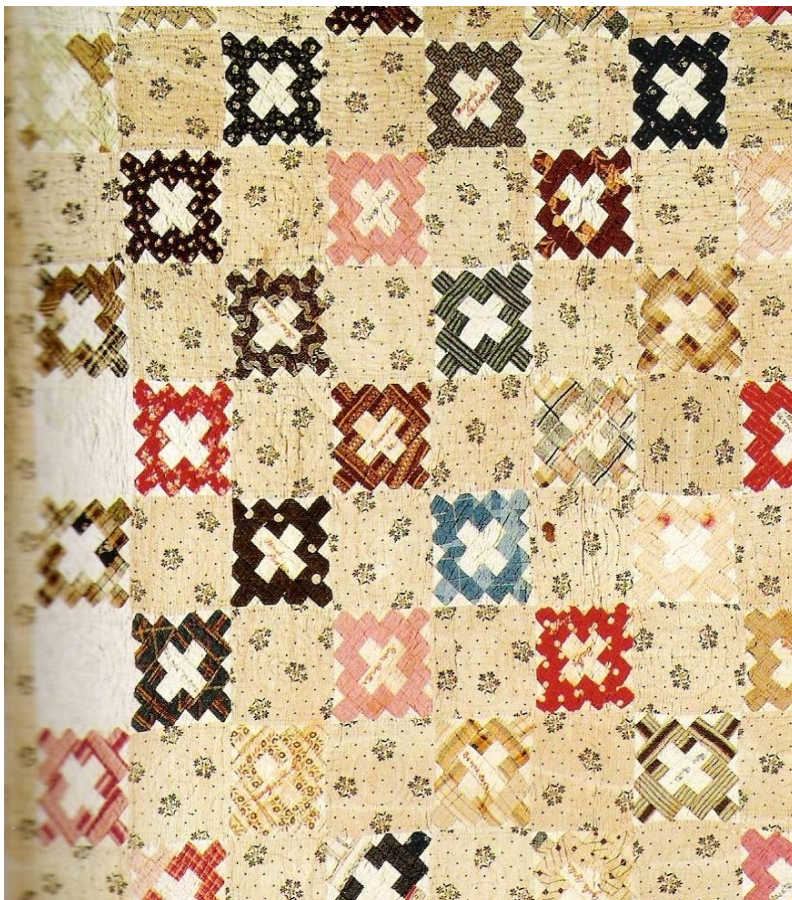
her that in the eyes of the white public she would never be seen as worthy of consideration or respect. (*Woman* 55)

As hooks points out, the fact that some women were excluded from the cult of True Womanhood did not prevent them from being influenced by its underlying ideology. Besides their attempts at purity, submissiveness, piety, and domesticity, these women the cult of True Womanhood marginalized shared with those it did not a passion for the quintessential True Woman's activity, sewing. Both the women True Womanhood targeted and those it excluded quilted. Both used quilts as texts where they recorded their lives, but because their experiences diverged so radically, they emphasized different aspects. While True Women used floral quilts to demonstrate their adjustment to the prevailing ideology and political quilts to explore the subtle ways in which they could try to overcome its limitations, pioneers and African-Americans quilted in an attempt to survive psychologically. Pioneers sought quilts to satisfy their craving for color and to comment on their physical and emotional losses. African-Americans quilted in order to compensate for meager bedding and to comment on their social marginalization.

Although figures vary from source to source, it is estimated that half a million Americans moved westward from the 1830s to the 1860s.²⁴ This resettlement, which took place progressively, responded mainly to economic factors, even though it was encouraged by the arrival of several waves of British, Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants and by the annexation of California in 1848. Relocating to frontier areas avoided an excessive subdivision of land into increasingly smaller lots. According to

²⁴ Both Kiracofe (118) and Weatherford (*Milestones* 63) argue that half a million people resettled in frontier areas following the Oregon Trail, a route linking Independence, Missouri, and Portland, Oregon, from 1842 until it was replaced by the transcontinental railroad in 1869. In "Mid-19th Century Album and Friendship Quilts," Ricky Clark reduces the figure to 250,000 (79).

John Demos, young married couples had two options: migrating to the west or accepting a portion of their parents' property, but "this portion was simply much *less* than what they could hope to gain for themselves elsewhere. And so they would leave" (10). The decision to move was generally made by men because as "economic considerations in the nineteenth century fell to males, men had the final say in moving" (McKnight 29). Since the prevailing ideology situated women outside the economic system, most women simply followed their relatives. Although some females were attracted to the idea of freedom from convention associated with the frontier, "for most [moving to the west] was a somber occasion, since it meant long-term separation from loved ones" (Clark 79).



Album Quilt
c. 1891
Nemaha
County,
Nebraska

Sarah Adaline
Potard Rogge

Source:
*Nebraska Quilts
and
Quiltmakers,*
p. 39

As a reminder of the intense community ties pioneer women left behind as they moved to frontier areas, their friends and families quilted friendship quilts, also called album quilts, for them.²⁵ Extremely popular from the 1840s to the 1870s, the emergence of friendship quilts is normally associated to migrations and the religious mood that dominated the United States at that time. While some were collaborative enterprises in which each quilter designed and made a block, others were individual projects which, in form, did not differ significantly from any other type of quilts made around the mid-nineteenth century. Album quilts sometimes included inscriptions, which ranged from Shakespearean poems to records of personal misfortunes. Often borrowed from fashionable *Godey's*, these quilted messages make friendship quilts resemble the autograph albums popular in America around that time. In general, what can be gathered from these quilts is that “mid-19th-century women valued religion, the family and female community, sentimentalized friendship, commemorated events, and dreaded separation” (Clark 79). Friendship quilts used thread to materialize the idea of community so as to minimize the pain of those who would have to endure long-term separation.

As they reified communities of relatives, friends, or churchgoers by embroidering vital names and dates in the life of the persons about to leave for the West at a time when women went “largely unnamed in public records of ownership, friendship quilts provided a vital record of existence, acting as an instrument of census taking,” and saving women from anonymity (Hillard 119). What is more, by incorporating the written into the sewn, friendship quilts challenged the dichotomy between the pen and the needle and

²⁵ The terms friendship and album quilt are normally used interchangeably without any difference in meaning. However, Kiracofe distinguishes between both. For him, “[a] friendship quilt is one in which the blocks are all of the same design” and an “album quilt is one in which all the blocks are similar; and the quilt is also signed, although not necessarily in every block” (81). I will use the terms as synonymous.

emphasized the enormous versatility of the quilt as a woman's text: its ability not only to record female experience in cloth but also to appropriate material written on women that patriarchal culture discarded as marginal or insignificant.

Despite the enormous emotional benefit pioneer women derived from friendship quilts, the strains of the journey and the demands of frontier life required that they use quilts in much more practical ways. Quilts proved invaluable while traveling; they protected delicate china, served as padding for uncomfortable seats, and covered exposed sides of the wagon from gusts and Indian attacks (Kiracofe 89). In addition to that, they wrapped those who passed away on their way to a real or imaginary better future in regions of the prairie where, due to the lack of raw materials and the distance from populated areas, wooden coffins could not be easily obtained. Quilts were used to lay out the dead, "to shelter the body of the deceased and to keep it warm before burial. The benefit to the deceased is actually minimal. It is the mourners who derive significant emotional comfort from this act, which is an expression of their concern and regard for the deceased" (Gebel 205). Women, who understood well the tangible and emotional warmth quilts provided, drew comfort from seeing how their textiles protected loved ones from direct contact with the cold ground.

The tendency to bury people in quilts did not disappear as pioneers settled in. Gail Andrews Trechsel provides several examples of the persistence of the habit in "Mourning Quilts in America." According to her, Sarah Legett's family recalled how the deceased used to be placed on a door, which normally rested on chairs or sawhorses, and covered with a quilt while waiting for a pine coffin to arrive. With slight variations, the custom was also popular in Arkansas (145-46). Although many mourning quilts were made with

dark colors and used to bury the dead, not all of them would fit into this description. In fact, the denomination “mourning quilt” constituted a wide term which included not only those quilts intended to wrap the dead but also those that paid homage to a deceased loved one. These tribute or memory quilts sometimes incorporated scraps of the deceased’s clothing and brief embroidered passages intended to honor the dead and comfort the living. As perfectly illustrated by Opal’s quilt in Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Love Life,” mourning quilts allowed women to come to terms with the pain of having to let go.

Although quilts helped the female pioneer overcome a series of losses before she embarked on her trip and on the journey west itself, they probably played an even more significant role once she arrived at her destination because they often protected her from losing her sanity. Accustomed to living in settled areas where color was taken for granted, pioneers were normally greeted by a dull autumn prairie whose vividness remained dormant for most of the year and where “[r]eproductions of artworks and books with colored illustrations were unavailable” (Long and Duke 177). In those areas quilts became both women’s sole source of color and the only outlet for their creativity, for their need to mix form, color, and texture. Elaine Hedges claims that “[i]n the monotonous expanses of the prairie and the plains, the presence of one small spot of color, or a bit of music, might spell the difference between sanity and madness.” Given the high rate of psychiatric disorders among farmers in frontier areas, the importance of color in women’s psychological survival cannot be underestimated (“Small Things” 100).

Scholars such as Jeannie McKnight argue that there was “something in the frontier conditions themselves [that] provoked insanity, particularly in women” (26). The

lack of color, the vastness of the prairie, and the isolation that it implied drove many to mental derangement:

Their isolation induced madness in many. The rate of insanity in rural areas, especially for women, was a much-discussed subject in the second half of the 19th century. As early as 1868 Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the influential *Godey's Ladies Book*, expressed her concern that the farm population supplied the largest proportion of inmates for the nation's insane asylums. And a decade later *The Atlantic Monthly* was reporting "the alarming rate of insanity ... in the new prairie States among farmers and their wives." (Hedges, "Small Things" 100)



Taken around 1880, this photograph of the Watters family's sod house perfectly illustrates the drabness of the prairie

Source: *Kansas Quilts and Quilters*, p. 29

Jeannie McKnight has hypothesized that these women's emotional disorders may have had their origin in the loss of a female world in which the support of friends and relatives played a major role (33). To compensate for the loss of female nurturance and in order to maintain the highest possible degree of emotional stability, pioneer women sought one another for a quilting bee, which became their main channel for reestablishing the female communities they had lost when they moved away from settled areas.

If quilting was necessary for pioneer women's emotional well-being, it was even more important for nineteenth-century black women, whose lives were characterized by enslavement, poverty, brutal beatings, and sexual abuse. Denied humanity and defined as chattel, illiterate slave women appropriated quilts as a text so as to leave not only "a powerful record—a hidden history, as it were—of their humiliation and tragedy" but also a chronicle of their struggle to survive whole in the midst of extreme human degradation (Fry 83). While slave women's quilts illustrate black females' misery and deprivation, they also bear witness to these women's ability to keep their creativity alive when not even their body belonged to them.

For slaves quilting was both a material and an emotional need. On the one hand, quilts compensated for the meager bedding consisting of commercial blankets that slaves typically received every three years (Fry 71). In addition to that, slaves usually tried to add personal touches to their bare cabins, which were normally composed of a single windowless room with a door and a chimney. Quilts represented women's main contributions to this customization effort (Fox-Genovese, *Plantation* 149-151). On the other hand, quilting allowed black women to channel their creativity into something beautiful and useful at the same time. It allowed overworked females to enjoy time for

regaining temporary control of their lives and for introspection and self-analysis. As bell hooks points out, quilting provided these women with “space [. . .] for stillness, for quiet and concentration. Quilting was a way to ‘calm the heart’ and ‘ease the mind’” (*Yearning* 117). Quilting, in summary, became a survival mechanism that endowed women with a sense of cohesion, both as individuals and as a group, in the midst of fragmentation.

In “*The Color Purple* and the Poetics of Fragmentation,” Judy Elsley analyzes Celie’s transformation as a shift from fragmentation to wholeness by juxtaposing her development towards healing and the construction of a quilt. In Elsley’s view, the road from initial disintegration towards a more unified definition of oneself starts by replacing being torn with tearing, which becomes a constructive act and “a singularly appropriate place for a woman to begin, whether with a quilt or with finding a way to autonomy, because being torn is so familiar an experience for women” (69). Although this developmental model could probably be applied to any quilter, it is, I believe, especially appropriate for enslaved black women because their identity was not only fragmented but also extremely self-contradictory. Slave women saw themselves as humans but were defined as property, they were labeled as matriarchs but treated as lustful objects, and, finally, they were valued for their reproductive qualities but deprived of their children. Quilting allowed these women sufficient space and time to neglect these conflicting ideas and to redefine themselves as emotionally whole individuals. This was especially true during quilting bees, where black women isolated themselves from both white and male influences:

Quilting offered slave women the chance to exercise their own imaginations. No white woman dictated their complex patterns, even if the pieces with which they worked were white women’s scraps. No outsider

interfered with the ceaseless flow of the gossip in which they delighted and through which they wove their own view of the world that usually impinged so heavily on their lives. (Fox-Genovese, *Plantation* 184)

Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) interviews with former slaves confirmed the importance of quilting bees in female slaves' lives. Because of their retreat-like qualities and the impact that they had on women's emotional survival, they were the work-related celebration most frequently mentioned after male corn-shuckings (Fry 71).

Despite the self-confidence and emotional power that they found in quilting bees, black women remained socially marginalized. bell hooks, who notes that “[n]o other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women,” explains that “[w]hen black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women” (*Woman* 7). Nineteenth-century African-American quilts, or, rather, their scarcity and the difficulty implied in tracing them, testify to their makers' social marginality and invisibility. Scholars such as Cuesta Benberry and bell hooks have struggled to demonstrate that quilts were made in and outside the United States, “in the ante-bellum period by both slave and free blacks; later, by middle class blacks and impoverished blacks; by educated blacks and those without educational advantages; by women, men and children; by folk artists and trained artists; and by persons who lived in the North, the South, the Midwest and the West” (Benberry 13). After emancipation, some former slaves even taught their white mistresses how to sew and make patchwork (Chouard 69). Yet, for a number of reasons, museum exhibits and written sources on the history of quilting tend to depict African-American specimens as exceptions.

Although W.P.A. interviews in the 1930s demonstrated how sewing promoted slave women's self-esteem and, in particular, how quilts were major sources of pride for them, few nineteenth-century quilts made by blacks have survived. As a consequence, some scholars have hypothesized that African-American quilts may have been used until they wore out (Sullivan, *Quilts* 5; Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 47). Other factors that may have contributed to the disappearance of black quilts include theft, sale, fire, emancipation-spurred mobility, and the prevalence of certain habits which, like the practice of washing clothes in boiling water with homemade lye soap, were extremely harmful to the cloth (Fry 42). Cuesta Benberry argues that, as slaves were not entitled to property, the majority of slave-made quilts have remained in the possession of white slaveholders, a fact which, in turn, contributed to spread the belief that slaves only quilted for their masters (27). Gwinner, for his part, adduces not only that scholarship on African-American quilts was lacking as late as the mid-1980s but also the similitude of many antebellum black quilts with those of white Americans, a fact that would render them indistinguishable (152).

In addition to their scarcity, antebellum black quilts suffer from a number of prejudices that, in broad terms, present their makers as either mere mechanical instruments for white women's creative ventures or as artistically challenged individuals. These biases mainly consist in assuming that pre-Civil War fine bedcovers whose African-American origin has been fully demonstrated do not belong to the "authentic" black quilting tradition but echo white mistresses' design ideas that slaves executed mechanically. Although Benberry drew attention to the fact that "[a]ssertions such as these tend to trivialize the quiltworks of self-taught slave seamstresses, or those who were

taught to sew by other female slaves,” these and other prejudices remain widespread (23).

It is also common to minimize or nullify black women’s creativity and to identify as African-American any unrefined ante-bellum quilt. Although not only slaves utilized low-quality cloth, the use of make-do is normally associated with them. Forced to work for mere subsistence and denied monetary reimbursement for their services, slaves did not have direct access to the cloth market but depended on their annual allowances for quilt materials. In fact, their tops recycle scraps from their clothing allowances, old quilt squares, and sacks, and, occasionally, they also incorporate fabric purchased with income earned working for other plantations (Fry 43). Their fillings reveal even more ingeniousness, as they mix old quilts, rags, discarded or picked cotton and wool from sheep (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 45). This inventiveness has led bell hooks to hypothesize that slave women might have been “among the first, if not the first group of females, to make crazy quilts” (*Yearning* 119). Like the explanation that defends the utilitarian origin of quilts, whose basic premises of material need and human resourcefulness this theory resembles, this proposition is deficient in supportive evidence.

In broad terms, African-American quilts range from those which would be impossible to differentiate from Euro-American specimens to those which, like Harriet Powers’, strikingly resemble African textile traditions. Powers’ quilts perfectly illustrate the use of African elements in African-American bedcovers. Born in Georgia in 1837, during the heyday of appliqués in the South (1775-1875), Powers made two Bible quilts whose form and function have been linked to Dahomean tapestries. Formally, both textile art forms narrate stories through graphic representations, depict humans in black or red, and feature animals whose colors are incongruent with their real life counterparts.

Functionally, they preserve oral stories. In fact, Powers “recorded legends she had heard on her quilts, continuing an African oral tradition in which stories customarily taught lessons, recorded historical events, reinforced values, imparted religious beliefs, instructed in survival techniques and entertained” (Benberry 43).



Bible Quilt
c. 1886
Athens, Georgia

Harriet Powers

Source:

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?path=/Folklife/FolkArt&id=h-2577>

Preserved in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. and in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Powers’ quilts are uniquely well-documented thanks to Jennie Smith, who bought one of the quilts from the maker and kept it along with a descriptive eighteen-page-long narrative in which she explained how she purchased the quilt from an economically-struggling Powers who had refused to sell her quilts for any price four years earlier. According to Smith, Harriet Powers, who often visited the quilt after she

was forced to part from it, provided the purchaser with a detailed description of each of the scenes it featured (Fry 86). In addition to verifying the authorship and authenticity of Powers' quilts, Smith's comments challenge some modern assumptions about nineteenth-century quilters' ability to understand the intellectual dimension of their aesthetic choices. Her comments confirm that for illiterate people like Harriet Powers quilts were the only texts they had access to, the only channel available for them to express their vision of life and art. Finally, they prove that, even when barred from the intellectualism implied in the pen, nineteenth-century women were able not only to use imagery in their quilts but also to articulate the meaning of those images.

2.3.5. "Log Cabin" and "Crazy" Quilts: The Patterns That Defined the Century

Of all the patterns that quilters created in nineteenth-century America, two captured their imagination in a way that probably no others did. Radically different in form and function, "log cabin" and "crazy" quilts were extremely popular in the second half of the 1800s. "Log cabin" quilts have been interpreted as the perfect embodiment of nineteenth-century industrialism and its functional approach to life. Crazy quilts, on the contrary, illustrate the rejection of simplicity propounded by a Victorian aesthetic based on overdecoration. For nineteenth-century women, these patterns had much deeper meanings and functions.

The exact origins of the "log cabin" pattern have not been established. Most authors claim that its beginnings are unknown and argue that its initial popularity coincided with Civil War times (Kiracofe 134). Schabel offers different data. According to her analysis, "log cabin" quilts owe their name to the propaganda of Harrison's 1840

presidential campaign, which tried to present him as a close figure, a simple man living in a log cabin, despite his aristocratic background and massive estate (9). Its specific origins notwithstanding, the practical design of “log cabin” quilts fits perfectly into the functionalism underlying the process of industrialization that the United States underwent in the 1800s. Although ornateness prevailed among those who decorated their homes following the dictates of fashion and taste, nineteenth-century technological advances and industrial production emphasized simplicity and functionality. Because they embodied a cheap and quick way of obtaining bedcovers from recycled materials at a time in which whole cloth was relatively scarce, all block-style quilts illustrated a practical approach to life. The “log cabin,” which “translated the principles of log cabin building into cloth,” represents one of the best examples (Gwinner 121).



“Log Cabin”
1860-80
Douglas
County, Kansas

Charlotte
Varnum Cutter

Source: *Quilts
from the Civil
War*, p. 14

Unlike their wooden counterparts, “log cabin” quilts are not constructed starting with the foundation, but with the so-called “chimney,” a central square, “traditionally done in red cloth, [which] came to represent the hearth fire within the cabin” (Hedges, “Small Things” 105). Relatively long and narrow blocks are then added around that pivotal piece; “each ‘log’ overlaps the one before, until a square of the desired size is formed. In the classic formation, colors are arranged so that half the square is of the light-colored logs and the other half is of dark logs” (Kiracofe 152). For many nineteenth-century American women these quilted log cabins represented the warmth of the homes they had lost when they moved away from the old centers of settlement. For many others, they symbolized the throne from which they tended to the emotional needs of their families and, by extension, women’s essential role in preserving the moral well-being of their society.

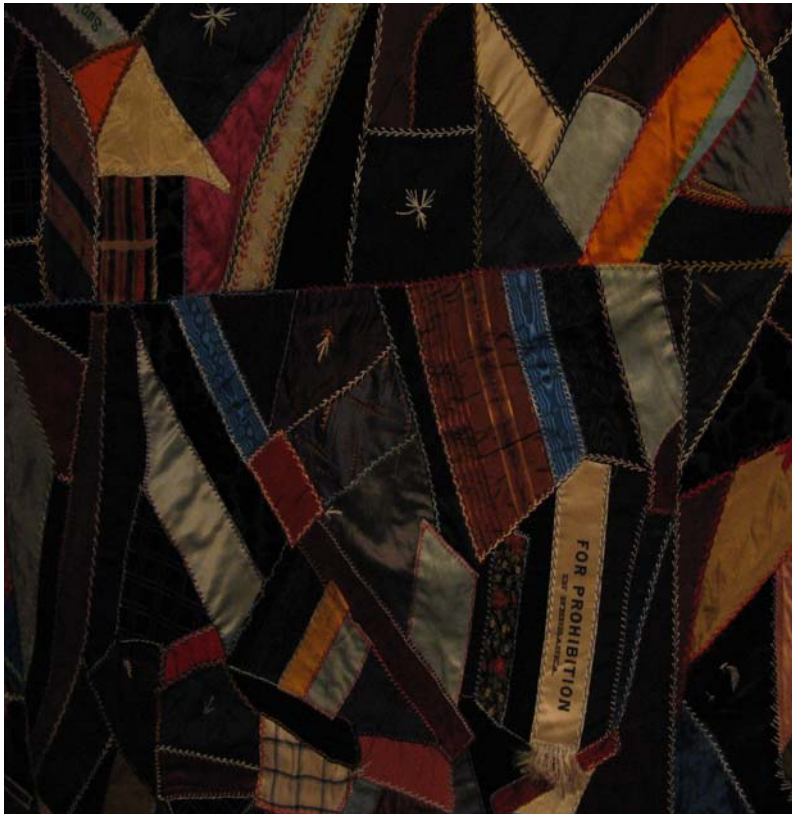
Crazy quilts, on the contrary, could be interpreted both as instances of True Women’s deep association with their homes and as a rejection of the stifling conditions that such an intense link with the domestic realm implied. The term “[c]razy quilt” describes a broad genre; representative works are characterized by a miscellaneous collection of irregular patches and a potpourri of fabrics. Generally these quilts have no central theme, no planned single design, no uniformity of fabric: their distinctive feature is irregularity itself” (McCarter 161). Because of this intrinsic irregularity and, especially, because crazy quilts do not require a consistent use of fabric, some scholars have hypothesized that the first quilters, lacking access to a variety of materials and forced to recycle whatever cloth they could find, could have only made crazy quilts (Kettering 130; Schabel 2). However, as no crazy quilts from the colonial period have been recovered,

physical evidence does not seem to corroborate these theories (Gwinner 139). As noted elsewhere, African-American scholars have also resorted to this argument in order to explain the origins of black quilts.

Despite the potential existence of early quilts containing various materials and irregularly-shaped blocks, the “crazy quilt” label is normally restricted to a distinctively nineteenth-century product made by high class ladies with fine materials such as velvet and silk and profusely embroidered with peacocks, fans, and flowers, among other elements. By 1900 conditions changed and the quilters that produced crazy quilts no longer belonged exclusively to the upper and middle classes. The “crazy quilt” fad began to affect rural women, who incorporated coarser materials such as wool or cotton to their crazy quilts. Unlike those designed by elite quilters, these ones were no longer used for decorative purposes but for warmth.

Most scholars have argued that, in this context, “crazy” equates with odd-shaped, bizarre, or crazed—that is, fragmented into irregular segments (Holstein, “American Quilts” 130; Falling-Rain 118-19). Sue Baker McCarter, on the other hand, claims that “[t]he name may have originated from the similarity of crazy quilts to ‘cracked ice,’ an oriental design seen at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876. Or it may have originated from the intensity of enthusiasm with which women embraced the new quilting style, bordering on a ‘craze’.” According to her, this enthusiasm for crazy quilts derives from the fact that they perfectly embodied the ideals of a historical period “characterized by rigid standards and overdecoration, which pervaded every aspect of life from architecture and music to social customs” (161). These quilts, unlike functional “log

cabin” ones, rejected simplicity and plain geometric forms so as to embrace the excesses of Victorian fashions and tastes.



“Crazy Quilt”
(detail)
c. 1903
Lincoln, Nebraska

Estella Douglass
Gage

This quilt shows that
nineteenth-century
patterns and reform
movements
continued to be
popular in the early
1900s (note the “For
Prohibition” ribbon)

Source: author’s
photograph

Although other quilts or symbols had enjoyed varying degrees of popularity at different times, crazy quilts were the first fad to sweep the country and also the first to suffer the inconsistencies of fashion.²⁶ Through part of the second half of the nineteenth century, women’s magazines and other periodicals encouraged high-class females to invest abundant time in making elaborate quilts whose degree of ornateness could match

²⁶ The popularity of all-white quilts had been linked to the search for classical purity triggered by the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum (Kiracofe 63-64); hexagon quilts became fashionable when home decoration favored the Moorish or Turkish style in the 1870s and 1880s (Ducey 116); the star was a favorite motif since its incorporation to the American flag (Gwinner 126); and the eagle enjoyed popularity since its inclusion in the American seal (Harding 66).

their equally overelaborate home décor. However, as soon as crazy quilts became extremely popular, “tastemakers in the decorative arts and the art needlework movements turned their backs on [them].” *Harper’s Bazaar* declared crazy quilts a waste of time and energy in 1884. Influential *Godey’s* followed suit in 1887 (Gunn, “Crazy Memories” 155). In spite of this advice from tastemakers, making crazy quilts continued to be a genteel occupation until approximately 1910.

Velvet and silk, the fine materials most commonly employed, and the absence of batting in many of them disqualified crazy quilts as warmth providers. Furthermore, the availability of alternative bedcovers, the intricacy of the embroidery present in these quilts, and the time required for their completion discarded their utilitarian use. In fact, many were not bed-size but much smaller. The vast majority was designed as sofa throws or table covers and intended as showpieces for areas of the home more exposed to public display than bedrooms. As Carolyn Ducey points out, exhibiting their crazy quilts in parlors and living rooms allowed women the opportunity of “showing off their superior needle skills” (128).

Although the situation changed as rural and lower-class women began to create warmer crazy quilts with a notable decrease in embroidery, the fact that this type of quilts was mainly used for decorative purposes could justify an interpretation that defended the quilters’ adjustment to the ideology of True Womanhood and, in particular, their intention of providing the home with a haven-like atmosphere. However, the dark shades of the materials employed and the bizarrely irregular pieces crazy quilts contained have led scholars to argue the exact opposite. According to this viewpoint, late nineteenth-century females invested long hours in painstaking work in order to counteract the

madness that isolation in the home could induce. Sunny Falling-Rain recorded a general belief when she wrote that “[c]razy quilts [. . .] were made as busywork by idle but wealthy women to keep them from going crazy for lack of any meaningful occupation” (117). The idea that needlework allowed females to mitigate their purposelessness, isolation or emotional distress was widespread in nineteenth-century America and, consequently, sewing was openly encouraged by the abundant number of advice books targeting women (Hedges, “Small Things” 103). However, crazy quilts radically differed from most other quilts in that they not only helped women cope with restrictive social situations but also openly challenged such imposed restrictions. As Sue McCarter argues in her outstanding article on the topic, crazy quilts became one way of opposing discipline and the clear-cut divisions the cult of True Womanhood established for women’s lives:

The crazy quilts that warmed their beds and decorated their parlors reflect what was in their hearts. Subconsciously at least, women pieced together manifestos that rejected the neat little geometric compartments of daughter, housewife, and mother. The cloth angles, the random strips, the odd-sized pieces, all had this message. The colors in crazy quilts also tend to rage, one against another, and the arrangement of pieces takes on the appearance of scraps dropped heedlessly to the floor—a silent rebellion against the status quo. (162)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as they became increasingly associated with a decadent era, crazy quilts lost most of their popularity. They were replaced by block-style quilts, which had coexisted with them throughout the last decades of the 1800s and which would later be considered the natural precursors of Arts and Crafts simplicity (McMorris 26).

2.3.6. Quilting at a Crossroads: The Turn into the Twentieth Century

Among quilt scholars, there does not seem to be much agreement as to the status and popularity of quilts around the turn of the century. While some argue that the women's rights movement and the appearance of the "New Woman" nearly brought the demise of quilting, others emphasize the role the so-called colonial revival played on increasing women's interest in both preserving quilted heirlooms and making new ones following supposedly colonial models. It is undoubtedly true, however, that by the end of the century, women no longer universally accepted quilts as texts where they portrayed their unique vision of the world. For many of those who sympathized with the women's rights movement, quilts, far from representing a tool with which to fight an oppressive society, became, like all other forms of needlework, the very symbols of gender oppression.

Although the Seneca Falls convention (1848) could be considered the starting point of nineteenth-century feminism in the United States, the popularity of the women's rights movement increased after the Civil War as females saw their contributions to the conflict, nursing the wounded and raising funds, ignored or overlooked. Despite their internal differences, the women's rights movement defended an agenda which promoted female suffrage, women's right to hold property in their name, as well as access to birth control information. This agenda was mainly backed by white middle- and upper-class women who regarded needlework as a source of gender-based oppression and as the "literal cause of women's inferior status: of their unpaid and undervalued work in the home and their exploited labor as factory textile workers and piece-workers" (Hedges,

Ferrero, and Silber 91).²⁷ Far from approaching quilting as a tool that allowed women to prove their commitment to the domestic sphere while they secured increasingly larger parcels of public space, early feminists such as Abigail Duniway demonized quilts, which they considered “primary symbols of women’s unpaid subjection” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 157).²⁸

New Women shared with women’s rights activists their rejection of all forms of needlework. The term “New Woman,” which was coined in the 1890s, referred to females that stood out both by their peculiar habits and by their unusual physique and accessories. Easily recognized by “her short hair, frank language, rational dress, bicycle, latchkey and cigarette,” the stereotypical New Woman was, according to Viv Gardner, an educated middle-class female who defended free love, lived on her own income, and had no associations with any social or political movement (185). New Women prized autonomy above all else, strived to be financially independent, and sometimes established independent households usually shared with other females with whom they had long-term monogamous relationships.²⁹ As Showalter states in *Sister’s Choice*, “[t]he New Women

²⁷ The interests of women from other races or different social strata went largely ignored. In a symposium entitled “Politics and Culture in Women’s History,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg asserted that many of the issues early feminists defended had little appeal to Catholic or black women, who constituted a large share of working-class women in nineteenth-century America (Buhle et al. 56). Southern white women were likewise excluded because they perceived women’s rights activism not as a critique of northern capitalism but as an attack on their own society and way of life (Fox-Genovese, *Plantation* 338).

²⁸ Pat Crothers suggests, in “Gender Misapprehensions,” that Duniway’s rejection of quilts may have had more to do with her personal ineptitude with the needle than with her political convictions. She argues that Duniway, who had once worked as a seamstress, deeply disliked sewing. Crothers further notes that one of Duniway’s extant quilts, made to help raise funds for the suffrage cause in 1869 and later purchased by the Oregon Historical Society, demonstrates the maker’s incompetence: “According to historian Ruth Moynihan, who once examined the quilt,” Crothers writes, “the stitching was poorly done and the colors violently clashed. This quilt ‘provides mute evidence that Abigail Duniway was both an abominable seamstress and possibly color-blind,’ and further illustrates how biased Duniway’s perceptions were” (55).

²⁹ Among the literary establishment, Sarah Orne Jewett’s relationship with Annie Fields represents the best-known example of intense relationships between two women. Jewett and Fields, who lived together for part of the year, had similar tastes, and provided each other with emotional support and traveling

writers of the 1890s no longer grieved for the female bonds and sanctuaries of the past” and “they had an ambivalent or even hostile relationship to women’s culture, which they often saw as boring and restrictive” (68). Their rejection of needlework best exemplifies their detachment from traditional women’s culture. Consequently, as sewing in general became tinged with negative connotations, disdaining the needle was perceived as “a sign of intellectual seriousness, of literary or professional ambition” and as a symbol of New Women’s commitment to becoming financially independent through their earnings (Hedges, “Needle” 345).

The so-called colonial revival, which aimed at establishing some balance between the old and the new, counteracted the negative impact the appearance of the New Woman or the women’s rights movement may have had on the popularity of quilting in the United States. It promoted a partial return to the past through the exaltation of traditional homemade and handmade artifacts such as quilts. Although, for reasons adduced in earlier sections, quilts barely qualified as colonial elements, they were an integral part of the “colonial revival” because of the loose use of the term “colonial,” which was applied to anything that reminded Americans of an earlier time, free from industrialization and vertiginous modern change. As a consequence, in 1894, the same year that British novelist Sarah Grand is believed to have coined the term “New Women” to describe women who, among other things, opposed sewing, patchwork quilting was promoted from the pages of women’s magazines, arguing that what had been considered passé was now the new fashion (Lasansky, “Colonial Revival” 100-01). For those who had not inherited a quilted heirloom, business entrepreneurs began to commercialize supposedly

companionship. The time of the year they spent apart was devoted to the development of their separate careers (Faderman 190).

colonial-inspired quilts. These embryonic business ventures involving quilts anticipated the aggressive commercialization of quilting, which eventually became one of the defining features of the twentieth century.

2.4. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century introduced innovations into quilting that meant a radical break with the traditions that quilters had established in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1920s, quilts started yielding to a process of commercialization that began by offering inexpert quilters the often illusory possibility of completing their own bedcover through the purchase of a kit quilt and ended with the widespread availability of made-in-China quilts in American stores. Furthermore, the twentieth century originated a radically novel type of quilt, the art quilt, which implied rupture with traditional forms. However, at least partially, the history of quilting in the twentieth century represents continuation with the nineteenth. Women's rights activists' and New Women's attitudes towards sewing pointed to a new way of interacting with activities that had traditionally been associated with females, but failed to displace quilting from women's lives probably both because they represented a social minority and because of the impact of the colonial revival.

As a consequence, at least initially, the average American woman continued to resort to quilts for many of the same purposes as in the previous century. She continued to use quilts to raise funds for various social reform movements and to express her political affiliations through them until she was granted the right to vote. Many of the struggles women had promoted in the 1800s (temperance, female suffrage, birth control

rights) were not solved with the turn of the century. Some, such as those involving access to birth control methods, lasted decades, resurfacing in the 1960s and 1970s as legal processes aimed at facilitating access to contraceptives or the right to have an abortion. Other battles, temperance and enfranchisement in particular, seemed to have been won around 1920 but those victories often proved disappointing.³⁰ Formally, quilts also remained similar. Up until the 1950s most of the patterns that quilters created had their origins in the previous century.

In spite of this, the relationship of women and quilts lessened in intensity after the first two decades of the twentieth century. After WWI a number of elements combined to progressively disassociate women from quilts: the impact of the women's rights activists, for whom liberation meant freedom *from* and not *through* the needle; female incorporation in the workplace, which limited the amount of time women could devote to doing needlework; and, among others, women's increasing access to alternative channels of expression, both artistic—writing, painting—and political—the right to vote. These and other lesser factors, which will be explained in detail in chapter three, eventually estranged females from quilts and, as a consequence of this estrangement, reading women's culture through quilts will become increasingly more difficult. By the time quilts recovered a spotlight position in the 1970s, their text-like qualities were not only unquestioned but emphasized, although in many cases both feminist literary critics and

³⁰ Although women were enfranchised when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed in 1920, a female block vote never materialized, leaving many with the disheartening impression that they had lost their chance to change the world. Furthermore, in order to avoid confrontation with their husbands, or simply because of lack of practice, many women, especially older ones, plainly refused to vote. As a consequence, the number of females who voted in a presidential election was not similar to that of males until 1956 (Weatherford, *Milestones* 292).

fiction concentrated on their reception, on the passive act of claiming quilts as texts that illustrate women's shared cultural past, rather than on their production.

2.4.1. Continuity, Commercialization and (the Beginning of) Artification: From 1900 to the Stock Market Crash

The turn of the century brought no great changes in quilt styles. "Crazy quilts" did not lose ground until after 1910 and their block-style counterparts enjoyed the same degree of popularity they had had in the previous century. No clear signs of innovation became highly visible until *Ladies' Home Journal* began publishing Marie D. Webster's patterns in 1911. Webster's quilts propounded "a refinement of the decorative aesthetic—return to classic forms, elimination of excessive and distractive frilliness, and softening of the color palette" (Waldrogel 86). Her patterns, inspired in the Arts and Crafts aesthetic, attracted the attention of non-traditional quilters, but had relatively little impact on the development of novel quilting styles (Waldrogel 92). Merikay Waldrogel notes that, despite Webster's defense of the need to introduce innovations in quilting, her own book, *Quilts: Their Story and How to Make Them* (1915), drew many quilters closer to traditional styles because of her praise of the more conventional quilt patterns Webster associated with pioneer America (88). Webster's vital role in renovating quilt patterns became evident in the 1930s, when designers incorporated defining features of Webster's style, like the floral centers, to commercial quilt patterns (Waldrogel 92).

In the following decade quilting still enjoyed enormous popularity but, paradoxically as it may seem, the connection between quilts and the average American woman weakened. As illustrated by the fact that in 1922 *Ladies' Home Journal* validated

antique quilts by asserting that they were the most fashionable item a bedroom could display, magazines targeting females kept promoting quilting (Waldrogl 86). Women also continued to produce new quilts but they had fewer reasons to put them to unconventional uses because women's enfranchisement and prohibition laws seemed to have rendered fundraising quilts superfluous. Enfranchised and apparently protected from domestic abuse, women activists believed they had won all the rights they had fought for (Friedman, "Feminism" 72-73). Consequently, fundraising quilts, which had partially financed several social reform campaigns, lost the social prominence they had enjoyed in the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, quilts, which had flourished with the ideology of the separate spheres, were now threatened by the disappearance of a distinct women's culture. With the apparent economic boom of the 1920s there emerged leisure activities that targeted men and women alike. Hence, gender-based separations of space progressively vanished, allowing females to appropriate parcels of the public realm that had previously been denied to them. As women demanded more public visibility and the possibility of interacting with men, the conditions that had sheltered them in the home and the rituals which, like quilting, they had developed as bonding elements between different generations disappeared at the same time that solidarity between females vanished with the perception that common goals had been achieved.

Quilts from the 1920s yield abundant data on the capitalistic turn the United States took in that decade. As Kiracofe has noted, the 1920s were prosperous times, brimming with creativity, that developed the "idea that personal fulfillment could be attained through the acquisition of consumer goods" and, therefore, spurred the purchase

and accumulation of material goods (188). Quilts reflected the rampant consumerism through the quilt kit which, besides cloth components, sold the often false promise of making one's own quilt in little to no time. Quilt kits normally "consisted of a background cloth, a perforated paper pattern, and stamping paste or stamping powder" (Copeland and Dunivent 142).

Kits were greeted with enthusiasm by both knowledgeable and inexperienced quilters. They offered the former the possibility of "further[ing] their quilting skills and design knowledge, using designs sometimes copied from museum artifacts, private collections, and winners of national quilting contests" (Copeland and Dunivent 141). The latter were attracted to kits because they filled the void left by both the collapse of an apprenticeship system whereby the mother played a major role, as well as by the absence of quilt guilds and quilting classes to replace it.

Among the most relevant quilt kit designers, two names—Marie Webster's and Ruby Short McKim's—stand out. Webster founded her quilt business, the Practical Patchwork Company, in the early 1920s. The company sold her designs through the mail and in department stores (Copeland and Dunivent 150-51). McKim, who worked as a *Better Homes and Gardens* needlework editor, went from focusing on traditional patterns to designing innovative quilts for the *Kansas City Star* from her McKim Studio in Independence, Missouri (Lasansky, "Colonial Revival" 103). A shrewd businesswoman, McKim also offered her creations through mail order catalogs called *Designs Worth Doing*, and, in collaboration with her husband Arthur, published her influential *One Hundred and One Patchwork Patterns* in 1931 (Copeland and Dunivent 154).

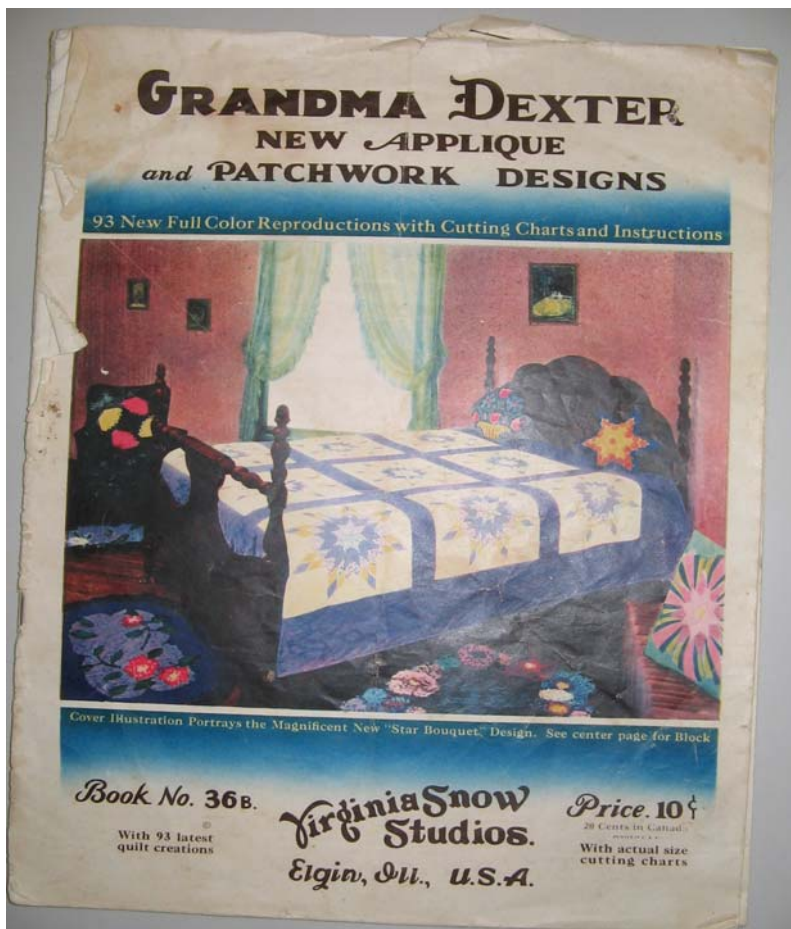
As McKim's liaison with *Better Homes and Gardens* proves, women's magazines played a major role in the promotion of quilt kits.³¹ In fact, these periodicals were second after art needlework companies in supplying components for quilts. Selling kits, they realized, proved extremely profitable because the market it created for additional products such as thread, batting, or fabric encouraged needlework companies to invest their money in paid magazine advertisements for their products.³² This allowed magazines to drop their prices, thus increasing circulation which, in turn, attracted additional advertising revenues (Zuckerman 26). Many of these periodicals also offered quilt kits as premiums for relatively long subscriptions.

This process of commercialization that quilting underwent in the 1920s had important consequences such as the irruption of non-traditional quilters in the development of new quilt styles. The quilting world, which had been a relatively insular one throughout the nineteenth century, began to be permeated by the ideas of women such as Orr or McKim, who were not trained as quilters but as designers. Furthermore, quilting was appropriated by relatively big business and corporations, which emphasized uniformity and profit over self-expression. These corporations replaced traditional quilters with what Xenia E. Cord has denominated "the 'helpful relative' device," fake quilters originally intended to support struggling needlewomen (147). Baptized with

³¹ *Good Housekeeping* also employed another influential quilt designer as art needlework editor, Nashville-based Ann Orr. Like McKim, Orr also established her own studio, the Ann Orr Studio (Lasansky, "Colonial Revival" 103).

³² Mary Ellen Zuckerman's *A History of Popular Women's Magazines in the United States, 1792-1995* offers valuable insights into the relationship between women's magazines and the advertising world. Although Zuckerman's analysis of this topic is particularly detailed for the decade of the 1920s, she also offers information on earlier periods (5-18, 59-65). It is particularly important to note that of the most popular women's magazines, the so-called "Big Six" (*Delineator*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Pictorial Review*, and *Women's Home Companion*), half (*Delineator*, *McCall's* and *Pictorial Review*) were conceived with advertising in mind. They were created to promote their founders' clothing patterns (xiv).

names which emphasized their femininity or their closeness to the purchaser, “Virginia Snow,” “Aunt Martha,” “Grandma Dexter,” or “Grandmother Clark” were designed to provide real quilters with the sense of a female community, which in American society had begun to vanish as the ideology of the separate spheres collapsed.



This catalog cover includes the names of two the most famous fictitious quilters created in the early 1900s: Grandma Dexter and Virginia Snow

Source:
author's photograph

These fictitious quilters, as well as the use of adjectives such as “quaint” or “colonial,” encouraged women to buy products that in time became increasingly more uniform. Cord notes that “[t]he marked similarity among catalogs from apparently separate sources, the prevalence of die-cut kits in a limited number of popular patterns provided by numerous suppliers, and the limited range of color and fabric selection all

suggest that control of the quilt kit industry rested in the hands of a relatively small group” (151). Therefore quilt kits stopped being texts where a majority of women expressed their view of the world in order to become reflections of a more limited point of view, that of a reduced number of elite tastemakers.

The fact that quilt kits did not allow room for women’s creativity has been adduced as one of the main factors that led to the near demise of quilting in subsequent decades. Kits, which, with virtually no exception, were made as originally designed, privileged the voice of a few designers at the expense of silencing that of individual quilters. Furthermore, they turned quilting into following a series of instructions, into a mindless activity that required no creative thinking. Nonetheless, the few scholars that vindicate the importance of kits emphasize the role they played in updating surface design, the great business opportunity they represented for female designers, and the jobs the quilt kit industry created in Depression times (Copeland and Dunivent 156). They also claim that the quilt kit kept quilting alive at times when traditional quilting was on the wane (Copeland and Dunivent 157).

In addition to the quilt kit, the other major development in quilting that took place in the 1920s was the implicit artification of quilts. Although they had been displayed vertically in nineteenth-century fairs, it was not until the 1920s that quilts were formally defined as art and, therefore, treated as such. Museums and university galleries alike began to incorporate quilts into their exhibits, thus granting them art status. In “The Colonial Revival and Quilts: 1864–1974,” Jeannette Lasansky mentions Newark Museum and the University of Kansas as pioneer institutions which displayed quilts in 1914 and 1920 respectively (103). Four years later, in 1924, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in

New York reiterated the artistic qualities quilts embodied by devoting one of its wings, which included these textiles, to colonial arts and crafts (Kiracofe 210).

This process of artification raised the question of whether quilts had always been art or not and thus originated a debate that remained latent throughout the century, resurfacing with stronger intensity with the emergence of the so-called “art quilt” in the 1970s. There existed, on the one hand, a current of thought that denied quilts any artistic merit on the grounds that geometric forms did not become elements used in “major” art forms (painting, sculpture) until the mid-twentieth century. Its proponents argued, furthermore, that nineteenth-century quilters did not understand the aesthetic value of their quilts:

Implicit in the act of creating a painting is the intellectual process which ties the work of an artist to his aesthetic ancestors and his peers, and places it in the history of objects specifically made to be art. This is precisely the quality which was absent in the making of pieced quilts. The women who made pieced quilts were not “artists,” that is, they did not intend to make art, had no sense of the place of their work in a continuous stream of art history, did not, in short, intellectualize the production of handcraft any more than did the makers of objects in the vernacular tradition the world over. (Holstein, *Pieced Quilt* 115)

This point of view has been severely attacked by authors such as bell hooks, who in *Yearning* asserts that “the oral testimony of black women quiltmakers from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century [. . .] indicates keen awareness of aesthetic dimensions” (117-18). Other critics, feminist ones in particular, have argued for a more inclusive definition of art. Helen Levy, for example, claims that women’s art, far from being a museum artifact, “belongs to a living space, healing the split between the place of

work and the place of residence, between art and daily existence, between past and future” (28-29). Such an inclusive definition of art especially fit quilts, which combine aesthetic qualities and practicality.

2.4.2. “Hard Times”: From the Great Depression to the 1960s

“Hard times” took hold of the United States after the stock market crashed in 1929. As many Americans went bankrupt and the number of available jobs considerably decreased, women went back to the home where quilting recovered part of the prominent role it had played in the past. Although more women than ever before sought employment to compensate for their husbands’ lost jobs or their families’ shrunk purchasing power, females were barred from the workplace by government regulations and the widely accepted belief that they should not work if their spouses did. In 1933 the government passed the National Economy Act, limiting the number of family members that could work as federal employees to one. In compliance with the new law, thousands of women were routinely fired. Furthermore, weighty institutions such as the American Federation of Labor asserted that women should stay at home if their husbands worked. According to a *Fortune* magazine poll offering data on 1936, 85% of men and 79% of women agreed (Fox and Langley 225).

As economic and social conditions denied women a place in the job market, females were sent back home and to all the activities that had traditionally been associated with it, like quilting, which underwent a revival. Waldrogl notes that “[b]y 1930, as the gross national product plummeted, the number of quilts skyrocketed” (85). Depending on the source consulted, this new popularity is ascribed to very different

factors, from the commercialization of quilts to the revitalization of quilting as a social activity. The production and sale of kits, which had emerged in the 1920s, exploded in the following decade. Companies continued to sell patterns, kits, and other quilt components over the mail and in department stores. To counteract the lack of liquidity, businesses devised new commercial strategies. The John C. Michael Company, for instance, offered the possibility of paying for one of its patterns in installments (Cord 155). Furthermore, quilting continued to be promoted from the pages of women's magazines. Newspapers also began featuring quilt patterns to increase their readership (Waldrogl 85). Constrained by lack of money for entertainment and urged to be productive by their dire economic situation, women returned to quilting both as a productive enterprise and as a social activity. In addition to this, quilting became revitalized through the Sears National Quilt Contest of the early 1930s.

The contest, part of the activities Sears, Roebuck and Co. sponsored at the Chicago's "Century of Progress" exhibition, probably was the most successful campaign ever launched to get people to quilt. Over 24,000 people entered quilts to compete for the enticing prize of \$1,000 (Waldrogl 91). The outstanding number of participants testifies to the renewed popularity quilting enjoyed in the 1930s. As Kiracofe has observed, "[a]lthough the prize of \$1,000 was surely a great incentive to the contestants, the money alone does not account for the overwhelming number of entries to the contest. Quilting was a popular pastime during the Depression" (197-98). Finally, this Sears initiative also encouraged quilting by offering patterns and kits of the first three award-winning quilts through the mail and their stores (Copeland and Dunivent 155).



Quilt made with flour sacks 1934-40 Tennessee
Unknown quiltmaker
Source: *The American Quilt*, p. 233

As expected, quilts made in Depression times reflect the “hard times” the country was going through. A new pattern, aptly called “Hard Times Block,” emerged to testify to the dire economic situation the United States was undergoing (McMorris 35). Furthermore, the incorporation of feed sacks to quilt tops provides not only additional evidence of the country’s material dearth but also of women’s renewed association to the domestic, since most of the sacks utilized stored staples such as flour, salt, or sugar. The use of sacks, which had been common in quilt backs since the late nineteenth century, became widespread in quilt tops and other textiles items as many families in need sought

inexpensive cloth. Aware of sack recycling, companies stamped their bags with “washable ink [that] would come out in warm soapy water” (Nickols 100). Moreover, a short book entitled *Sewing with Flour Bags* became extremely popular as the Depression took hold of the country. Originally published by the Household Science Institute of New York in the late 1920s, the booklet was republished first by the Textile Bag Manufacturers Association, Inc., and later by the National Cotton Council as the demand for cotton sacks skyrocketed in the 1930s and 1940s (Nickols 98).

If in the 1930s the phrase “hard times” was not only the name of a new quilt pattern but also a perfect description of the economic conditions in the United States, from the 1940s to the 1960s it best illustrates the situation of quilting itself. For almost three decades there was an unprecedented void in the production of quilts that almost brought the demise of quilting. Although some individual women continued to quilt, quilts not only lost the leading role they had played as outlets for women’s creativity but also their social relevance. In addition to the impact of quilt kits, the reasons adduced to account for this situation, which will be more exhaustively explained in chapter three, range from working-class women’s incorporation to the job market after World War II to the association of quilts with Depression poverty, as well as the development of a suburban culture which preached conformity and isolated white middle-class women from each other.

This situation began to change towards the late 1960s, which showed signs of deeper social transformations that would eventually have a positive impact on the revitalization of quilting. The sixties ended with a fight against the negative aspects of the modern lifestyle, with a counter-culture movement that reacted against the

dehumanization brought about by technological advances and the loss of individuality implied in mass-produced artifacts. As the decade progressed, more and more people wished to move to the country. By 1970 *Life* magazine estimated that as many as two thirds of Americans shared that desire (McMorris 40). Those who finally chose a rural life over an urban one turned to crafts in their struggle to survive economically and claimed art status for their hand-made products. Quilts, which had become “rarer and symbolic of an age distant enough to be regarded with nostalgia,” lost their connections with the economic penuries of Depression times to become a sign of good taste (Behuniak-Long 155). By the end of the 1960s quilting was again a favored craft (McMorris 43).

2.4.3. The Quilt as Art and as Metaphor: The Revival of the 1970s

The main reason for the revival of quilting in the 1970s is to be found in the counter-culture movements of the previous decade, with their idealization of rural life and their emphasis on the rejection of corporate products in favor of the hand-made. In addition to that, there were a series of other factors that contributed either to the revitalization of quilting itself or to the renewed appreciation of quilts. The making of quilts was mainly spurred by two 1976 events: the American Bicentennial and a quilt contest. In order to celebrate the Bicentennial, quilts were made illustrating American communities and commenting on the two-hundred-year-old country or values traditionally associated with it, such as liberty (Behuniak-Long 155). Although the contest, sponsored by *Good Housekeeping*, the United States Historical Society and New

York's Museum of American Folk Art, did not have the impact of its 1933 predecessor, it encouraged many women to quilt (Wilder 192).

On the other hand, in the 1970s the creations of many artists, inspired by everyday objects but meant to be used as artistic pieces, blurred the line between what qualified as art and what was simply craft. In the midst of this new conception of art, some museums began offering a series of exhibits that emphasized the aesthetic value of quilts. The Whitney Museum of American Art was a pioneer in the field with "Abstract Design in American Quilts" (1971), an event that not only "helped validate quilting as an art form worthy of the same respect as traditional 'male' art" but also initiated a period of quilt collecting (Ronning 167). By the end of the decade quilts had become popular museum pieces, as attested by the fact that 125,000 visitors, "the largest audience that museum has ever recorded," attended an antique quilt exhibit in Oakland, California, in 1981 (McMorris 43). This revalorization of quilting led many to approach quilts in a business-like manner, from individual women who used quilting to supplement their incomes at a time of high unemployment rates and soaring gas prices to quilt dealers, as well as rural cooperatives such as the Alabama's Freedom Quilting Bee or the Mountain Artisans Cooperative of West Virginia, which provided business opportunities for women in underdeveloped areas by exploiting the craving for quilts (Ronning 167; McMorris 47-49).

Feminists also acknowledged the aesthetic qualities embedded in quilts, but they emphasized the fact that quilts were a distinctively *female* art form. As a political ideology defending the social equality among men and women, feminism became powerful in the 1970s. An overwhelmingly white movement headed by middle- and

upper-class females with college degrees, the feminist movement brought about the reevaluation of women's contributions to all artistic fields, recovering literary works by women who had been ignored by the traditional canon and emphasizing cultural forms which, like quilting, were distinctively related to women. Unlike their women's rights predecessors, late twentieth-century feminists did not interpret quilts "as symbols of women's unpaid labor and economic subordination" but "embraced the quilt as their prime visual metaphor" (Hedges, Ferrero and Silber 7). In fact, in the 1970s quilts were as important as physical objects as they were as metaphors.

Feminist scholars appropriated needlework, incorporating each of the steps involved in quilting into their jargon. Thus, the deconstructive act of ripping fabric was related to women's torn existences and the assembling of the different parts, the piecing, to the process of female self-fashioning. Furthermore, the multi-centeredness of the quilt was interpreted as a direct correlate of the decentered structure of women's texts. Finally, quilting institutions such as the bee became the reification of women's collaborative approach to writing and the embodiment of female cooperation and egalitarian relationships. As a last step, the quilt moved from its original association with females to being appropriated as a metaphor for the multicultural American identity.

In "In Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use,'" Sam Whitsitt claims that the quilt has been reassessed, "moving from the marginalized position it held as a symbol of gossipy women's sewing circles, to becoming by the seventies the 'central metaphor of American cultural identity'" (443). In fact, it has been claimed that "the quilt has become a national symbol, replacing the melting pot, to describe an ideal of unity through diversity" (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 7). From the

1920s to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s the melting pot had symbolized the process of assimilation to a common cultural identity that newcomers and minorities were supposed to go through in the United States. However, the metaphor, which had become negatively tinged, “summoned to some minds the image of a soup so long cooked that all the ingredients dissolved into each other” (Gubar 22). As a soup-like metaphor, the melting pot did not allow room for differences, for nuances, or textures, and as a consequence it was replaced by another symbol for national identity, the quilt, which did accommodate variety and racial or cultural diversity without compromising unity.

2.4.4. Tradition and Innovation: From the 1980s to the Present

In the past few decades the most outstanding development in quilting has been the emergence of the so-called “art quilt,” which has become a means of expression not for traditional quilters but for artists in the conventional sense of the word. Materials and topics have also been renewed to illustrate changes in technology and new social realities. However, many aspects related to quilting in the late twentieth-century seem to be directly inherited from their nineteenth-century counterparts, which they resemble extraordinarily.

Although quilting bees lost the extraordinary relevance they had had in American women’s lives in the nineteenth century as many women began hiring professionals to quilt their tops, these social institutions were revitalized in the late twentieth century. According to Deborah Harding, conversations at these meetings now revolve around the entire world of quilting, ranging from patterns and quilt shows to the preservation of quilts (63). In addition to the quilting bee, modern quilters also enjoy the recently formed

quilt guilds, whose main objective is the promotion of quilting through the study of quilts and the celebration of events where women can share their experiences. Kari Ronning has noted that quilt guilds play an especially relevant role in sparsely populated states, where, despite the technological advancements in transportation and communication methods, quilters continue to feel isolated (168).

Modern materials also recycle something of the old and incorporate something of the new. Traditional materials such as cotton continue to be the basic tool with which the contemporary quilter works, but nowadays there is an unprecedented availability of fabrics, thread, and dyes, as well as other quilting staples. Even though many of these new supplies have eased the most tedious aspects of quilting, some also show the most unappealing side of the commercialization of quilts. Like kits in the 1920s, products such as liquid embroidery lure women into believing that the completion of their own quilt has never been easier. For those who are reluctant to invest their time in making a quilt of their own and have not inherited one but would like to enjoy the warmth associated with it, the market has devised the manufactured quilt, which, nonetheless, fails to evoke all the positive connotations of its traditional counterpart:

They [manufactured quilts] are made quickly and inexpensively and are often attractive. While they more than adequately serve their function of keeping sleepers warm, they fail to express the work of an individual crafter. The buyer's awareness of this lack of relationship between crafter and product is evident in the casual use and disposal of bedcovers. Inexpensively bought, mass produced items rarely engender care and sentimentality. In their mundaneness, they have no meaning or value beyond their limited use of covering and warming a bed. A product of a technological process, they are mere function. (Behuniak-Long 159)

Often imported from China, where some believe forced prison labor may be used in their making, manufactured quilts neither provide the makers with the comfort traditional quilters derived from quilting nor with a channel for their own creativity (Behuniak-Long 162). They do not, in summary, channel the silenced voice of the maker. Instead, they articulate wider issues such as capitalistic practices of accumulation and dissociation between maker and product, as well as the progressive globalization of the planet.

Finally, some of the topics portrayed in contemporary quilts could have been found in most nineteenth-century bedcovers. Many quilts still mourn the lost lives of loved ones or center on the celebration of important stages in the life cycle (births, marriages). However, modern quilters have updated traditional topics by openly tackling domestic abuse or incorporating issues such as divorce in their quilts (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 7). This proves that, even today, women rely on quilts to help them deal with complex emotional realities and ease their psychological pain. In addition to that, wider topics, some of them unique products of the late twentieth century, have also been reflected in modern quilts. As noted in *Hearts and Hands*, issues such as “environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation and citizen diplomacy, and peace and war” have replaced questions like abolition, which, despite centering the debate in the 1800s, are now outmoded themes (Hedges, Ferrero, and Silber 7).

If the number of quilts made about the topic is indicative, armed conflicts or simply the threat of war seem to continue to have an enormous impact on women’s lives. Of the thousands designed during the Gulf War to protest the military intervention, support and welcome back the troops, or mourn the dead, some incorporated camouflage fabric especially designed for that conflict (Armstrong 18). These contemporary war

quilts also tend to incorporate novel imagery. Destruction is usually associated with bombs or missiles; gas pumps and flames symbolize the centrality of oil in the contemporary world; oil-covered birds remind us of environmental damage; and, finally, corpses and coffins become symbols of death, destruction, and, particularly, of the price (monetary as well as human) to pay for gas.



Art Quilt
("Desert
Storm Quilt")
1990s

Terry
Hancock
Mangat

Source:
*Visions: The
Art of the
Quilt*, p. 26

Another distinctively contemporary topic that has found its way into modern quilts is the AIDS epidemic. Although quilts have been privately made to express women's ideas on the issue or to mourn those whose lives were cut short by the disease, AIDS is most commonly associated with quilts through the so-called "AIDS quilt," a

communal project whose status as a quilt has been questioned. Instead of patches or blocks, the quilt is composed of panels made to commemorate the lives of AIDS victims by friends or relatives. Each panel, individually designed, stands on its own until the quilt is prepared for display. It is then that the panels are joined but, as Hillard has aptly noted, “their coexistence is altogether temporary” (122). This intrinsic shapelessness of the AIDS quilt radically differentiates it from “traditional pieced, patchwork and crazy quilts that were deliberately designed to appear random, cluttered, and spontaneous, but were, in fact, intricate solutions to effect unity from great variety” (Hillard 122-23). In addition to questioning the unity of the disparate elements that constitute the AIDS quilt, scholars have also found its massiveness problematic:

In October 1988, a quilt containing almost nine thousand handmade panels, each one in memory of an individual who had died of AIDS, was spread out on the Ellipse, south of the White House. The 375,000-square-foot quilt with panels from 50 states in the U.S. (as well as from Canada, Germany, Italy, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, and Sweden), attracted thousands to mourn for those who had died. Before its final display in Washington D.C., the quilt, weighing 11,510 pounds, completed a twenty-city, 12,000 mile, four-month national tour, raising \$500,000 for care and services of people with AIDS. (Elsley, *Quilts* 41)

Hillard has argued that the immensity of the AIDS quilt perverts its meaning. In her view, although ideals such as concern and warmth, normally associated with traditional quilts, are present in each of the individual panels, the gigantic size of the quilt commercializes the idea of loss. She further argues that, when multiplied by thousands, discrimination and individually felt pain are replaced by mere quantitative data (123-24). This quantifying approach to the quilt, evident in figure-laden analyses such as the quotation

above, neglects the feminine, care-based approach to social problems typical of other quilts and replaces it with a masculine, statistic-driven focus.

The AIDS quilt incorporates unusual materials such as leather, a fact that links it to the major late-twentieth-century quilt development, the “art quilt.” Innovative in its components, form, and function, the art quilt represents the last stage in the process of artification quilts embarked upon in the 1920s. Far from being functional, art quilts are normally too small to have been intended for a bed. Instead of being designed by traditional quilters, they are created by artists in the conventional sense of the term that favor quilts over other expressive media such as painting, which they may have practiced earlier. Formally, art quilts emphasize color combinations over fine stitchery and, functionally, “they are primarily statements of the makers’ abilities to manipulate fabric, color, and pattern” (Kiracofe 237). Art quilts emerged as a natural consequence of the 1960s and 1970s artistic reevaluation of traditional quilts, whose geometric patterns were considered the predecessors of modern artwork motifs.

The appearance of the art quilt has meant the irruption of formally trained artists, both male and female, in a world that McMorris has defined as “a necessarily insular one” where “its practitioners learn[ed] from each other and innovations c[ame] from within the community of needlewomen” (61). It was originally believed, especially among feminist groups, that such an irruption would favor both traditional quilters, by enhancing the status of their works, and females who competed in the conventional art world, dominated by males. However, some scholars have challenged that hypothesis. Susan Bernick, for instance, asserts that “the increase in status for some quilts was bought at the cost of women’s control over quilting as an art form, the creation, reception, and

preservation of their quilts.” In her view, once quilts achieve the status of art, they enter a male realm, governed by male rules, over which women have no control. Bernick has further argued that such enhanced status has brought about “deep divisions between traditional quilters and art quilters, including some feminists, which resulted from a splintering of what had been a fairly unified artistic tradition” (134). In *The Art Quilt* McMorris also mentions the development of “tension” between traditional quilters and art quilt makers (58).

Despite these tensions, *Hearts and Hands* estimated that over fifteen and a half million people were involved in quilting in the late 1990s (7). This represents a significant increase in relation to the previous decade, when Gwinner had put the number of active quilters at only seven million (169). In fact, the past two decades seem to have been a propitious time for quilting, with art quilters such as Nancy Crow winning prizes formerly intended for painters or quilt artists such as Faith Ringgold’s having entire books devoted to criticism of their work (Gwinner 156). Nevertheless, debates on whether quilting is on the wane or not and voices questioning for how long art quilts will continue to be accepted as art are not uncommon (Doss 221; McMorris 69).

It is my personal impression that these debates are, to some extent, a replica of those that happened around 1900, and, particularly, the result of alarmist analyses typical of every turn of the century that may have little to do with any evident deterioration in the status of quilting. During my research periods in North Carolina and Kansas, I have witnessed the frequency with which quilt events take place, the predominance of quilts in cloth stores, the abundance of quilt magazines in general bookstores, Faith Ringgold’s popularity among women from and outside the academia, the expansion of quilt

institutions, and the success with which quilt guilds manage to gather women from far and near. I have also witnessed how women continue to quilt for the same reasons their ancestors did in the past.

For many, quilting is a creative outlet from which they derive a deep sense of personal pride. In the course of an informal conversation, Kathi Tichansky told me that she had purchased a bed and a cabinet so that she could display in her own home her many works, which she refuses to enter in quilt contests. Ideas of physical and emotional warmth and concern for others continue to lie behind many modern quilts. Barbara Bergin, for instance, created two starry quilts intended to provide her grandchildren with the impression of celestial protection while they slept. Concern for others was also what led Monica Yungeberg to make, in collaboration with another teenager, a baby quilt for a high school friend which reflected a very contemporary issue, teenage pregnancy. Furthermore, although modern technologies have turned the prairie into a less isolated area and, therefore, women no longer spend long, dreary winters deprived of other female company, women continue to quilt to preserve their sanity. A leaflet published by the cloth store “Thimble Pleasures” at the end of 2004 specifically stated that “[m]ost of us quilt for our mental health” (2). Kathi Tichansky, who attested that the quilter’s mental state was always reflected in her quilts, either through fabric choice or technique, claimed that quilting was “relaxing” and “therapeutic.” Finally, all quilters I had the opportunity to talk to tended to emphasize solidarity between women and the sense of belonging they derived from quilting.

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that women in the United States have expressed their creativity, their deepest feelings, and their own view of the world through quilts. American females have used quilts as texts from the colonial period to the present, but with varying intensity depending on the historical moment. The few quilts that have been preserved from the colonial period were designed by elite women and are, primarily, aesthetic statements of their makers' affluence. In the nineteenth century, widespread access to materials led females to quilt frantically. Quilts voiced pioneers' isolation and homelessness, slaves' social and economic marginality, white middle-class women's adjustment to the ideology of True Womanhood and their attempts to overcome its restrictive norms. They also revealed women's rejection of slavery, their fight against domestic abuse and alcoholism, and their long battle for enfranchisement. Instead of disappearing with the turn of the century, some of these messages remained valid until the 1920s, when quilts began to lose their centrality as women's texts in order to become mere commodities. As a result of this and other additional factors, such as some women's incorporation into the workplace and others' struggles to adjust to the 1950s version of femininity, quilts became old-fashioned channels of self-expression in the mid-twentieth century. When they were recuperated as expressive outlets in the 1970s, much of the emphasis lay on claiming old quilts as intrinsically female metaphors. With some innovations, production itself emerged strongly once again. As the art world validated quilting as a means of expression for artists, those to whom other texts had traditionally been denied picked up quilts to continue voicing their deepest concerns.

CHAPTER THREE

3. QUILTS IN FICTION: FROM ANNETTE'S "THE PATCHWORK QUILT" (1845) TO PAULA KAY MARTIN'S "THE QUILT ADDICT" (1988)

In chapter two I made an attempt to demonstrate that quilters used their creations as a means of expression. I tried to elucidate some of the ways in which actual quilts functioned as texts at the same time that I attempted to highlight certain messages that women conveyed through them. Although in chapter three I will use that information as socio-cultural and historical background knowledge and draw from it as necessary, I will concentrate mainly on the exclusively literary and on explaining how women writers created fictional quilts through which they expressed their own view of the world. As an exhaustive analysis of all the different topics that could be presented through quilts would exceed the scope of any dissertation, this chapter focuses on very specific issues that, I believe, have consistently reappeared in women's literature as well as in the criticism of their works.

After showing the connections between women's lives and quilts in the initial section, I will concentrate on an analysis of short stories that present quilts as a metaphor for the written text and quilting as a correlate of the creative process implied in producing a literary piece. Once a text(ile) emerges with the study of its creation and reception, once we have a text to work with, the analysis will shift to focus on one of the recurrent topics which female text(ile)s deal with: the idea of community. Since, unlike male literature, women's writings are supposed to emphasize relationships over individualism and quilting has been interpreted as a relational activity, the third section will critique short stories that use quilts to present communities of women. Finally, late twentieth-century

stories will be studied in light of the emergence of the feminist movement and its recuperations of women's cultural contributions. Mason's and Walker's pieces, both of which feature women claiming their cultural heritage through quilts, will illustrate different approaches to such recovery attempts.

3.1. QUILTS AS WOMEN'S LIVES: MALE AND FEMALE PERSPECTIVES

A superficial look at Eliza Calvert Hall's "Aunt Jane's Album" (1907) and George Washington Harris's "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" (1867) reveals striking similarities. Both stories feature a narrative structure that consists in a dialogue between two characters. One of them, the one who briefly questions the other and serves as the element that triggers the story-telling, is an educated figure who plays the essential role of transforming oral information into written discourse. In "Aunt Jane's Album" this responsibility falls on an anonymous figure, Aunt Jane's niece, who, in addition to her few questions, contributes a brief introductory note setting the scene and a concluding paragraph illustrating her newly-gained understanding of quilts. In "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" the questioner's role is played by a fictional construct called George whose perfect standard English and verbal precision oppose Sut's verbosity and dialectal use of the language. The other character is an uneducated but supposedly wise rural figure through whose voice most of the action is narrated. In addition to that, both stories illustrate how deeply interrelated women's lives and quilts are.

A deeper look would reveal few more connecting points. These two short stories differ in tone and point of view. "Aunt Jane's Album" is a women's story that celebrates female culture. "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," on the contrary, is a pessimistic account of life

in the mountains that, despite its deceptive title, narrates Sut's experiences and not Mrs. Yardley's. Hall's short story depicts a "civilized" world of churches, fairs, and successful social gatherings where women occupy a central space. Harris's portrays a world of the outdoors, of base passions, full of destruction and disharmony, where men prevail at the expense of women, who are relegated to a secondary position. In fact, as it will be noted later, "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" has been read as an attack on supposedly sentimental fiction such as Hall's.

"Aunt Jane's Album" seems an appropriate short story to begin with because, besides emphasizing women's connection to quilts, it illustrates many of the points made in the two previous chapters. As Aunt Jane herself has been called "a representative, albeit fictional, nineteenth-century quilter," the story, not surprisingly, perfectly summarizes much of what was postulated in chapter two (Crothers 51). In fact, the amount of information included and its accuracy are as directly linked to the role Aunt Jane is supposed to play as to the author herself. Eliza Calvert Hall was so deeply interested in needlework that in 1912 she published *A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets*, in which she linked the neglect of hand-made artifacts to the deprecation of women's cultural contributions and, hence, of women themselves. Like Aunt Jane herself, who uses her quilts as a weapon against the loss of her dearest memories, Hall's intention in writing the book was "not merely to recall and name coverlet patterns" but "to find a woman's way back to her foremothers by listening to the voices of women in order to rediscover the women and their history otherwise lost to us" (Elsley, "Uncovering" 158).

Despite having been published in the early twentieth-century, "Aunt Jane's Album," one of the nine chapters included in *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, features a

protagonist who attended quilt fairs “back yonder in the fifties” and, therefore, lived part of her life at the height of the cult of True Womanhood (65). In order to demonstrate her adaptation to that code and her femininity, Aunt Jane holds that “there never was any time wasted on my quilts” because, she emphasizes, “I did my work faithful; and then, when I might ‘a’ set and held my hands, I’d make a block or two of patchwork, and before long I’d have enough to put together in a quilt” (58). As the embodiment of the perfect nineteenth-century quilter she is supposed to be, Aunt Jane presents a world in which quilts accompany women throughout their lives. She claims to have learned to quilt from her mother “as soon as I was old enough to hold a needle and a piece o’ cloth” and, as a consequence of her devotion to quilting, by the time she married her late husband Abram she had managed to accumulate a considerable dowry which included bedclothes for three beds (58-59).

Aunt Jane’s quilting knowledge is demonstrated not only through the multitude of patterns she is able to create but also through the effectiveness with which she combines colors. In Aunt Jane’s home, the frame narrator writes, “[t]here seemed to be every pattern that the ingenuity of woman could devise and the industry of woman put together, —‘four patches,’ ‘nine patches,’ ‘log cabins,’ ‘wild-goose chases,’ ‘rising suns,’ hexagons, diamonds, and only Aunt Jane knows what else” (57). As *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* was published before Marie Webster’s and Ruth Finley’s works helped codify quilt pattern names, this list mixes general denominations with more specific ones, thus combining nineteenth- and twentieth-century naming practices. As for color, the old woman’s niece compares a Florentine mosaic maker with Aunt Jane arguing that, although the old Kentuckian works with humbler materials, both share “the eternal

aspiration after beauty” (72). Furthermore, Aunt Jane depicts quilting as an activity from which women derive emotional rather than monetary rewards and a sense of personal pride at the same time that they form uncompetitive communities.

Since she had not intended to get financial gains from her needlework but “a heap o’ comfort,” Aunt Jane situates her female world outside the economic system of nineteenth-century America arguing that she “wouldn’t take a fortune for ’em [her quilts]” (59). As her disassociation of quilts from the monetary excludes both her and her product from the competitiveness of the economic realm, she is able to establish deep emotional relationships with other women. In addition to crediting her neighbors with helping her with the actual quilting, Aunt Jane presents a world where women willingly share with other females the few opportunities they have for standing out and proving their excellence. Although the awards she obtained at fairs represent her main source of pride, Aunt Jane notes that neither she nor other apt needlewomen hesitated to withdraw their quilts from a competition so Sarah Jane Mitchell, a less qualified woman, could enjoy the honor of being considered a reputed quilter. After noting their uncompetitive drives by arguing that seeing Sarah Jane’s happiness “was worth a dozen premiums to me, and Milly, too,” Aunt Jane elaborates on the respect women gained through their quilting:

She [Sarah Jane] jest stood lookin’ at that quilt and the blue ribbon on it, and her eyes was full o’ tears and her lips quiverin’, and then she started off and brought the children in to look at ‘Mammy’s quilt.’ She met Sam on the way, and says she: ‘Sam, what do you reckon? My quilt took the premium.’ And I believe in my soul Sam was as much pleased as Sarah Jane. He came saunterin’ up, trying to look unconcerned, but anybody could see he was mighty well satisfied. It does a husband and wife a heap

o' good to be proud of each other, and I reckon that was the first time Sam ever had cause to be proud o' pore Sarah Jane. It's my belief that he thought more o' Sarah Jane all the rest o' her life jest on account o' that premium. (68)



Album quilt
c. 1850
Riverhead,
NY

Betsey Jane
Young Luce

Source:
Gatherings,
p. 56

Sarah Jane's story brings us back both to some of the ideas mentioned in chapter one about women's writing and to the quilt-like structure of this short story. "Aunt Jane's Album" does not narrate the title character's development as an individual who lives in isolation from her community, but her interaction with that community, her relationships with other members of her neighborhood. To put it simply, "Aunt Jane's Album" is not

“about” the title character, but “about” her and her children; her granddaughter Henrietta’s wedding trip, the quilt pattern she brought from Europe, and her failed attempt to get Aunt Jane to design a crazy quilt; Sarah Jane and her award-winning quilt; Milly, her selflessness, and her willingness to let Sarah Jane excel at her own expense; Miss Penelope and her angelic voice; and the different ways in which Mary Harris and Mandy Crawford reacted to widowhood. In summary, the story does not concentrate on an individual female but on the whole community of women. In this sense, the short story is thematically and structurally quilt-like, multicentered and non-hierarchical, as women’s writing is supposed to be.

Even though Aunt Jane acts as the narrator for the entire community, her own story does not prevail over the others’. In fact, the structure of the short story itself seems to be particularly adapted to accommodate others’ experiences. Intended as an informal conversation in which transitions from one topic to the next are quickly made, “Aunt Jane’s Album” smoothly shifts from one woman’s life to another’s, devoting similar narrative attention to each of them. Furthermore, as no woman’s experience is designed to dominate over the others’, the short story is structurally similar to an album or friendship quilt, made of equally important, independent blocks which strikingly resemble each other. In “Aunt Jane’s Album” the similarities between the narrative “blocks” emerge from their protagonists’ shared experiences as women, although these are, like album quilt blocks, treated as discrete units which relate to each other in a non-hierarchical way. Moreover, the narrator does not stand out at the expense of her neighbors. On the contrary, Aunt Jane extols other women’s qualities, particularly Miss Penelope’s unique voice. Even when dealing with fields in which she excels, like

quilting, Aunt Jane makes room for other women, mentioning those with whom she shared the quilting or allowing less-skilled females like Sarah Jane to enjoy the personal satisfaction and social recognition implied in being the recipient of a blue ribbon for the best quilt.

Moreover, Hall's short story is also quilt-like in that it replaces linearity with fragmented, broken thematic parts that randomly combine past, present, and future. Aunt Jane uses her quilts as a stock of memories that help her bridge the gap with her past. The quilts prove such an effective strategy that, because of the vividness with which past events are presented, the difference between the past and the present appears blurred:

“Now this quilt, honey,” she said, “I made out o’ the pieces o’ my children’s clothes, their little dresses and waists and aprons. Some of ’em’s dead, and some of ’em’s grown and married and a long way off from me, further off than the ones that’s dead, I sometimes think. But when I set down and look at this quilt and think over the pieces, it seems like they all come back, and I see ’em playin’ around the floors an goin’ in and out, and hear ’em cryin’ and laughin’ and callin’ me jest like they used to do before they grew up to men and women, and before there was any little graves o’ mine out in the old buryin’-ground over yonder.” (60)

In addition to seeing quilts as a text where she can read her past, Aunt Jane also concludes that, because of the ability of cloth to outlast its wearer, quilts provide their maker with a sense of permanence. Since for her “there ain’t many things that’ll last longer’n a quilt,” she interprets her own bedcovers as her link to the future, as her own personal claim to posterity:

“Now, some folks has money to build monuments with—great, tall, marble pillars, with angels on top of ’em, like you see in Cave Hill and

them big city buryin'-grounds. And some folks build churches and schools and hospitals to keep folks in mind of 'em, but all the work I've got to leave behind me is jest these quilts, and sometimes, when I'm settin' here, workin' with my caliker and gingham pieces, I'll finish off a block, and I laugh and say to myself, 'Well, here's another stone for the monument.'"
(79)

Because of this connection between women, quilts, present, past, and future, "Aunt Jane's Album" presents quilts as a metaphor for women's lives, as a text in which it is possible to read about the whole spectrum of female experience. "[I]t looks," Aunt Jane exclaims, "like my whole life was sewed up in 'em [her quilts]" (82). In fact, in this short story references, direct or indirect, to the relationship between quilts and texts abound. First, Aunt Jane undermines the difference between the needle and the pen by likening both, arguing that "there's jest as much difference in folks' sewin' as there is in their handwritin'" (64). Taking into account the parallelism Aunt Jane establishes between needle and pen, and starting from the premise that uneducated women like herself sewed, rather than wrote, their own lives, Aunt Jane moves on to emphasize the similarities between her quilts and diaries:

"You see, some folks has albums to put folks' pictures in to remember 'em by, and some folks has a book and writes down the things that happen every day so they won't forgit 'em; but, honey, these quilts is my albums and my di'ries, and whenever the weather's bad and I can't git out to see folks, I jest spread out my quilts and look at 'em and study over 'em, and it's jest like goin' back fifty or sixty years and livin' my life over again."
(59)

The emphasis of Hall's story on describing this fictional Kentuckian quilter as the perfect embodiment of conventional femininity partially conceals the fact that, in addition to presenting quilts as texts in which it is possible to read about women's daily experiences, "Aunt Jane's Album" portrays quilts as texts that might potentially challenge patriarchal hegemony. In fact, Hall effectively employed the characterization of Aunt Jane as a rural old lady seemingly satisfied with her condition who highlights the everyday in her quilts to expose women's social discrimination. As Judy Elsley claims in *Quilts as Text(iles)*, Hall argued throughout *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* that patriarchal laws had a decidedly negative impact on women's lives. However, as Elsley herself points out, Hall was fully aware of the fact that the mere exposure of social evils would not attract new adepts to women's rights and, therefore, "she spoke in parable through her fiction" using a character whose "story has the sting of a bee" even though she "speaks with the sweetness of honey" (32).

Although Hall's revolutionary aims are more obvious in "Sally Ann's Experience," in which she depicts a woman who challenges St. Paul's guidelines by speaking in church, "Aunt Jane's Album" also features a scene in which Aunt Jane contests male interpretations of the Bible. More importantly, Aunt Jane validates quilts as universal texts capable of explaining the most complex theoretical dilemmas in plain terms understandable by readers at all cultural levels. This universality is contrasted with the barriers encountered when gaining access to the quintessential male text, the Bible, whose interpretation is the exclusive realm of formally educated interpreters:

"Many a time I've set and listened to Parson Page preachin' about predestination and free-will, and I've said to myself, 'Well, I ain't never been through Centre College up at Danville, but if I could jest git up in the

pulpit with one of my quilts, I could make it a heap plainer to folks than parson's makin' it with all his big words.' You see, you start out with jest so much caliker; you don't go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece here and a piece there, and you'll have a piece left every time you cut out a dress, and you take jest what happens to come. And that's like predestination. But when it comes to cuttin' out, why, you're free to choose your own pattern. You can give the same kind o' pieces to two persons, and one'll make a 'nine-patch' and one'll make a 'wild-goose chase,' and there'll be two quilts made out o' the same kind o' pieces, and jest as different as they can be. And that is jest the way with livin'. The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut 'em and put 'em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the caliker." (74-75)

To sum up, in addition to illustrating that women's lives and quilts are intricately connected, "Aunt Jane's Album" portrays quilts as female texts which reflect women's daily lives and which, despite their apparent harmlessness, have the potential to threaten the hegemony of patriarchal texts and their custodians, here embodied in the aptly named Parson Page.

George Washington Harris's "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" shares with "Aunt Jane's Album" the depiction of quilts as an integral element of women's culture. Harris's short story presents a female world in which quilts "perdominated" and quilting bees constituted one of the few occasions in which mountain people had the opportunity to socialize. The centerpiece of this female world is Mrs. Yardley, a woman who, according to the narrator, "run strong on the bed-kiver question":

Irish chain, star ove Texas, sun-flower, nine dimunt, saw teeth, checker board, an' shell quilts; blue, an' white, an' yaller an' black coverlids, and

callickercumfurts reigned triumphan' 'bout her hous'. They wer packed in drawers, layin in shelves full, wer hung four dubbil on lines in the lof, packed in chists, piled on cheers, an' wer everywhar, even ontu the beds, an' wer changed every bed-makin. (116)

As such a productive quiltmaker, Mrs. Yardley is also depicted as a woman who “hed hilt hundreds [of bees],” as a frequent quilting bee organizer (116). In fact, as James Hedges rightly notes, “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting” features many of the elements traditionally associated with quilting bees. Hedges asserts that for the composition of this short story “Harris relied heavily on the folkways of the mountain people, especially upon his knowledge of the social aspects of quilting” (145). Hence, Sut elaborates on the invitation Mrs. Yardley extends to the entire community, on women’s early quilting, on male evening attendance, on the victuals guests enjoyed, and on the courting rituals both males and females performed (116-17). However, all this information, besides being conveyed in a language that often borders on vulgarity, is presented in an overtly disparaging male tone that minimizes women’s cultural contributions in order to highlight men’s experiences. Thus, Mrs. Yardley’s “quilting” and, implicitly, the communal values it represents are relegated to playing the role of mere background for Sut’s sexual adventures and asocial behavior.

Ben Harris McClary argues in “George Washington Harris’s ‘Special Vision’: His Yarns as Historical Sourcebook” that the general tone of *Sut Lovingood Yarns*, the collection in which “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting” was included, is “masculine and coarse with few exceptions” (235). In fact, in “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting” coarseness prevails. Besides, even though the short story superficially deals with women’s cultural institutions, its point of view is decidedly masculine. Sut renders female culture

irrelevant. He mentions none of the positive aspects of quilting bees, totally ignoring the sense of community and belonging women derived from them. In fact, Sut absolutely neglects the central elements of quilting bees so as to concentrate on their “trimmins: ‘vittils, fiddils, an’ sperrits in ’bundance’” (117). Although Sut claims that “quiltins, managed in a morril an’ sensibil way, trully am good things,” none of the virtues he mentions about quilting bees allude to their community-building qualities or their ability to provide women with a safe space where they could develop their creativity unhindered by patriarchal restrictions. According to him, they are, simply, “good fur free drinkin, good fur free eatin’, good fur free huggin, good fur free dancing, good fur free fitin, an’ goodest ove all fur poperlatin a country fas’” (117).

In fact, Sut’s narration concentrates on these last two aspects: social disruption and his failed courting attempts. In relation to the former, “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting” clearly depicts a world in which deep emotional relationships and other supposedly female values such as nurturing are replaced with the individualism underlying the rejection of the Other, here incarnated in a male outsider whose presence Sut tries to eliminate because of the threat it represents to his own hegemony. Sut’s actions—tying a row of quilts to the stranger’s horse, which ultimately gets scared and runs away, followed by his owner and leaving behind a trail of destruction which includes both several torn quilts and a fatally wounded Mrs. Yardley—demonstrate his inability to create a community, similar to that represented by the quilting bee, which incorporates the Other. Sut’s rejection of the outsider, the chaotic situation he originates, and his neglect of the essence of quilting bees all need to be interpreted as part of a larger

struggle against social conventions and order. Sut's asocial behavior directly opposes the communal values Mrs. Yardley's incorporative quilting bee represents.

Harris's critics have strongly emphasized Sut's rejection of an orderly society in which the individual is bound to the compliance of certain norms. Milton Rickels asserts in the pageless preface to *George Washington Harris* that this author's work shows a "low comic defiance of civilized life." In "Characteristic Ambivalence in the Yarns of George Washington Harris," Alan Henry Rose elaborates on the issue, linking Sut's phobia about social conventions to his fool role. For Rose, "Sut's hostility toward order is inevitable, for he objectifies the essence of the trickster, 'the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries'" (115). Since women have traditionally embodied society, order, and the restrictions civilization imposes on the individual, Sut's opposition to these values entails a rejection of women and their cultural contributions. Some critics have, in fact, included (certain types of) women among Sut's main objects of scorn. In "The Imagery of George Washington Harris" Milton Rickels provided an extensive list enumerating those who suffered Sut's contempt, which included "ugly women, old women, respectable women, and the woman as wife," as well as other groups formed either partially ("Negroes, Republicans, [. . .] Catholics, Jews") or mainly ("teachers, church-goers") by females (183). Samuel I. Bellman added strong-minded women and suffragettes to those Sut despised (179). "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" could easily expand the list.

In this short story Sut is especially cruel in his attack of spinsters and bespectacled women, of whom he says that "they am dang'rus in the extreme. Thar is jis' no knowin what they ken du" (114). Since Mrs. Yardley "wer a curious 'oman in her way, an' she wore shiney specks," she herself becomes an object of scorn. In addition to being accused

of the same meanness Sut ascribes to all glasses-clad females, Mrs. Yardley is attacked for her devotion to quilting as well as for her female insistence on holding long conversations which revolve around apparently minor topics. Seen from Sut's perspective, Mrs. Yardley was "a great noticer ove littil things" who "wud gabble, no odds who wer a-listenin" (114-15). In fact, Sut deprecates almost everything that has to do with the title character, including her death, which is supposed to be the focal point of the short story.

Asked by George "[w]hat caused the death of Mrs. Yardley," Sut disparagingly retorts: "Nuffin, only her heart stop't beatin 'bout losin a nine dimunt quilt. True, she got a skeer'd hoss tu run over her, but she'd a-got over that ef a quilt hadn't been mix'd up in the catastrophe" (115-16). Much of the criticism that has tried to elucidate the reasons that led to Mrs. Yardley's demise has concentrated on this reply. It is my belief that Sut's answer not only encapsulates the motives that may have caused her death but also summarizes the basic difference in point of view between the male perspective in "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" and the female one in "Aunt Jane's Album."

Several explanations have been provided to clarify why Mrs. Yardley dies. The most simplistic of all associates her death with the loss of a favorite quilt without providing any additional information as to why a quilt—and not any other of Mrs. Yardley's daily used objects—is singled out, that is, without explaining why her demise is specifically triggered by a quilt. James Hedges' article belongs to this category. According to him, "Mrs. Yardley, being the true quilting buff that she was, could survive anything but the untimely loss of a quilt, and especially her 'nine-diamond' quilt" (150). Other articles, instead of reducing the options to one single explanation, have enumerated

a series of potential reasons for Mrs. Yardley's death. Jane Przybysz, for example, argues that Mrs. Yardley may have died of the wounds the horse inflicted on her, of the damage suffered by her quilts, or as a consequence of challenging patriarchal values by emphasizing the idea of community with the celebration of her quilting bee. According to Przybysz, "Sut finds her desire for self-extension, to invite that which is 'other' (in this case urban) into her community and home, and the pleasure she derives from quilts and from 'intercourse' with women a threat to his masculine identity and privilege" (169).

In light of the intricate relationship between women's lives and quilts that "Aunt Jane's Album" portrays, an additional interpretation could be suggested. This new reading would blur the difference between Mrs. Yardley and her quilts so as to present both as part of a larger unit: women's life. In Hall's short story Aunt Jane refuses to dissociate herself from her quilts because they represent her entire life. "I'd give away," Aunt Jane says, "my best dress or my best bonnet or an acre o' ground to anybody that needed 'em more'n I did; but these quilts—Why, it looks like my whole life was sewed up in 'em, and I ain't goin' to part with 'em while life lasts" (82). Taking into account that both Aunt Jane and Mrs. Yardley live surrounded by quilts in which they express their deepest emotions, Mrs. Yardley's quilts could be interpreted as an extension of her physical self, as a place where the intangible part of the individual—experiences, emotions, beliefs, etc.—is stored. Following this reading, Mrs. Yardley would not have died of her physical wounds alone because, as Sut himself asserts, although "she got a skeer'd hoss tu run over her, [. . .] she'd a-got over that" (116). Instead, she would have died of a combination of the bodily damage suffered and the psychological shock of seeing the physical expression of her emotional life destroyed.

In this sense, the difference between “Aunt Jane’s Album” and “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting” would be minimal because both would illustrate the depth of the connection between women’s lives and quilts. Nevertheless, these two stories differ radically in that while the former places women’s lives in the narrative center and validates female culture, the latter disparages women’s experiences and, by extension, women themselves. This deprecation is abundantly clear in the explanation Sut provides for Mrs. Yardley’s death. Before moving on to describe at length her attachment to a nine-diamond quilt and how she was wounded by a runaway horse, Sut explains Mrs. Yardley’s death as the result of “[n]uffin” (116). In addition to this disparaging comment which epitomizes male blindness to female culture, Sut’s narration offers plenty of examples illustrating his belittlement of women and their quilts. As previously noted, Sut uses Mrs. Yardley’s quilting bee as a setting for his failed attempts to court Sal Yardley and as a mere excuse for engaging in his antisocial conduct, but the most telling evidence confirming Sut’s deprecatory attitude is provided by his concluding comment. When asked by George “how did the quilting come out?,” Sut aggressively retorts: “How the hell du yu ’speck me tu know? I warn’t thar eny more” (122).

The marginal role Sut ascribes to Mrs. Yardley’s quilting bee perfectly exemplifies the contrast between Hall’s and Harris’s short stories. Although both portray women’s intimate relationship with quilts, the former by tying quiltmaking to female self-fashioning as well as by emphasizing the textual quality of quilts and the latter by making quilts a crucial part of both the title character’s life and death, only Hall’s presents that relationship in appreciative terms. Narrated from a female perspective, “Aunt Jane’s Album” highlights the importance of quilts in order to validate women’s

experiences. Told from a male point of view, “Mrs. Yardley’s Quilting,” on the contrary, minimizes women’s culture so as to privilege the narration of a male story based on ideas such as dominance, exclusion, or social chaos that have traditionally been defined as antithetical to female culture.

3.2. THE FICTIONALIZATION OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS: QUILTS AS LITERARY TEXTS

Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “An Honest Soul,” Kate Chopin’s “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story,” Alice MacGowan’s “Gospel Quilt,” Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s “The Bedquilt,” and Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” feature women artists who struggle to produce a text(ile). None of the five short stories describes the creative process as an easy path for females. Freeman’s piece depicts an old lady absolutely sapped of energy after redoing her text a total of three times. Chopin kills a heroine who had dared to compose a series of written pieces imitating the quilting process. MacGowan’s protagonist’s life revolves around a radically innovative quilt which fails to reach an understanding audience. By the time Fisher’s Aunt Mehetabel achieves glory and recognition, she is sixty-eight and has spent a lifetime ignored by everyone around her. Glaspell’s Minnie Wright, imprisoned and charged with her husband’s murder, leaves behind her a text that either shows her mental derangement or highlights her unwillingness to control her anger in the midst of patriarchal oppression. Through quilts, these five stories explore the difficulties women experience when they attempt to create a text.

The barriers these five female protagonists encounter in their aspirations to authorship derive from the fact that they try to enter a realm, the literary, which has traditionally discriminated against women. Writing is normally characterized as a male activity. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, “the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). Hence, writing is implicitly defined as an unwomanly activity. In fact, the widely acknowledged discrimination women suffered in the literary realm derives from a series of educational disadvantages, socio-cultural beliefs, and gender-linked peculiarities which men did not experience.

As “[a]n illiterate is scarcely capable of writing stories,” poor educational opportunities undoubtedly played a major role (Rabuzzi 21). In the antebellum period a girl’s education depended mostly on the home-making training she received from her mother. Formal education, which had historically been either nonexistent or of a decidedly low quality, usually consisted in a semester or two spent at some female academy, where curricula were secondary, students’ progress was neither monitored nor emphasized, and where enrollment did not depend on the applicant’s abilities but on her family’s social standing (Douglas 58-59).

As the nineteenth century progressed, women began to receive more formal education for increasingly longer periods of time, but the quality of the instruction they got paled before that of males. Women “did not, as one might logically predict, get even a modified version of the curriculum currently offered their brothers” (Douglas 58). While men were familiarized with classic culture or practical subjects, women were taught disciplines which, like music, sewing, literature, or modern languages, could help

them become better ladies and enlighten their families (Douglas 58). Nevertheless, women did not gain general access to college education in the 1800s. In fact, they did not even begin graduating from high school in significant numbers until educational opportunities improved in the 1920s (Fox and Langley 225).

Only upper-class females customarily received some college education. Since a number of stable and renowned institutions with high academic standards such as Vassar, Wellesley, Smith College, or Oberlin tried to demonstrate through the latter part of the 1800s that women could withstand rigid educational standards, even these elite females functioned as testing ground for a system of higher education that was experimenting with what could be considered acceptable instruction for ladies. The viewpoint these institutions defended came under attack by the last quarter of the nineteenth century with the publication of Dr. Edward Clark's *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for Girls* and the appearance of surveys which showed that educated women bore fewer children. Based on research on six patients, Dr. Clark's treatise, published in 1874, tried to demonstrate that college education was pernicious for women. According to him, female engagement in mental activity diverted the blood necessary for menstruation to the brain and, consequently, doomed women to suffer a large number of diseases (Faderman 235). Other authors argued that it was women's smaller brain that made them unfit for intellectual activity.

Furthermore, female education became increasingly tinged with negative connotations as waves of new immigrants settled in the United States. To counteract the rapid growth of the immigrant population, by the 1890s middle- and upper-class women were expected to bear as many children as possible. Statistics showed that there seemed

to be a direct correlation between higher education and lower birth rates, as women with college degrees were four times more likely to remain single than uneducated ones. Besides, those who married tended to do so an average of eight years after graduation, thus limiting greatly their reproductive years (Simmons 121). Although basic education reached a large section of the northern population in the nineteenth century, women with college degrees were the exception rather than the rule.³³

None of the five female protagonists studied in this section seems to have been thoroughly educated. In fact, it is questionable whether four of them can read or write at all, even though it is difficult to hypothesize about Minnie Wright because she is an absent character who does not directly participate in the development of the plot. MacGowan's Keziah Mase and Freeman's Martha Patch express themselves in colloquial language which often verges on the ungrammatical or uneducated. Both make unusual contractions and fail to pronounce certain sounds. In Keziah's speech sentences with no subjects are not uncommon. Martha often resorts to double negatives. The third-person narrator of "The Bedquilt" clearly states that Aunt Mehetabel is an uneducated woman who only commands basic vocabulary. Mehetabel, who is not acquainted with any poetic expression other than loose sentences from hymnbooks, "fumble[s] blindly for unknown superlatives" as she tries to explain herself (265). On the contrary, Elizabeth Stock is literate. However, she admits that she could have never harbored the "ambition to shine or make a name" as a writer because of the "time and labor it meant to acquire a literary

³³ In the South, highly deficient in common schools, especially if compared to the North, the situation was even bleaker. Ante-bellum yeoman women, educated only at Sabbath schools, were predominantly illiterate (Fox-Genovese, *Plantation* 269). Female slaves fared much worse; they were barred from writing by the laws of a social system in which "literacy was used effectively to perpetuate a strict racial and subsequently sexual hierarchy." Before the Civil War, "[w]ho would receive the power of literacy was [. . .] at the discretion of whites" and after it, of black men (Babb 108).

style,” thus endorsing the idea that women were barred from education that implied a long-term commitment (274).

In addition to their educational disadvantages, nineteenth-century American women writers had to overcome a series of socio-cultural barriers that hindered their access to the pen. Partially inherited from the past, some of these prejudices were invigorated with the cult of True Womanhood. As the ideology of the separate spheres swept the country, it was generally agreed that women’s moral superiority excluded them from base human passions, which they were unable to feel and, in turn, unfit to write about (Showalter, *Literature* 79). Moreover, it was common knowledge among nineteenth-century Americans that the domestic sphere sufficed for a True Woman. Therefore, those who took the pen were considered restless souls unable to find satisfaction in what society had prescribed for them. Showalter claims in *A Literature of their Own* that this idea remained widespread as late as 1892 (85).

In fact, for most of the 1800s the concepts of “woman” and “author” seemed to be apparently incompatible and, consequently, women who took the forbidden pen were often charged with unwomanliness. The nineteenth-century association of “author” with self-assertion and public exposure, and “womanhood” with submissiveness and domesticity made the phrase “woman author” a contradiction in terms. To have one’s writing published implied public exposure and, consequently, contradicted one of the defining characteristics of the True Woman: domesticity. Through a large part of the nineteenth century, females, who were expected to refrain from meddling in public affairs, were severely attacked for surpassing the threshold of the domestic and blamed

for tampering with what was considered the right order of things (Fox and Langley 72-74).

In the nineteenth century, a woman could be charged with unwomanliness even if she did not have her literary compositions published. The mere act of writing was a rebellious endeavor which challenged the prevailing definition of womanhood. The submission expected from every True Woman clashed directly with the self-assertion implied in writing. Women were defined as selfless beings who worked to shelter men from the threats of the public world and, more generally, to safeguard and guarantee the well-being of others. However, “[f]or women writers, this definition of women as selfless was, and is, especially problematic, for to write is precisely to assert a self, to ‘master’ language and discourse as a subject. It is to open the space in which meaning is created rather than to be the object or matter on which meaning is imposed” (Ewell, “Kate Chopin” 158). Since writing was self-centered labor, a selfish activity that entailed claiming one’s own life and time, for most of the 1800s there remained a conflict between writing and selfhood on the one hand, and womanhood and submission on the other.

This conflict is partially responsible for the “anxiety of authorship” Gilbert and Gubar describe in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, where they argue that females are affected by “an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex.” “[I]f contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority,” Gilbert and Gubar conclude, “they are able to do so only because their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like

madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture” (51). Nevertheless, until it was finally overcome, the anxiety of authorship severed the literary ambitions of many a female writer.

In the short stories studied in this section, the prevalence of these socio-cultural obstacles is clear. Elizabeth Stock’s Uncle Williams, who tells her to “stick to [her] dressmaking” and give up her writing ambitions, epitomizes the forces that attempted to restrict women to the domestic space. By the time Fisher published “The Bedquilt,” more than three decades after the composition of “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story,” many of the prejudices that equated public exposure with unwomanliness had vanished. As a consequence, Aunt Mehetabel is encouraged to leave her confinement in the house in order to expose her text(ile) to public opinion. Finally, both “The Bedquilt” and “Gospel Quilt” demonstrate the sense of empowerment women get from writing. The first half of MacGowan’s piece represents a woman’s impassioned defense of her work against those who try to disparage it. Despite its limitations, Aunt Mehetabel’s astonishing transformation from “a mouselike little creature” to “too proud” a woman illustrates how her quilt empowers her as an individual.

As the nineteenth century advanced, these educational and socio-cultural prejudices began to disappear gradually, particularly as the ideal of True Womanhood began to vanish with the collapse of the ideology of the separate spheres and the increasing number of females who took the pen. As a consequence, the social status of the woman writer changed. Ann Douglas asserts that “[w]hile a female author at the beginning of the nineteenth century was considered by definition an aberration from her sex, by its close she occupied an established if not a respected place” (8). However, as

women overcame some of the barriers that hindered their access to the written text, they began to suffer from additional sources of discrimination that kept their writing in a secondary position in relation to men's. As Linda Abbandonato argues, when women "overcame oppressive technologies of gender and took up the forbidden pen, the technologies of print could always be deployed against them" (1107). Thus, women engaged in a long struggle to have their works accepted both by the male-dominated publishing industry and as part of the canon.

In *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century*, Elizabeth Ammons offers a summarized version of what the canon comprised until quite recently which shows the degree of exclusion of women writers from that privileged account of American literary history:

For much of the twentieth century the picture of America's literary past provided by mainstream scholarship has been remarkably simple. The story has run something like this: Following a long period of development during the country's colonial and then early nation-building periods, American literature came of age in the early nineteenth century with the work of Irving, Cooper, and Poe and then exploded into brilliant creativity at mid-century in the works of writers whom F. O. Matthiessen labeled in 1941 as members of the "American Renaissance"—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. Fictive literature after the Civil War then underwent a change from romanticism into realism, the accepted story has held, with the major practitioners being Howells and James, the second of whom, along with Twain, and in some people's view Emily Dickinson as well, became the major literary figure of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The nation's literature then descended into a valley at the turn of the century before erupting in a second brilliant outpouring of talent, akin to that of the American Renaissance, in the 1920s, which saw

the emergence of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and most important, Faulkner (3).

Ammons notes that this favored version of the history of literature in the United States does not cover a thirty-five year span in which women published high-quality literature, which, not coincidentally, includes some of the short stories studied in this section (4).³⁴ What is worse, with the exception of Emily Dickinson's oeuvre, it completely ignores the female literary production of all times, a situation that feminist critics have tried to ameliorate since the 1970s with the recovery of outstanding female authors and their literary contributions.³⁵

This prolonged silence affected all the women authors included in this section. Although *The Awakening* has now become a quintessential women's literary piece and "An Honest Soul," "The Bedquilt," and "A Jury of Her Peers," frequently anthologized in collections of short stories, are considered women's masterpieces, their writers enjoyed popular and critical acclaim while alive but then disappeared from the literary panorama until the 1970s. In "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" Kate Chopin shows her awareness of the gendered nature of writing and, especially, her understanding of the power of the publishing industry over women's texts. By featuring an editorial figure who reduces

³⁴ Ammons's list includes, among others, the following novels: *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *Weeds* (4).

³⁵ In many cases this recovery has been partial, affecting only those works which fit the feminist agenda and ignoring those whose commercial or formulaic nature compromised their literary quality. Mary Wilkins Freeman is a case in point. While her earlier short stories depicting independent old maids who defy social conventionalism are anthologized and analyzed over and over, her more conventional later ones featuring traditional marriages, her novels, and her ghost stories have received little attention. Kate Chopin's example probably is even more conspicuous. The recovery of *The Awakening* and its elevation to the category of women's masterpiece has partially obscured her contributions to female magazines and her short fiction, even though, while alive, her fame rested on them.

Elizabeth's "conglomerate mass" of writing to "one story," Chopin provides a fictionalized version of female silencing at the hands of editors and publishers.

The silencing explored in "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" is recuperated by Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," which clearly indicates that reading is also a gendered activity which men and women approach in different ways and which, therefore, may render women's texts invisible to the patriarchal gaze. In fact, feminist critics have consistently argued that the exclusion of women's literature from the canon depends on male blindness to female texts rather than on their aesthetic value. Scholars such as Josephine Donovan assert that, despite the fact that "by *traditional* standards of literary excellence women writers *have* produced masterpieces," female literature has been neglected. For her this is due to the fact that canonizers selected "worthwhile" texts according to historically determined factors which are not directly linked to any aesthetic criteria of literary excellence. Donovan notes further that in the case of the American canon, as in many others, the selection, which was thematically determined, privileged male interests ("Masterpieces" 27). Judith Fetterley expresses a similar view in "Reading about Reading," where she contends that "men, controlling the study of literature, define as great those texts that empower themselves" (150). It was within this chauvinistic approach to literature that women's stories were silenced to emphasize a male version of what the American experience entailed.

Canonizers privileged a series of texts that provided a unified account of how U.S. literature reflected the American lifestyle as embodied in characteristics such as democracy, progress, or independence, which were chosen as quintessential American virtues. These qualities were most often found in the quest novel, which became the

centerpiece around which the whole canon revolved. The quest novel featured a “(male) protagonist [who] feels cramped and stifled by the strictures of ‘civilization,’ usually embodied by the city, town, and/or home. He responds to his dilemma by fleeing to an unstructured landscape beyond those strictures. There, he finds freedom, but he also confronts a lack of structure which threatens identity” (Leder, “Quilt” 141-42). Behind this escape from “civilization” lay the search for self-definition and the belief that the individual may only be able to realize his full potential if unhindered by social barriers.

Therefore, the essential American characteristic became its potential for offering the individual a wild space where he may fulfill his destiny free from the restrictions civilization tried to impose on him. Consequently, only works that reflected the conflict between the individual and society were considered worthy of inclusion in the canon. With some notable exceptions such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, most canonical authors of the classic phase wrote about this clash. Later authors to whom the label “major” has been applied also explored the topic. Typical examples are Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, where the raft and the whaling ship stand for a no-man’s land where conventional social pressures do not seem to exist. In addition to those novels, critics have added the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, or F. Scott Fitzgerald among many others. The prevailing exaltation of the values embodied in the literature of canonical male authors has proven problematic for women writers.

On the one hand, as women authors did not write about extraordinary events set in spaces free from the restrictions of civilization, such as the forest or the sea, their fiction was ignored in the canonization process. On the other hand, their female condition

identified them with society, with the social structures and strictures the male hero of the quest plot was trying to flee from and, thus, women “entered literary history as the enemy,” the adversary, the antagonistic power that tried to jeopardize the unrestrained development of the individual (Baym 69). Finally, since women’s fiction was mostly domestic, concentrated on social settings, and failed to emphasize those values that had come to represent the quintessential American spirit, female contributions to the national literature were increasingly rejected as antithetical to the American ideal.

This rejection became particularly obvious after World War I, when the professionalization of the study of literature coincided with the exaltation of characteristics men had shown during the war. According to Showalter, the U.S became “[a] country taking new pride in its cultural heritage after the war [that] saw only weakness and sentimentality in the contribution women had made to our national literature. In the years following the war, women writers were gradually eliminated from the canon of American literature as it was anthologized, criticized and taught.” As Showalter further notes, women writers were attacked for feminizing national literature, for emasculating the American novel, and, more generally, for their “conventionality and propriety,” while, at the same time, “little tolerance [was shown] for female unconventionality, originality, and impropriety” (*Sister’s Choice* 107).

This situation had deep implications for women’s literature. As critics emphasized the virtues of male literature and literary tastes changed with the new mood that was sweeping the country, women’s works and the values they depicted were, either consciously or unconsciously, depreciated. The rejection of women’s stories meant that females were not even allowed to participate in the dominant culture. In fact, the

inclusion of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature by women and, particularly, the absorption of the values it defended would have destroyed the intended uniformity of the canon. Josephine Donovan contends that, since “[a] culture’s identity is determined in part by its stories, its literary canon,” with the admittance of women’s values and the resulting “deformation” of the canon “we might have the grounds for a new and more positive concept of that culture’s identity.” That new identity would replace characteristics such as “dominance, escapist violence, competition, and exploitation” with others such as “humility, humanity, and compassion,” as well as with a revitalization of the everyday (“Masterpieces” 36). It would also include the communal values explored in the short stories studied in the next section.

In addition to these external barriers, women writers suffered from internal pressures, which uniquely affected them because of their female condition. Most nineteenth-century women found it difficult to have both a literary career and a family life. Scholars have stressed over and over that many women authors of the 1800s did not marry, bore no children, or had unusually turbulent relationships. Among those who did wed, some waited until they were past the childbearing age to do so and others did not take the pen until they had become widows, thus illustrating the seemingly incompatibility of family and career (Douglas 95; Magee xix). The stories analyzed in this dissertation were composed by female authors who perfectly illustrate this point.

Alice MacGowan remained a spinster. By the time Mary Wilkins agreed to marry Dr. Freeman, after a decade-long courtship, she was fifty years old. Like Freeman, Susan Glaspell married late in life and had no children. Kate Chopin published nothing until her husband passed away. Finally, Dorothy Canfield Fisher had a fulfilling, but

unconventional, relationship with her stay-at-home husband John. The fictional authors these writers portrayed in the short stories featured in this section suffer a similar fate. Borrowing Elizabeth Stock's words, three of them are "unmarried, and not afraid or ashamed to say it" (275). A fourth, Minnie Wright, is unhappily married and childless. The last one, Keziah Mase, who has two live children, "dr[ove] her pigs to a poor market" when she wedded her husband (149).

Among the real-life writers, Mary Wilkins Freeman probably represents the best example of how crippling marriage could be for a female author who published at the turn into the twentieth century. Experts in her oeuvre unanimously agree that she composed her best fiction before her wedding to Dr. Freeman, while engaged in a deeply supportive relationship with her friend Mary Wales. Wales, with whom she moved in after her parents' death, provided Freeman with the emotional support and material convenience required to produce fiction. In Wales's house, Freeman found a friend who "took care of all the daily tasks that might have interfered with [her] productivity, protected her from intrusion, provided her with a work space of her own and steady emotional support" (Glasser, *Closet* 96). After marriage, beset by her husband's alcoholism, troubled by the demands of her marital life, and transplanted from New England, the setting of her most renowned stories, to New Jersey, Freeman published work of decidedly low quality, especially in comparison with her previous publications (Westbrook 110). In the five short stories studied in this section, Freeman's fictional counterpart would be Minnie Wright, whose marriage progressively silences her voice and kills her artistic drives.

If we are to judge from the lives of the women writers studied in this dissertation, motherhood proved even more complicated for female authors than having a successful marriage or love relationship. Only Chopin seems to have found little contradiction in combining the roles of mother and writer. Her daughter Lélia stressed Chopin's devotion to her family and revealed that the author of *The Awakening* enjoyed writing in the living-room, surrounded by her children, with whom she had a very intimate relationship (Toth, *Unveiling* 109).

For most nineteenth-century women writers, on the contrary, combining motherhood and artistic life proved problematic. In *Conflicting Stories*, Elizabeth Ammons holds that, although the conflict between both roles assailed women writers throughout the 1800s, the solutions they envisaged varied. According to Ammons, around the middle of the century female authors "decided against being artists. They stayed within women's realm producing writing—but not 'art'—while they simultaneously raised families and ministered to husbands." At the turn into the twentieth century, however, their literary successors made the opposite choice, putting career interests before motherhood (9).

Fisher's correspondence demonstrates that even in the twentieth century it was complicated for a woman to negotiate a safe middle ground between motherhood and authorship. After giving birth to her son, she experienced first-hand the lack of understanding the publishing industry showed towards specifically female issues. In 1913 she "complained to her agent about the insensitivity of a demanding editor: 'I feel like writing Mr. Robinson an impassionate inquiry as to whether he has ever lived in the house with a new baby and tried to do any work!'" (Ehrhardt 13). Fisher would

repeatedly encounter insensitivity on the part of male literary agents and publishers alike every time she had to assume her womanly responsibilities and delays (or in the worst of cases no work at all) followed. Despite these inconveniences, Fisher could be considered a privileged woman writer. Her earnings allowed her to hire domestic help and her husband gave up his literary ambitions to become a homemaker so that Dorothy, the more successful writer of the two, could devote herself to the pen. Fisher's letters testify that she acknowledged her privileged situation and understood that "[w]ithout these reprieves from childrearing responsibilities [. . .] her career might not have flourished as it did" (Ehrhardt 13).

Out of the five fictional women artists depicted in this section, only two are motherly figures. In Chopin's short story, Elizabeth Stock, who has no children of her own, acts as surrogate mother to her nephew Danny by financing his education. "Gospel Quilt," on the other hand, presents a biological mother who struggles to combine what seem to be antagonistic forces: motherhood and authorship. Although the short story does not concentrate on portraying how Keziah's creativity is hindered or constantly interrupted by her motherly responsibilities, it does present an artist whose children constitute a threat to the completion of her text(ile). While Lavena, her oldest child, "wish[ed] it was burnt up," her youngest daughter ruins the quilt by "feeding" molasses to its Biblical creatures. Furthermore, the quilt is the main point of conflict and misunderstanding between mother and older daughter.

In summary, in this section I will explore the barriers that limited women's options when they attempted the pen and, particularly, the feelings of inadequacy and uneasiness they originated in those women who wished to produce literature. As this

group of short stories was published in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, the women artists they feature do not, like the scribbling women Hawthorne complained about around 1850, conceive writing as a mere source of income. On the contrary, by the time these short stories were published, an exclusively professional approach to literature had weakened, creating a series of female authors, “determined to invade the territory of high art traditionally posted in western culture as the exclusive property of privileged white men” (Ammons 5). As the shift from one conception of literature to the other was not immediately accomplished, several female *littérateurs* were influenced by both approaches to fiction and, therefore, assailed by conflicting impulses. One of such authors was Mary Wilkins Freeman.

One of her short stories, “An Honest Soul,” will be the first to be analyzed. This short story concentrates on the creative process itself, on how women produce works of art. By showing its protagonist struggling to create text(ile)s that would satisfy both its maker and those agencies who have some degree of authority or control over them, Freeman illustrates the anxiety that beset those female authors caught in between two traditions, between contradictory forces, or in a transitional period in between two eras that supported antithetical approaches to writing. Before moving from the process to the (finished) product—from quilting/writing to the text(ile) itself—“An Honest Soul” will be compared to Kate Chopin’s “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story,” which also depicts a female artist, in order to contrast Martha Patch’s fate with Elizabeth Stock’s.

I will then concentrate on Alice MacGowan’s “Gospel Quilt” and Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s “The Bedquilt,” which rather than focusing on the making of text(ile)s tackle the text(ile)s themselves, even though from different perspectives. While “The

Bedquilt” presents Aunt Mehetabel’s quilt as a masterpiece and glorifies those who, given the right preconditions, manage to create a unique work of art, “Gospel Quilt” portrays the failure awaiting those who dare to defy convention by creating a text that not only fails to accommodate to a female tradition but also openly subverts a male-sanctioned view of the world. Finally, although Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” details the peculiar conditions in which Minnie Wright creates her quilt, the essential element in the short story is not the text’s production but its reception. Regardless of whether the emphasis is placed on the product itself, on its creation or on its reception, all five short stories highlight the fact that quilts, which in their cloth version had been used as women’s texts for a long period of time, could also function as metaphors for the written text in their fictional variant.

Through Martha Patch’s character in “An Honest Soul” (1885), Freeman expounds the conflicting forces women had to struggle against when they tried to create a text(ile). Described as the “defiant” daughter of a man who “came of a hard-working, honest race, whose pride it had been to keep out of debt,” elderly Martha Patch is portrayed surrounded by creative travails, striving to complete two different quilting orders for her neighbors, “Mis’ Bennet” and “Mis’ Bliss” (233). As she quilts, the pieces those two ladies had provided her get confused in her mind, and in the midst of that confusion, she creates two quilts that combine the pieces she had been handed in to quilt separately. Martha Patch makes this same mistake not once but twice. The first time she “put[s] Mis’ Bliss’s caliker with the leetle pink roses on’t in Mis’ Bennet’s quilt” and the second she incorporates Mrs. Bennet’s calico into Mrs. Bliss’s quilt (236). Aware of her mistakes, Martha sets to make her neighbors’ bedcovers for a third time. By the time she

finally finishes, more than a fortnight later, Martha, exhausted and ill-nourished, faints on her kitchen's floor, where she helplessly lies until she is finally rescued by her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Peters. By the end of the short story, after having spent more than a month channeling her creative impulses toward the making of the two quilts, Martha declares herself "kinder sick of bed-quilts somehow" (242).

In many senses "An Honest Soul" is a prototypical Freeman short story, one that includes most of the traits that led to define her as a recorder of female life in nineteenth-century New England and, therefore, the characteristics that made her a successful woman writer in the late 1800s and that subsequently relegated her to literary oblivion for most of the twentieth century. Martha's values—thrift, honesty, temperance, piety—reflect the Puritan upbringing Freeman herself received. In particular, the Patches' efforts to stay debt-free, their obsession with money, and their insistence on keeping their poverty from neighborly scrutiny all indicate the influence of "[t]he Calvinists from whom Freeman sprang[, who] believed that earthly success signaled election while poverty implied rejection by God." As a consequence, "Freeman's characters are invariably humiliated by their poverty and try their best to conceal it" (Blum 75). Martha Patch is one such character.

Martha's material dearth not only represents the bequeathal of an improvident father but also the direct consequence of her spinsterhood, which denies her a male link with the economic world. In fact, Martha Patch perfectly embodies the poor rural old maid character that Freeman explored throughout her career. As Kate Gardner has aptly noted, these characters neither qualify as stereotypical heroic figures nor possess distinctly male strengths (money, physical power) or female resources (youth, beauty,

male protection) (449). As a consequence, they deviate from the idealized definition of femininity propounded by the cult of True Womanhood, especially in that their spinsterhood allows them to maintain their independence, which openly clashes with the submissiveness expected from a True Woman (Mann 43-44). However, despite depicting characters that do not fit within the prevailing definition of womanhood, Freeman refuses to portray old maids as failed individuals.

Like Martha Patch, whom the narrator characterizes as “a little defiant old figure,” many of Freeman’s old women are defined by their “[i]ndependence, resoluteness, and even downright stubbornness” (Voss 94). In fact, Freeman’s fiction challenges disparaging definitions of spinsterhood that equated an old maid with “an unattractive, malicious, prudish, petty, narrow, simpering, drab, gossipy, barren, shallow, trouble-making, envious, withered, characterless, bossy, snooty, selfish, unsuccessful and impoverished woman” (Koppelman 3). Instead of belittling her elderly women, Freeman validates their experiences by presenting a quasimatriarchal New England resulting from the many casualties of the Civil War and the migration of males to the unsettled West where female culture plays a central role.

Many of these female characters disregard male authority especially if it threatens their freedom, usually symbolized in the ability to maintain the ownership of a home, the control of a place of their own free from male interference. As Susan Mann asserts in “A House of One’s Own: The Subversion of ‘True Womanhood’ in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s Short Fiction,” “Freeman’s protagonists understand that a house of one’s own is a prerequisite for personal freedom” (47). They also understand that the rejection of marriage, which privileges male-female relationships, allows them to concentrate on

female-female unions and explore their creative self. Unmarried women who, like Martha Patch, live independently in their own house are allowed to engage in “selfish” but satisfying creative work, while married women are expected to devote their energies to procreation and the care of others.

This emphasis on an almost exclusively feminine world led to the critical silence Mary Wilkins Freeman’s oeuvre suffered from the 1920s, after the events surrounding World War I led to privilege male values in American literature, until it was partially recovered by the feminist movement in the late twentieth century:

Freeman’s critical acceptance [. . .] altered considerably in her own lifetime due in large part to the changing attitudes of her generation toward her female subject matter. The resurgence of interest in this author in our own generation, moreover, indicates a further shift in our expectations of and attitude towards such subject matter in literature: we are now, it seems, reacting against the anti-feminism which so dominated the first half of this century. Indeed, only in the last twenty years or so has the woman’s movement succeeded in validating the importance and efficacy of many facets of women’s lives heretofore considered immaterial or trivial in comparison with those of men. (Reichardt, “Criticism” 74)

Critics like Kate Gardner have pointed out that Freeman’s entire oeuvre could hardly qualify as feminist because her heroines, far from being interested in the feminist agenda of their times—particularly in the struggle for enfranchisement—“are not devoted to a cause, save that of self-preservation” (467). In addition to that, women’s magazines published plenty of formulaic children’s and holiday stories that Freeman composed with no other aim than that of improving her financial situation. However, feminists have

marginalized this commercial production, avoiding references to it in their analyses of Freeman's fiction, so as to depict this writer as "an early feminist author who shunned sentimentalism in favor of realistic portrayals of women who either are constrained by their male-dominated society or who successfully battle against its strictures" (Johanningsmeier 175). Feminists have, therefore, concentrated on Freeman's depiction of intimate relationships between sisters, mothers and daughters, or friends, as well as on her portrayal of independent women like Martha Patch. It is this perspective that has led outstanding feminists like Elaine Showalter to critique "An Honest Soul."

In "Piecing and Writing" Showalter masterfully reads Martha's failed attempts to complete the two quilts without mixing Mrs. Bennett's and Mrs. Bliss's scraps as the reification of the struggle between "two traditions of quilting and women's writing." According to her, while the pieces belonging to Mrs. Bennett represent "the Austen heritage of the women's novel," Mrs. Bliss's scraps stand for "women's culture and literary jouissance" (239). Showalter's conclusions are derived from the last names of the two neighbors for whom Martha Patch is quilting. Mrs. Bennett's family name, popularized by Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, evokes quality women's fiction which, in addition to including the romantic plot, explores social and legal discriminatory practices that deny females the same rights as men. Mrs. Bliss's, on the contrary, refers to a different type of women's literature, with lower quality standards and more modest in its goals—a literature that aims at entertaining its readers rather than provoking deep intellectual reflections.

Besides interpreting "An Honest Soul" as a fictional piece that reflects the conflict between two different traditions of women's writing, it is possible to analyze this short

story as a staging of a more personal conflict affecting every woman writer. By adding Martha Patch to the Bennett-Bliss dichotomy the story would lend itself to an alternative reading in which the relationship between the three women would stand for that tying author to editor and audience. In fact, both Freeman's biographer Leah Glasser and Shirley Marchalonis, one of her most outstanding critics, have noted the impact of these opposing forces on her writing, although neither of them in an analysis of "An Honest Soul." In *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*, Marchalonis notes that because Freeman was "[w]holly dependent on the income from her writing, she tried to balance what the critics and the public seemed to want with what she wanted to write" (1). Glasser's comments in Freeman's biography *In a Closet Hidden* reiterate Marchalonis' idea. According to Glasser, Freeman's "letters continually reveal both a willingness to compromise her standards for her public, as defined by her publisher, and a commitment to her own sense of 'truth'" (39).

In this alternative reading Mrs. Bennett represents the editorial figure, the person who most directly controls the production of the text and the individual whose indications the artist foremost needs to consider when writing. In fact, the first censor of Martha's art is embodied in Mrs. Bennett's character. When Martha initially incorporates Mrs. Bliss's pink floral calico in Mrs. Bennett's quilts, she does not go to Mrs. Bliss's to search for help in solving her predicament. As Mrs. Bliss represents a relatively elusive force called audience, Martha cannot have direct access to her. However, when the elderly woman fails to separate her neighbors' scraps for the second time, now adding Mrs. Bennett's pieces to Mrs. Bliss's quilt, she does visit Mrs. Bennett so as to reconfirm that she has created a flawed text(ile). Once her work is disapproved of, Martha restarts her quilts in

accordance with Mrs. Bennett's guidelines (237). Finally, in keeping with her editorial responsibilities, Mrs. Bennett is in charge of setting deadlines for Martha, even though she provides the artist with an ample temporal margin of almost a year (237).

Mrs. Bliss, on the other hand, stands for a female audience that resorts to literature as a source of entertainment, bliss, and joy. In contrast with the editor Mrs. Bennett, Mrs. Bliss does not have a direct impact on the creative process. According to Martha, even if the resulting text does not cater to her taste, Mrs. Bliss "won't say nothin', and she'll pay me, but she'll fell it inside" (236). In other words, her influence is not direct but indirect; she represents an apparently silent reading public who could ultimately boycott or dismiss forthcoming texts by a writer unable to accommodate her audience's preferences. Despite the pressure this situation implies for the artist immersed in the creative process, a comparison between the "proper handsome" scraps Martha Patch receives from Mrs. Bliss and Mrs. Bennett's "good" but "old" pieces which "ain't quite ekal to Mis' Bliss's" may reveal a preference for audience's demands over editorial constraints.

Caught in between Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Bliss, Martha Patch symbolizes the artist who suffers from the predicament of trying to satisfy the demands of her editors and reading public while maintaining her artistic integrity. This conflict, which in "An Honest Soul" is incarnated in Martha, haunted Freeman herself throughout her career. Critics and biographers alike have emphasized Freeman's intimate relationship with *Harper's Bazaar* editor Mary Louise Booth, with whom she corresponded for decades. However, in "'Friend of My Heart': Women as Friends and Rivals in the Short Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman," Mary Reichardt argues that Freeman shows her dependence on Booth,

who acted more as a mother and an advisor than as an equal friend. According to her, Freeman's letters to Booth and other women editors and writers "suggest that despite her steadily increasing popularity and success over the years, Freeman never completely felt these women's equal. Rather, in many ways these women too apparently played a more maternal than friendly role in Freeman's adult life" (57). This dependency on her editors' advice led Reichardt to assert that Freeman showed "willingness early in her career to revise her stories according to her editor's suggestions" (*Freeman* 118). Like Freeman, Martha also redoes her text(ile)s according to Mrs. Bennett's indications.

On the other hand, both Freeman the author and Martha the character insisted on pleasing Mrs. Bliss, their audience. In a letter to Fred Lewis Pattee quoted by Virginia Blum, Freeman explained the impact the reading public had on her creative process. "I want," she wrote, "more symbolism, more mysticism. I left that out, because it struck me people did not want it, and I was forced to consider selling qualities" (78). Just like Freeman intuitively perceived what her audience demanded, Martha is also keenly aware of Mrs. Bliss's wishes. Failing to add the pink floral calico to Mrs. Bliss's quilt, Martha says, "won't be doin' the squar' thing by her" (236). This interest in pleasing both one's literary editor and one's public results from the artist's dependence on revenues from her work. In fact, both Martha and Freeman were obsessed about money.

Martha's precarious financial situation leads her to envisioning her creative work as a source of income. In the initial paragraph of the story, right after surveying the bags with Mrs. Bliss's and Mrs. Bennett's pieces, Martha notes that she will "get a dollar for both of them quilts, an' thar'll be two dollars. I've got a dollar an' sixty-three cents on hand now, an' thar's plenty of meal an' merlasses, an' some salt fish an' pertaters in the

house” (233). As the story progresses, Martha continues to allude to her prospective earnings in exact amounts. Likewise, Freeman is often described by her critics as a writer beset by the image of her early poverty and dominated by the compulsive desire to reach a wide audience that would initially alleviate her economic hardships and would later help her maintain her economic status.

Freeman’s youth consisted mainly of a distressing succession of personal and financial losses. By the time her sister Anna died in 1876 at age seventeen, the family economy had deteriorated. A year later, her father’s failed enterprises, first as a carpenter and then as a general store manager, forced the Wilkinses to move into the household of Reverend Thomas Pickman Tyler, where her mother became a housekeeper (Reichardt, *Reader* ix). In his biography of Freeman, Perry Westbrook notes that “[m]any of Freeman’s fictional characters regarded such subservience as the ultimate disgrace that could befall them” (10). The desire to avoid impending poverty led both Freeman and Martha to accept commissioned offers. Just as Martha agrees to quilt for Mrs. Bliss and Mrs. Bennett, Freeman, “[a]lways a practical woman, [. . .] expressed few qualms about such writing on demand, regarding it as her bread and butter” (Reichardt, *Reader* xii-xiii). As a consequence, Freeman produced commercial fictional pieces featuring unrealistic situations and unconvincing characters which, nevertheless, met magazine requirements. Furthermore, both Freeman and Martha Patch tried to improve their economic situation by testing their abilities in different genres. While Freeman wrote poetry, novels, holiday stories, children’s tales, and short stories intended for an adult readership, Martha “did odd housewifely jobs for the neighbors, wove rag-carpets, pieced bed-quilts, braided rugs, etc., and [thus] contrived to supply all her simple wants” (234).

However, neither author nor character could be satisfied with regarding their textual/textile production as a mere source of income. Virginia Blum posits that “the issue of debasing her art for mercenary considerations plagued her [Freeman] throughout her career” (72). Mary Reichardt, for her part, writes that “[a]bove all, Freeman emphasized the importance of truth to the self, or artistic integrity” (*Freeman* 16). It is that artistic self-respect that results in Martha’s mixing of her neighbors’ scraps. Despite her emphasis on completing her orders as commissioned, Martha subconsciously makes her own text, a text that despite satisfying neither her editor nor her audience does please herself as an artist. The fact that, before yielding to pressures which should ideally be external to the creative process, Martha creates her own text twice is illustrative of the inner conflicts haunting artists who, like Freeman, were trapped between an era in which female writing was conceived as a professional money-making career and another one which emphasized literary respectability over revenues. Although Martha insists on enjoying the benefits of producing a successful work of art, she is also deeply interested in creating an artistically satisfying product.

In addition to utilizing Martha’s creative troubles as the epitome of the late nineteenth-century female artist’s conflicts between pleasing audiences but devaluing one’s art for money, satisfying editors’ requirements, and producing artistically valuable fiction, “An Honest Soul” also explores women writers’ marginalization through Martha’s lack of a front window. In “Piecing and Writing” Showalter argues that the old lady suffers a “claustrophobic separation from other sources of vision [which] is signified by her windowless house” (239). Although the Patch house, “an infinitesimal affair” which “stood far enough back from the road for a pretentious mansion,” does convey a

distressing feeling of claustrophobia, Martha is not absolutely disconnected from external influences (233). In fact, her house is not “windowless” but a strange construction with “one curious feature about it—not a door nor window was there *in front*, only a blank, unbroken wall” (233; emphasis added). It does, however, have a back window which “did not have a very pleasant outlook” (234). As Martha “sat down by th[at] window in a low wooden rocking-chair to sew,” she observed the Mosely children returning from school, the progress of the grass, the birds making nests, Mr. Peters’ cows, and, as Martha herself says, “that’s about all I do see—never git a sight of the folks goin’ to meetin’ nor nothin’” (234-35). This clear-cut differentiation between the missing front window and the existing back one illustrates Martha’s connection to marginal literary influences.

Instead of having access to front, mainstream sources of vision, Martha is relegated to back, marginal ones. As a spinster and a female author who writes for women (Mrs. Bliss and Mrs. Bennett), from a female perspective, and using women’s materials (scraps), Martha lacks a connecting link with the relevant male outside world and its values. The physical separation from that world which her lack of a front window implies disqualifies her for writing about it and relegates her to a writing tradition that concentrates on the apparently superficial, the birds, cows, or green grass which could function as backgrounds to deeper situations; the domestic; or the socially marginal (children, women). A bequest from her father Simeon Patch, Martha’s house and its blank front wall symbolize a patriarchal legacy of female isolation, a reminder of how women are prohibited from participating in the literary realm as full members.

By the end of the story Martha does get a front window, which in “An Honest Soul” represents much more than the possibility of expanding the self to include the

Other. It stands not only for the possibility of being affected by the mainstream, the male Other, but also for the option of having an influential window or showcase for one's own literary tradition. The fact that Martha will continue to create women's text(ile)s by her new front window indicates that the window stands for a vindication or valuation of women's tradition and not for an attempt to imitate men's. Furthermore, Martha's "hope [that the Mosely children] won't ever hev to piece quilts fur a livin', without any front winder to set to" (237) and the fact that the new window "kinder makes me feel younger" (242) suggest that the window may also represent the hope that a new generation of women writers may enjoy new options and face fewer blank walls, fewer obstacles when attempting the pen.

For Martha Patch, these obstacles as well as the demands Mrs. Bliss and Mrs. Bennett impose on her do not necessarily constitute insurmountable barriers but they do complicate her creative process, leading her to making a total of three sets of quilts and to virtual starvation. The two first sets Martha finishes with "a sense of virtuous triumph" represent the unconditioned work of art that subconsciously emerges from the author's creative impulses (236). The third and final set, on the other hand, represents the need to restrain artistic creativity in order to subordinate it to forces which, in an ideal situation, should be external to the artistic production. It epitomizes a text that pleases both editor and audience but fails to satisfy entirely the requirements of the author herself. Although after receiving their text(ile)s both Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Bliss "were profuse in praises," Martha had to debase her art and compromise her artistic integrity in order to satisfy the two ladies and, as a consequence, she is not nourished by the creative process (241). By the time she finishes her neighbors' quilts, her pantry is utterly empty. Such lack of

victuals indicates the absence of nurturing qualities in an art that is obsequious toward elements that should be alien to its production. The exhaustion Martha felt once she completed her order, when “she woke up so faint and dizzy that she hardly knew herself” and she “crawled out into the kitchen, and sank down on the floor” where “[s]he could not move another step,” may point to the potential death of the mercenary artist, who was assailed by new definitions of literary excellence which privileged artistry over selling quantities (239). Yet Martha survives.

Elizabeth Stock, another defiant woman artist, fares much worse. The protagonist of Kate Chopin’s “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” (1898) has more in common with the prototypical defiant New England old maid character Freeman explored in her short fiction than with the Southern female characters through whom Chopin gained her initial literary reputation. In fact, Elizabeth describes herself as a spinster living in a tiny Missouri village not unlike small New England towns. “I’m,” she proudly states, “thirty-eight years old and unmarried, and not afraid or ashamed to say it. Up to a few months ago I have been postmistress of this village of Stonelift for six years” (175). Like the Martha Patches that flood Freeman’s fiction, Elizabeth lives very modestly and is skeptical about men—by the time she puts pen to paper she has been rejecting Vance Wallace for twenty years. These similarities between Elizabeth Stock and Freeman’s characters are not coincidental; Chopin’s critics have often pointed out that she held the so-called New England local color tradition in high esteem (Leder, “Letter” 162). In fact, scholars have listed Freeman—as well as Walt Whitman and Sarah Orne Jewett—among Chopin’s main American influences (Papke 24-25; Koloski 6; Ewell, “Kate Chopin” 160).

Furthermore, as both Freeman and Chopin published their works at roughly the same time, both could be considered transitional writers trapped in a dilemma between approaching literature as a business or as a vocation. However, the academic community seems to be divided as to whether Chopin qualifies as a transitional figure. On the one hand, critics such as Bernard Koloski argue that the author of *The Awakening* published as many aesthetically satisfying short stories as works which show “the Chopin who was eager to please, eager to build a career for herself” (79). These scholars insist that, even though she tried to develop her own style and subject matter, Chopin published for money. According to Janet Beer, “Kate Chopin wrote to earn a living; she kept records of submissions, transactions and monies earned; her account book details all payments received for published writing” (6). On the other hand, a number of critics, including her biographer Emily Toth, maintain not only that Chopin did not live on her literary earnings but also that she aspired to artistry, despite playing the role of the spontaneous writer who barely revised her work (xxi, 164-67). In “Kate Chopin’s Women Writers and the Anxiety of Ambition,” Kathleen J. Weatherford, who endorses Toth’s position, argues that Chopin reified her detachment from the popular feminine tradition through stories such as “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story,” which, in her view, feature unpromising women writers (61).

Partially because of its similarities with Freeman’s fictional world, “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” constitutes an atypical Chopin piece, which would neither meet the expectations of nineteenth-century readers, accustomed to her Southern tales, nor those of twentieth-century ones, who, privileging *The Awakening* over the rest of her work, tend

to regard her as a novelist.³⁶ “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” belongs to a late period in Chopin’s life when she had “developed as a writer” and “found herself testing the limits of her publishers and her audience” (Cutter 18). The piece was never published during its author’s lifetime because, in Toth’s view, “[n]o one wanted to publish such a somber story” (203). It was intended as a part of a collection of short stories to be entitled *A Vocation and a Voice*, which, for several reasons, did not come out as a separate volume until 1991. Bernard Koloski has listed among those reasons its failure to depict the harmony of her previous collections and its anticipation of the gloomy atmosphere of *The Awakening* (54).

In addition to its thematic unconventionality, “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” is also technically divergent from most of Chopin’s short fiction in its inclusion of a framing device and first-person narrator. Before Elizabeth is allowed to explain “how I lost my position, mostly through my own negligence,” a condescending frame narrator sets the scene, describing Elizabeth as a spinster “much given over to scribbling” who wrote “in bad prose and impossible verse” (274-75). This frame narrator explains in a matter-of-fact tone how s/he “discovered but the following pages which bore any semblance to a connected or consecutive narration” in “the whole conglomerate mass” of

³⁶ Among her contemporaries Chopin forged her reputation as a writer of short stories. In fact, her novels did not enjoy the same popular or critical success as her short fiction. The first, *At Fault* (1890), was published at her own expense and virtually ignored by critics (Papke 23). The second, *Young Dr. Goose*, was destroyed after failed attempts to have it published (Beer 1). *The Awakening*, her third and final novel, became “a novel with an oddly scarlet reputation,” praised by Chopin’s female contemporaries but attacked by male reviewers (Toth xix). Since editors and reviewers were overwhelmingly male, rejection of *The Awakening* prevailed. In fact, as late as 1937 Chopin was defined as “incomparably the greatest American short story writer of her sex” in articles that, while mentioning the rest of her production, ignored *The Awakening* (Reilly 74). For some this rejection of her third novel affected both Chopin’s psychological well-being and written work very negatively. Papke has noted that “[i]t is literary legend that critical and popular response to *The Awakening* killed her” (26). Others, like Heather Thomas in “What Are the Prospects for the Book?: Rewriting a Woman’s Life,” have devoted their energies to proving that Chopin’s decreasing production after the publication of *The Awakening* responded to physical illness rather than to emotional factors.

writing Elizabeth left on her desk at her death, thus functioning as an editorial figure (274). Those pages presumably constitute Elizabeth's "one story." Heather Thomas alludes to this frame narrator as a woman, perhaps "herself a successful literary woman" who finds in the title character's story nothing but the "creative confinement, paltry self-esteem, and general indigence of would-be scribbling women" ("Chopin" 25). Other critics, on the contrary, have highlighted certain male characteristics in the frame narrator, whose gender is never clearly identified. Both Priscilla Leder and James Hutchinson have pointed out the frame narrator's obsession with objectivity. For Leder "[t]he note of objectivity suggests literary naturalism, with its *masculine* assumption of scientific authority, fascination with power, and occasional brutality" ("Letter" 170; emphasis added). Hutchinson, for his part, posits that the frame narrator "feigns objectivity but is actually patronizing and judgmental" (72). Finally, Nancy Walker associates Elizabeth's description as a spinster "much given over to scribbling" with the bigoted comment Hawthorne had made about women writers half a century earlier (224).

This interpretation of the frame narrator as a male agency seems appropriate not only because of the masculine characteristics critics have pointed out but also because the world of "letters" "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" depicts is defined in male terms, controlled and dominated by men. With the possible exception of the Brightman women, whose role is irrelevant for the development of the plot, Elizabeth is, as Hutchinson has aptly noted, "the only woman [. . .] in a tale whose other characters are all sons, nephews, fathers, and uncles" (71). In such male dominance rests the key of the entire short story, which is not, as Elizabeth writes, a simple account of her own role in losing her position as postmistress of Stonelift, but a radical piece of fiction which, underneath its apparently

innocuous surface, explores the patriarchal strategies that have traditionally excluded women from the world of language and literature. It clearly enunciates that the “mail” world in which Elizabeth tries to survive is “male.”

Elizabeth Stock is Chopin’s only female writer (Leder, “Letter” 159). She is also the only female character featured in this dissertation who creates written texts rather than quilted ones. Yet, her writing procedure consists in “turning and twisting things in my mind just like I often saw old ladies twisting quilt patches around to compose a design” (275). The entire short story revolves around this dichotomy between the male world of letters Elizabeth attempts to enter and the female world of quilts she belongs to. Since her writing techniques and the values she transmits through her texts are influenced by her womanhood, she remains a marginal character in a realm which, controlled by men, is defined in male terms.

Among the few critics that have interpreted Elizabeth in absolutely negative terms, Heather Thomas probably painted the most dismal portrayal. Her article “Kate Chopin’s Scribbling Women and the American Literary Marketplace” characterizes Elizabeth as the perfect embodiment of “the failed literary woman who questions her talent, loses her reputation and health, and dies alone in ‘unbroken silence’” (30). “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story,” Thomas argues further, not only represents one of the few short stories in which “Chopin specifically ridiculed women writers” but also a piece of fiction in which she depicted her character as a stereotypical woman author—irrational, impulsive, concerned about trivial matters—in order to show her detachment from domestic literature writers (19). In contrast, Barbara Ewell’s outlook on Elizabeth Stock is extremely positive. In addition to defining her as “a proud, independent woman of

responsibility,” Ewell lists Elizabeth as “one of Chopin’s strongest, most self-possessed females” (*Kate Chopin* 167). Finally, a number of other scholars have characterized Elizabeth as a complex individual hidden underneath the mask of the prototypical spinster who aspires to authorship.

James Hutchinson, for instance, claims that although Chopin “offers the traditional cultural assumptions about women that she knew her audience would expect,” such as “the woman as melodramatic and irrational,” she creates a character that “is self-effacing to a such a point that we see through this mask and realize that she is parodying the idea of the inept, unrealistically self-sacrificing, and ultimately helpless female by casting herself in that role” (73). Martha Cutter, for her part, argues that Elizabeth Stock’s personality is the result of Chopin’s maturity as a writer and, more directly, of this author’s awareness that resistant voices who try to ignore or challenge patriarchy directly are easily repressed and eradicated by patriarchal discourse. According to her, “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” is a clear example of the use of a “voice covert,” which Cutter defines as “a voice that attempts to undermine patriarchal discourse through mimicry and through hollowing out the patriarchy from *within* its own structures” in order to enter into a dialogue that would ultimately demonstrate that patriarchal categories are not absolute (17).

Since “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” portrays a character trapped between conflicting values, between two different approaches to writing, and, above all, between a male world of letters and a female world of quilts, Elizabeth can only be analyzed as a complex individual who neither stands for the reification of independence nor for absolute selflessness. In fact, the short story perfectly illustrates the dilemmas that beset

the woman writer who tries to disconnect herself from an American female literary tradition that subordinates artistry to financial revenues at the same time that she attempts to think back through her literary mothers. It ultimately demonstrates that writing and reading are gendered activities from which men purposely exclude women. In fact, in “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” Chopin charges patriarchal society with using its power over the world of “letters” to marginalize females in order to allow males to retain their privileged position.

Examples of male dominance over writing and reading abound. First, Elizabeth’s access to writing is hindered from its earliest stages. While she is initially struggling with plots—“the trouble,” she says, “was with plots”—in order to compose a story, she is advised to “stick to your dress making” by a paternalistic figure called Uncle Williams (274). His comments illustrate that the needle-pen dichotomy Anne Bradstreet had denounced in her poetry two centuries earlier remained valid at the end of the nineteenth-century. Moreover, it is a certain Mr. Brightman who conspires with another male, Mr. Collins, to remove Elizabeth from her position as postmistress. Having read a telegram Mr. Collins addressed to Mr. Brightman in order to notify him of a meeting to be held in St. Louis the following day, Elizabeth endangers her life in the midst of an icy downpour so as to deliver the message. Ironically, Brightman and his partners hold the meeting to deprive Elizabeth of her position, which is offered to “a young man named Collins, [. . .] the son of some wealthy, influential St. Louis man; a kind of delicate, poetical-natured young fellow that can’t get along in business, and they used their influence to get him the position when it was vacant” (279). This act of power is but a minor mirror image of the patriarchal control exercised on a widespread scale at state level.

In fact, when Elizabeth gets her dismissal letter from the federal government and is unable to interpret it, she is told that “Uncle Sam don’t make mistakes” (279). The use of this colloquial denomination for the U.S. government emphasizes the fact that women are subject to an invisible and relatively elusive patriarchal agency that, nevertheless, controls their destinies and their ability to function in society as full individuals. Consequently, Elizabeth suffers “from patriarchal blindness and indifference to a woman’s need for a fulfilling identity” (Hutchinson 71). Furthermore, Elizabeth herself collaborates in preserving the world of letters as a male realm by using her income to finance her nephew Danny’s formal education (280).

Elizabeth Stock’s main problem results from the fact that her association with the female world ill-equips her to survive in the male-dominated literary sphere. Her values contradict male dominance, individualism, indifference to human suffering, and even hypocrisy—Mr. Brightman, who profusely thanks Elizabeth for delivering the telegram, will later use her act of kindness against her. On the contrary, Elizabeth’s credo is based on a peculiar amalgamation of Christian ideals such as self-sacrifice, love, or compassion, and characteristics which are normally identified as feminine—connection, loyalty to the members of one’s community, selflessness—and linked to quilts. The fact that she associates her own writing with quilting illustrates her marginal position in the prevailing male literary realm; such a connection implies “all[ying] her writing not with masculine novelty and heroism, but with the repetitive, non-linear structures of piecing and quilting,” and, therefore, positioning one’s literary production outside the prevailing definitions of quality fiction (Cutter 30). Moreover, a deep association between quilting and writing may also render one’s text illegible to males.

Even though the frame narrator decides to preserve the pages he reproduces for being the only ones “which bore any semblance to a connected or consecutive narration,” Elizabeth’s story is clearly non-linear (274). Its fragmentation emerges as a consequence of the temporal changes that her frequent digressions originate. Elizabeth moves from the present she utilizes to describe herself as a thirty-eight-year-old spinster to past events which help elucidate the reasons that ultimately led to her dismissal as well as to even earlier situations which deal with her childhood dreams. Furthermore, in addition to being temporally fragmented, Elizabeth’s narrative is thematically broken as well. She recounts a number of incidents—her problems creating suitable plots, her rejection of Vance Wallace, her nephew’s qualifications, etc.—which are not directly related to her stated purpose of “tell[ing] how [she] lost [her] position” (275).

This fragmentation surfaces as a direct result of Elizabeth’s quilt-like approach to writing. The non-linear, fragmented story she produces is a consequence of “turning and twisting things in my mind just like I often saw old ladies twisting quilt patches around to compose a design” (275). In fact, I would argue that the “*scraps* and bits of writing” the frame narrator discovers among “the whole conglomerate mass” Elizabeth left at her death represent the different blocks of the narrative quilt she composed after losing her position as postmistress, the “stock” of stories produced by Elizabeth but neglected by the frame narrator (274; emphasis added). Taking into account that, as I tried to demonstrate in chapter two, quilts’ radical messages were often ignored because men did not perceive quilts as texts, if we assume the frame narrator to be the embodiment of the patriarchal gaze, we could find an explanation for both the erasure of Elizabeth’s literary scraps as well as for the publication of her “one story.” In this sense, while the missing scraps

would not have been considered texts and would have therefore been ignored, the existing narrative would have escaped censorship by being superficially read as Elizabeth's account of her dismissal and not as the radical piece of fiction it is, as a reification of how patriarchal society tries to silence women's discourse. In both cases, the editorial figure demonstrates a male inability to read women's texts properly.

Elizabeth's insistence on approaching the male realm of letters from a female perspective results in her troubled relationship with language. As the local postmistress, Elizabeth is seemingly allowed into the sphere of letters. However, her access to those letters is restricted to their cover, to the envelope; she is forbidden access to their content, to the letter itself. Once she commits the subversive act of acceding or reading that content, she is expelled from the post office, the paradise of letters, and punished with suffering and ultimate death in what seems to be a late-nineteenth-century revision of Eve's biblical attempt to acquire knowledge and her subsequent sentencing to childbearing pain, mortality, and expulsion from Christian Paradise. This revision is further suggested by Elizabeth's comments associating the yearning for knowledge with female "human nature." "I leave it to any one—to any woman especially," she writes, "if it ain't human nature in a little place where everybody knows every one else, for the postmistress to glance at a postal card once in a while. She could hardly help it" (275). This association between Elizabeth and Eve was suggested by Martha Cutter, who argued that Elizabeth may be trying to "tell the tale of an American Eve—the tale of a woman who tastes of forbidden knowledge, forbidden discourse, and thereby loses a privileged status" (29-30).

In spite of approaching texts surreptitiously, Elizabeth questions her own reading skills, which sometimes prove ineffectual to decipher a patriarchal discourse which she considers unintelligible. For instance, when she receives the official letter firing her from her position, she hands the document to Vance Wallace and “made him read it and [. . .] asked him what he made out it meant” because she is unable to comprehend its full implications (278). Elizabeth also distrusts her writing abilities because, even though writing is a childhood ambition of hers, “whenever [she] wanted to write a story [she] never could think of a plot” (274). As a woman, her trouble with plots is two-fold; on the one hand, she is discouraged by a patriarchal figure named Uncle William from writing about the everyday and about what she, as a woman, knows best. On the other hand, she is unable to create a masculine story of adventure and violence. “I tried,” she says, “to think of a railroad story with a wreck, but couldn’t. No more could I make a tale out of a murder, or money getting stolen, or even mistaken identity; for the story had to be original, entertaining, full of action and Goodness knows what all” (275). Once her dismissal frees her from patriarchal control, from the world of letters, she searches within herself and creates a quilt-like female story which emphasizes communal values while offering a radical message cloaked in apparent harmlessness.

A comparison between “An Honest Soul” and “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” reveals that both Freeman and Chopin were interested in depicting the barriers women had to face when immersed in the creative process. There are, however, relevant differences between the two short stories: Freeman’s piece features a quilter who creates texts, Chopin’s a would-be writer who models her fiction according to quilt patterns; Freeman portrays a female world of the indoors, Chopin a male universe of post-offices

and outdoor spaces where women slip, stumble, and make little progress. In fact, Elizabeth Stock's climb to Nathan Brightman's house demonstrates that once women enter the male world of the outdoors, their protective domestic tools need to be redefined as male instruments and become ineffectual; while the slippery ascent forces Elizabeth to "use [her] umbrella half the time for a walking stick," she realizes that "the stitches had come out of [her] old rubbers that [she]'d sewed about a month before" (277). As a consequence, she becomes exposed to the severe weather conditions and gets fatally ill. Furthermore, Chopin punishes with death her protagonist's defiance and her insistence on dissolving the boundaries between the male and female worlds. Though sapped of energy, Martha Patch is allowed to survive. Elizabeth's and Martha's different endings may suggest that, despite changing attitudes towards women's writing at the turn into the twentieth century, it was only possible to explore female literary ambitions covertly, presenting a quilter rather than a writer. Regardless of the associations fictional female writers established between their own writing and quilting, their defiance in appropriating for themselves a male activity could not be tolerated.

Although from different perspectives, both "An Honest Soul" and "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" highlight the relationship between quilts and written texts. Both concentrate on the creative process and emphasize the obstacles women had to overcome when they attempted to create artistic pieces. Despite revolving around an unfinished quilt, Alice MacGowan's "Gospel Quilt" (1909) relegates the creative process to a secondary position so as to focus on the created product, a unique bedcover inspired by Bible stories. The short story narrates Keziah Mase's infatuation with her cloth "masterpiece," a bedcover of innovative design whose interpretation proves puzzling for

everyone but herself. The quilt, defined by the third person narrator as an utter artistic failure, not only shelters its maker from her own dull and prospectless life but also serves as the instrument through which she establishes or breaks relationships.

In clear contrast with Martha Patch, who excels as a quilter, Keziah Mase does not seem to possess any artistic talents. According to the narrator, Keziah lacks artistic instincts, in particular “that crude art sense which finds its expression in the mountain woman’s beautifully pieced quilt” (149). Her aesthetic blindness is reflected in the quilt she fashions, a bedcover which fails to fulfill the basic requirements of quilting excellence because it has been “[c]lumsily done, with no feeling whatever for form, proportion or color” (149). Any representative quilter, like fictional Aunt Jane herself, would agree that color combinations are crucial, not only because they reflect one’s emotional state and perspective on life but also because they are an intrinsic part of the aesthetic criteria that need to be maintained when quilting. As the title character claims in “Aunt Jane’s Album,” “[y]ou can spoil the prettiest quilt pieces that ever was made jest by puttin’ ’em together with the wrong color” (76). Furthermore, proportions represent a vital component of the entire quilting process. In fact, the relation between proportions and quilting is, as noted elsewhere, twofold; on the one hand, geometry was oftentimes taught through quilting and, on the other hand, some quilt patterns, “log cabins” in particular, constituted cloth representations of building techniques that emphasized a correct use of proportions.

As a result of these flaws, triggered by Keziah’s artistic insensibility, her quilt features structural deficiencies that ultimately render her text unintelligible to potential readers. The following excerpt testifies both to the extent of her artistic failure and the

deficient codification of her message, which, despite reaching its intended recipient, fails to be properly interpreted or decoded:

“What’s this here thing with birds a roostin’ on it?” inquired Iley Turrentine incautiously.

“That thar’s Jacob’s Ladder—don’t you see the postes, and the pieces a-goin’ acrost?” returned Keziah with dignity. “Lord, the trouble I had with them angels! I don’t wonder you took ’em for birds. I had a mind to turn ’em into birds, time and again. I done well on Noey’s dove—see, here’s it—an’ a ark—well, hit ain’t no more than a house with a boat un’neath.”

She pulled the folds about to get at the period of the deluge.

“Course I see now jest what it was intentioned for,” Iley hastened to say. “If I’d looked right good I could ’a’ made out the angels goin’ up an’ down. How”—she hesitated, but the resolve to retrieve herself overcame all timidity—“how natural them loaves an’ fishes does look!”

“That thar’s the ark,” explained Keziah, putting her finger on the supposed loaf. There was a moment of depressed silence; then, Keziah, willing to let bygones be bygones, observed:

“Over here is the whale and Joney.” These twin objects were what Iley had taken for the fishes. (150)

In addition to Keziah’s artistic shortcomings, the unreadability of her text also depends on its inherent personal nature. Unlike Martha Patch, whose quilts are partially determined by the scraps she receives from her neighbors Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Bliss, Keziah does not fashion an imposed text, but an extremely personal one. Her creativity is neither hindered by the tools others hand her nor by the need to accommodate to forces external to the creative process itself. Her quilt emerges from her innermost being, from her subconscious. In fact, the inspiration for her innovative text is supposed to have

surprised her in her sleep. According to the narrator, “there came to her a vision in the night, and she rose up and took bits of quilt pieces and began to fashion a new thing” (149). As a consequence of this close relationship between her art and her psyche, her text cannot be easily identified as belonging to any existing tradition and, therefore, it becomes a unique piece whose potential reading becomes problematic.

Moreover, her subconscious seems to have dictated a text that challenges not only male-imposed definitions of women as inherently evil individuals but also the entire version of western culture privileged by the patriarchal system. Despite being inspired by the Bible, Keziah’s quilt questions the validity and veracity of its parables, especially when they regard women, because their composition and interpretation have been carried out from a male perspective. Therefore, the construction of her quilt finds obstacles to overcome from its very inception. Like the Bible, Keziah begins populating her quilted universe with Adam and Eve, but, unlike the Bible, Keziah’s quilt neither portrays Eve as the personification of evil itself nor indicts her for human suffering. In fact, Keziah tries to make a recuperative reading of both Eve and women in general. Despite noting that “a body cain’t gainsay what’s in the Bible,” she has “always had [her] doubts about that thar apple fuss. Hit’s men that prints the good Book, and does about with it—not women; an’ I’ve always had a feelin’ that mo’ likely hit was Adam got into that apple business first” (152). This “feelin’” Keziah experiences points to a newly discovered proto-feminist consciousness.

In fact, Keziah’s attempt to challenge a disparaging reading of Eve suggests a covert intention of questioning and ultimately eradicating imposed constructs which define women according to a dichotomic system that describes them as either angels

(Maries) or demons (Eves). In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that the pervasive polarization of women between angels and monsters needs to be addressed and erased so that females can envision themselves as complex individuals and find a space for the self-definition that necessarily precedes self-assertion (17). In addition to that, Keziah also challenges the definition of women as men's negative Other through her references to Adam's supposed wickedness and her statements defending that females are "[n]ot nigh so prone [to sin] as them men" (151-52). Asseverations such as the aforementioned indicate the rejection of polarized comparisons between males and females that routinely assign characteristics considered negative to women.

As a consequence of the transformations Bible stories undergo as they become incorporated into Keziah's quilt, she ends up fashioning a new text which readers fail to recognize because, as she herself admits, "[m]ebbe it ain't adzactly the Bible" that she ends up quilting (152). The unreadability of the resulting text, which clearly underscores Keziah's artistic failings, should not obliterate its positive aspects. In addition to refuting prevailing readings of women as sinful and challenging a text western civilization considers sacred—not only in its religious meaning but also in the sense that it represents a quintessential reference book whose teachings are not supposed to be gainsaid—, Keziah's quilt helps her stay alive and survive psychologically. No other short story featured in this dissertation explores as poignantly as "Gospel Quilt" the role quilts had in preserving women's emotional well-being.

Keziah's gospel quilt is conceived as an open text whose meaning can be altered as one's experience increases and, therefore, it represents the comprehensiveness of an

ideal work of art that amounts to an artist's entire oeuvre. Keziah's intention to continue working on her text and her inability to "put it in the frames and quilt it," to frame and define the boundaries of her text, giving it final and stable form, point to a conception of the work of art as a process rather than a product (151). Keziah's quilt is inclusive rather than exclusive, open rather than closed. She is "skeered [she] might quilt it and bind it, and then all at oncet [sic] ricollect something jest *ort* to have been on" (151). This openness indirectly suggests that the ongoing text represents a vital project that helps its maker stay alive.

Furthermore, Keziah's gospel quilt provides her with psychological relief against the disappointments her womanhood triggers. Just like nineteenth-century American females used their quilts as a means of psychological survival when faced with the loneliness and isolation of frontier territories on the vast prairie or distressed by the threat, often materialized, of infant death, early-twentieth-century women such as Keziah Mase continued resorting to quilts in search of emotional healing. "Gospel Quilt" shows that women's culture, here embodied in the figure of the quilt, had the potential to cure the wounds inflicted by disappointing heterosexual relationships in a historical period which offered the average female few viable alternatives to getting involved in one such union. In fact, Keziah initially engages in the fashioning of her innovative quilt as a defense mechanism against a prospectless marriage. According to the third-person narrator, she "had begun it far back in the early days of her marriage, before Lavena was born, when she was beginning to learn that Simrall Mase would never amount to much, and she had indeed, as her parents asserted, 'driven her pigs to a poor market'" (149).

Keziah's quilt also shelters her against the pain inflicted by the miseries implied in being a mother, especially the death of her children. With a household that consists of her husband, her teenage daughter Lavena, her six-year-old child Mary Ann Martha, and "a row of small graves of varying lengths in the neglected graveyard on the hill southward," Keziah is well aware of what woman's pain means (149). In fact, her decision to create a Bible-inspired quilt could be interpreted as her attempt to come to terms with the frailty of young lives as well as with the unavoidability of childbearing risks affecting the newborn and the mother alike. In *Within the Plantation Household* Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that women's religiosity was strongly influenced by the dangers associated with the childbearing process, even though she also notes that in the development of these religious feelings personal pacts with God played as significant a role as institutionalized religion (277). This peculiar relationship with religion can be seen in that while Keziah does seek the solace of her religious background, she deviates from traditional or stereotypical teachings of the Bible to the point of openly challenging them. Her attitude towards religion perfectly reifies the widespread contradictions that plagued nineteenth-century American women's relationships with the church, which fluctuated from conceiving it as a refuge that provided females with a sense of belonging outside the home to portraying it as a prison that obstructed their development as full individuals.

Despite all the concessions to women's culture that "Gospel Quilt" makes—presenting a woman whose life revolves around a quilt, emphasizing the artistic value of quilts, highlighting the importance of religion in women's lives, etc.—this story presents a changing atmosphere, one in which a new social order is replacing the nineteenth-

century ideology of the separate spheres. “Gospel Quilt” features no New Woman. Neither Keziah nor her daughter Lavena represent the new options available to women in the early twentieth century. While the former belongs to an older generation whose options in life depended on marrying a suitable partner, the later has her potential chances for education hindered by her rural origins and a marriage proposal which, at age sixteen, she is eager to accept. However, the story details situations which evince the disintegration of a distinct feminine culture, making special emphasis on illustrating the importance of different-sex relationships and on questioning the boundaries between what constitutes a male and a female.

Furthermore, “Gospel Quilt” replaces the deep emotional relationships between mothers and daughters that characterized a large part of the nineteenth century with a complete absence of communion between different generations of females. According to Josephine Donovan, this generational confrontation was widespread at the turn into the twentieth century when a generation of young white middle-class females, allowed to enter some universities and professions, began “to leave the world of the traditional woman—the home—and the traditional roles of wife and mother” (“Silence” 151). As a consequence, there developed a gap between mothers, who had been raised according to the values of a separate women’s culture, and daughters, who entered the public sphere lured by the new opportunities available to them. Although “Gospel Quilt” features no educated woman, it is possible to perceive distinctly how the female culture embodied in Keziah’s quilt has become irrelevant for her daughter’s generation. In fact, for Lavena her mother’s quilt and, indirectly, the women’s culture it represents are outdated, “an old story” (148).

“Gospel Quilt” also illustrates changing attitudes in the relationship between men and women. It replaces the marginal role that males played in the communities females formed in the nineteenth century with camaraderie between father and daughter, who share their frustration with women’s traditional culture as embodied in the ever-present quilt. In one of those moments of frustration, Lavena “crouch[es] beside her father and rest[s] against his shoulder for the solace of contact, the feeling of comradeship,” and utters her anger against the quilt. “I wish,” she proclaims, “it was burnt up!” (153). For Lavena the quilt not only represents old-fashioned attitudes and values but also a barrier that prevents her from interacting with males; at the onset of the narrative, she has been forbidden by her mother to marry her suitor Cloud Lackland on account of his disparaging attitude towards Keziah’s gospel quilt. In addition to presenting a younger generation of women that privileges its relationships with males over its relationship with other women and perceives female culture as a barrier to establishing a connection with the opposite sex, “Gospel Quilt” also explores the disintegration of a distinct female culture by blurring the line between what constitutes being a male and a female.

The embodiment of that blurring is Mary Ann Martha, Keziah’s youngest daughter. Mary Ann Martha does not conform to stereotypical definitions of women as passive and docile. In fact, her tomboyish attitude leads the narrator to compare her to a boy and to describe her as “unsexed and hostile” (155). Moreover, during the course of the narration she suffers a literal process of transvestitism which clearly illustrates the collapse of the male-female dichotomy. The fact that she is “pent up in a tight little jean suit which had belonged to one of the small dead brothers, and from which her solid limbs and fat, tubby body seemed fairly exploding” suggests women’s uneasiness with

their new roles in a transitional period between a separate women's culture and the incorporation of women to the public, male realm (155). However, the climactic scene in "Gospel Quilt"—Mary Ann Martha's attempt to feed quilted Eve some molasses and the resulting apparent destruction of her mother's quilt—clearly indicates that female culture was being directly attacked from the inside by the time the short story was published in 1909.

Keziah Mase is many ways a similar character to Aunt Mehetabel in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "The Bedquilt" (1927). Both drown their sorrows in cloth and thread, see in quilting a reason to live, and try to create a masterpiece. However, while Keziah fails in her attempt to produce an innovative work of art, Aunt Mehetabel succeeds. Through Mehetabel Elwell, Fisher's "The Bedquilt" analyzes the different steps that constitute the creative process, highlighting the fact that given the right preconditions a woman may create a personally satisfying text that rewards her with social recognition. The story follows the construction of a unique quilt, made from "a pattern beyond which no patchwork quilt could go" (259), from the moment it is conceived as an idea to Aunt Mehetabel's return from the state fair, where her piece receives a blue ribbon. Paralleling that process, "The Bedquilt" also explores the development of Aunt Mehetabel herself, from "a mouselike little creature, too shy for anyone to notice" (258) to a relatively confident woman who is proud of her own achievements, demonstrating that "[q]uilmaking, self-fashioning and the construction of a woman's text are all part of the same process" (Elsley, "Nothing" 164).

According to Fisher's biographer Ida Washington, "The Bedquilt" was composed in order to rescue an elderly relative of the author's from a lifetime of neglect as well as

to compensate her for the wrongs she had suffered while alive, some of them at the hands of Fisher's own parents. Washington notes that Fisher tried to honor an old lady whose family cared for her in turns and whose identity she used to protect under the nickname "Cousin Margaret." On one occasion, this elderly woman was scheduled to arrive at the Fisher household on a day that little Dorothy's parents—two people who, unlike the old maid, were socially successful individuals—were hosting a dinner party.³⁷ So that "Cousin Margaret's" arrival would not interfere with their plans, a cab was reserved to pick her up at the station and, once at home, Dorothy was supposed to receive her and direct her to her room. Young Dorothy Canfield was unable to interpret "Cousin Margaret's" disappointing look and silence until years later, when she observed two sisters—one a beautiful young married lady with a baby, the other a plain hardworking single woman who toiled for her entire family without receiving a word of appreciation—while on a trip in Norway. Seeing her family's cruelty towards "Cousin Margaret" reincarnated in the plain sister's situation, she decided to make amends and immortalize her by-then-dead relative by extolling her quilting skills (Washington 50-51).

In "Piecing and Writing" Elaine Showalter defines "The Bedquilt" as "a paradigmatic American women's text about piecing and writing" (240). In *Sister's Choice* she elaborates on the topic expounding that Fisher's "ambitions to create an extraordinary new form for the novel are figured in the image of the ultimate quilt" (159). In fact, the story explores the creation of a masterpiece, detailing the emotional effort and

³⁷ The author's father, James Hulme Canfield, was a reputed professor of Political Economy and Sociology who taught at the University of Kansas among other institutions. He also held the chancellorship of the University of Nebraska from 1891 to 1895. Her mother, Flavia Camp Canfield, was an artist who spent long periods of time in Europe, usually accompanied by her daughter Dorothy, who spoke five languages and served as her translator (Wright 113).

temporal investment required of Aunt Mehetabel from the moment she is inspired to create a unique work of art to the moment she returns from having received widespread public recognition at the state fair. Though published in 1927, the short story is set in the late nineteenth century, “in the old-time New England days” when “the old-time skill born of early pioneer privation and the craving for beauty, had [already] gone out of style” (257, 260). It is, therefore, set in an era which valued quilts as art, privileging their artistic qualities over their ability to combine usefulness and beauty to perfection. In fact, the quilt Aunt Mehetabel creates constitutes an artistic masterpiece which does not seem to be intended for practical use. A five-year project, Aunt Mehetabel’s quilt is probably a crazy quilt whose “good side’s just like a picture” and whose back side is filled with “tiny squinchy little seams” (260). That is, like all crazy quilts, her masterpiece constitutes a time-consuming project intended to demonstrate its maker’s embroidery knowledge and quilting skills rather than her ability to provide her family with aesthetically pleasing, warm bedcovers.

In addition to being influenced by late-nineteenth-century approaches to quilting which favored artistry over usefulness, Aunt Mehetabel’s design is also affected by early-twentieth-century avant-garde movements, which encouraged novelty, rupture with traditional forms, and innovation. In fact, the bedquilt the protagonist of the story creates perfectly embodies a unique work defined by its innovativeness and originality, qualities which were valued very positively when the short story was published. As an example, Sophia Elwell, Mehetabel’s sister-in-law, notes that “a stone image would take an interest in [Mehetabel’s] pattern” right after exclaiming that she had “never seen such a pattern in [her] life” (260). Moreover, the positive appreciation Aunt Mehetabel’s quilt receives

partially depends on the increasing socio-economic and professional opportunities women enjoyed in the 1920s. Fisher's short story demonstrates, in summary, that given the propitious times for female artistic originality, a woman's text, far from being rejected as a failed enterprise like Keziah's, can be deemed a masterpiece.



Crazy quilt
1893
Saunders
County, NE

Ellen Franklin
Gillihan

Source:
*Nebraska Quilts
and
Quiltmakers*, p.
153

Furthermore, through a character such as Aunt Mehetabel, “The Bedquilt” illustrates not only that women can be responsible for literary innovation but also that

such change may spring from heretofore marginalized authors. Taking into account that innovative approaches to literary material normally result in the creation of texts which critics assign to different movements, Fisher's insistence on the novelty of Aunt Mehetabel's quilt may be read as a strategic way of questioning men's exclusive right to literary innovation. In the introduction to her book *Friendship and Sympathy: Communities of Southern Women Writers*, Rosemary Magee explains the peculiar status of female writers in the American canon and theorizes that, because they had been relegated to the consideration of minor authors, their works were never chosen as starting points for any literary movement (xviii). It should not, therefore, be remarkable to observe women's scarce confidence in their potential for triggering innovation. Aunt Mehetabel's perplexed reaction to her ground-breaking ideas for a unique new pattern illustrates this point:

She never knew how her great idea came to her. Sometimes she thought she must have dreamed it, sometimes she even wondered reverently, in the phraseology of the weekly prayer-meeting, if it had not been 'sent' to her. She never admitted to herself that she could have thought of it without other help. It was too great, too ambitious, too lofty a project for her humble mind to have conceived. Even when she finished drawing the design with her own fingers, she gazed at it incredulously, not daring to believe that it could indeed be her handiwork. (258)

Through this short story Fisher rebelled against biased definitions of literary innovation which approached fiction from a male point of view, defined such innovation in male terms, and, therefore, ignored women writers. Fisher herself suffered from this prejudiced attitude towards female authors; her narratives were considered "unfashionable," her

narrative technique labeled “too conventional,” and she herself “relegated to a marginal position in the literary pantheon” (Madigan 51).

Fisher’s decision to create a story around a character who is, initially, a virtual nonentity could be interpreted as a way of challenging deeply ingrained beliefs that associated literary innovation with either males or members of mainstream society. By making a dependent spinster aged sixty-eight who “had never for a moment known the pleasure of being important to anyone” responsible for textual originality, Fisher anticipates the role authors such as Alice Walker or Bobbie Ann Mason will play in American literature (257). Like Aunt Mehetabel, whose gender, age, and marital status render her a marginal author, Walker and Mason also represent writers who have received critical attention but do not, because of their gender, race or socio-economic background, belong to the mainstream.

In fact, Fisher anticipates a further connection between Aunt Mehetabel and late-twentieth-century characters such as Alice Walker’s Maggie Johnson. Both Fisher’s “The Bedquilt” and Walker’s “Everyday Use” clearly differentiate between, on the one hand, the creation and understanding of quilts and, on the other hand, theorization about them. Both short stories depict able quilters: while Maggie is portrayed as a proficient quilter versed in the stories her family’s quilts represent, Aunt Mehetabel is described as a quilt artist whose portfolio contains any pattern her neighbors may desire (258). Both understand the value of quilts; they fully comprehend that quilts, far from being a mere composite of cloth scraps, represent their own voices, a source of emotional well-being, a reason to stay alive, a storehouse of memories, etc. However, neither of them is able to adequately phrase their quilting knowledge or the feelings quilts inspire in them. Having

been educated in an oral culture which favors oral stories and myths and is based on non-written texts such as quilts, both feel uneasy with the phraseology of the written culture which, despite being used among quilt scholars and literary critics, is alien to them as quilters and, hence, does not provide them with adequate means of expression. Both, in summary, understand the creative process and the meaning of quilts but neither is able to theorize about them.

Maggie's and Aunt Mehetabel's worlds are basically oral. The elderly maid's contact with the world is exclusively visual and oral. Her closest approach to written materials is obliquely made through the religious readings she recalls; according to the narrator, hymnbook phrases were "the only kind of poetic expression she knew" (265). For her part, Maggie is introduced to the written realm, where she fails to thrive. In fact, "Everyday Use" shows a young woman who struggles to do what appears to be some basic reading. Given their relative ignorance of the technical vocabulary necessary to comment on quilts, Aunt Mehatabel and Maggie are unable to conceptualize quilting despite being able to create and understand both the creative process and the meaning of quilts. Appropriate and accurate terms to define the meaning of quilts and to express the feelings they inspire elude them; as a consequence, the vocabulary they do use is too prosaic to do justice to their knowledge and experience. On the one hand, Maggie grunts rather than talks. On the other, although Aunt Mehetabel can perfectly "s[ee] the glory that shone around the creation of her hand and brain [and] long[s] to make her listeners share the golden vision with her," she is unable to. Despite "struggl[ing] for words [and] fuml[ing] blindly for unknown superlatives," she only manages to define her masterpiece as simply "real *good*" (265).

Maggie and Aunt Mehetabel resemble real quilters who produce masterpieces but lack the technical vocabulary necessary to theorize about them. bell hooks' grandmother Baba could be considered a spiritual sister of theirs. According to hooks, "Baba did not read or write. She worked with her hands. She never called herself an artist. It was not one of her words. Even if she had known it, there might have been nothing in the sound or meaning to interest, to claim her wild imagination. Instead she would comment, 'I know beauty when I see it'" (*Yearning* 116). This state of affairs has led quilt scholars to question whether quilters who did not intellectualize their production should be considered artists (Holstein, *Pieced Quilt* 115). In "Everyday Use" Maggie's sister Dee seems to take this approach to quilting; even though Maggie is the only quilter of the two and the only one who understands the non-monetary value of quilts, her sister charges her with being unable to "appreciate" quilts (54).

In order to propound that a marginal woman's text may become a socially-recognized masterpiece, "The Bedquilt" presents a changed environment in which the self-assertion and public exposure implied in writing are accepted as natural, rather than condemned as unfeminine, like in the 1800s. Through Aunt Mehetabel's development as a character, Fisher's story demonstrates that quilting and the creation of female identity are parallel processes. The initial paragraphs highlight Aunt Mehetabel's marginality and social invisibility. The opening one reads as follows: "Of all the Elwell family Aunt Mehetabel was certainly the most unimportant member. It was in the old-time New England days, when an unmarried woman was an old maid at twenty, at forty was everyone's servant, and at sixty had gone through so much discipline that she could need no more in the next world. Aunt Mehetabel was sixty-eight" (257). Three paragraphs

later the narrator insists on her marginal position by claiming that “she was so insignificant a figure in their [the Elwells’] lives that she was almost invisible to them” (257). She is, furthermore, defined as a nonentity who lacks individuality and a personality of her own. “[T]he same at twenty as at sixty,” Aunt Mehetabel is described as too shy a person “to raise her eyes for a moment and wish for a life of her own” (258). From this bleak beginning Aunt Mehetabel will develop into a character that speaks and acts according to her own volition, even when that implies contradicting the wishes and ideas of others.

Hindered by her dependence, Aunt Mehetabel feels unable to begin her text until she is granted permission to do so. From that moment onwards, her personality begins a slow process of self-assertion which will eventually lead her to contradict her relatives’ advice when, self-absorbed in the contemplation of her text(ile), she refuses to visit the fair sights she had been suggested. As she starts projecting her vital energies towards “the work of her life,” Aunt Mehetabel begins to perceive how “the atmosphere of her world was changed,” how her environment altered to accommodate her new purpose-filled existence (260-61). In a little room described as permanently “flooded with sunshine” Aunt Mehetabel begins to quilt in self-absorption, to change, and, consequently, to challenge the stereotypical definition of nineteenth-century womanhood (260). She becomes “too proud” of herself after receiving her family’s attention and praise for the first time in her life. The day after, more conscious of her own potential than ever before, she gathers enough courage and “[f]or the first time in her life the dependent old maid contradicted her powerful sister-in-law” in order to defend her quilt against Sophia’s inexpert readings (261). Thus, gradually, Aunt Mehetabel gets her family’s recognition, a

sewing table of her own, and time to devote herself to creating, an activity which the old maid had initially described as “selfish” (259).

By paralleling Aunt Mehetabel’s quilting with her self-assertion, “The Bedquilt” not only highlights the positive role quilts played in helping women develop as artists and as individuals but also implicitly defends that the twentieth century was a more propitious time for women authors to leave their marginal positions and become responsible for female literary innovation. In the 1800s unmarried women were, like Aunt Mehetabel initially is, doomed to remain “the most unimportant” member of the household, to be relegated to the most tedious and tiresome domestic tasks, and to see their experiences devalued and ignored. However, with the turn into the twentieth century, new doors opened for women, who had access to a wider range of opportunities which allowed them to dissociate personal, artistic, and social success from their marital status. Since Aunt Mehetabel gets the recognition her spinsterhood had denied her, “The Bedquilt” emphasizes the role artistic creations played as keys to open those doors.

As the production of her masterpiece advances, the elderly lady gets many of the elements necessary for the production of literature. She initially gets time away from monotonous household tasks so that she can devote it to quilting and introspection.³⁸ As interest in her text progressively increases, she is allowed to enjoy some room of her own both literally in her brother’s house and metaphorically in society. Instead of the room of her own that Virginia Woolf defined as a precondition for female writing, she is given “a little round table in the sitting room, for *her*,” and with it some of the independence

³⁸ Susan Bernick has argued that relatives’ selfishness often underlies the time fancy quilters are allowed to devote to their quilting. According to her, “[f]amily members often encourage fancy quilters ‘to spend long hours at the quilting frame producing an item they know will eventually be theirs’” (140).

required for producing texts (261). Through the frequent visits her ongoing project receives and her participation in the state fair, she gets both public recognition and an interested audience. Finally and more importantly, she gets an autonomous voice which is listened to.

In addition to illustrating that in the late 1920s the conditions in which women wrote were more favorable than in the previous century by presenting the self-assertion implied in female writing as a positive element, "The Bedquilt" also challenges nineteenth-century theories which condemned women's writing because the public exposure it entailed contradicted women's supposedly inherent domestic nature. Fisher's story represents a sort of condensed *Künstlerroman* in which the degree of Aunt Mehetabel's public exposure is directly proportional to her development as an artist. Beset by the defiance implied in claiming time for herself and wondering if "it would perhaps not be too selfish to make one square," the old lady begins creating her lifetime project hidden in the loneliness of her room (259). By the time she is about to finish that one square she "venture[s] to bring her work down beside the fire where the family sat" and thus both her work and herself are scrutinized for the first time (260). As her quilt progresses, her self-confidence improves, and she realizes that "[n]ow things had a meaning" in her life, she becomes exposed to public examination. She is first evaluated by the local minister and his wife and later by a throng of neighbors and total strangers who drop by to inspect her work until "Mehetabel's quilt came little by little to be one of the local sights" (262). Finally, both she and her text(ile) are formally subject to direct criticism and public comment at the Vermont state fair.

It is precisely at the state fair that the combination of maximum public exposure and greatest artistic recognition coincide. As her quilt is placed in a glass case, exposed to general scrutiny, and openly commented upon, it receives the blue ribbon which establishes Mehetabel's reputation as an excellent artist. Meanwhile, the old lady, absorbed by the beauty of her creation, listens to the comments made by visitors in what seems to be a clear fictionalization of the close author-reader public relationship Fisher herself strived to maintain:

During all my life as a writer—half a century it is, now—readers have been helpful advisers to me ... I don't share the feeling of those writers who say they write solely for themselves. It doesn't seem to me that I am unlike people who read my books—how should I be? What I write is an invitation to those with whom time has proved that I have much in common to join me in reflecting on the human life we all lead. They are an indispensable part of the effort to feel the essential quality of the doings of men, women, and children. Here is the place to acknowledge with comradely appreciation the spoken explicit, and unspoken implicit cooperation given me by readers in the revision of these stories. (qtd. in Washington 179)

This close author-reader relationship was beneficial for both. Fisher often received letters from appreciative readers who thanked her for the joy her works brought to their lives and for creating literature which helped them find stability and strength in their daily struggle to understand human existence (Ehrhardt 55).

Throughout this process of progressive public exposure, Aunt Mehetabel not only is not attacked for her unwomanliness but she is openly encouraged to display both her masterpiece and herself. In fact, her family provides her with new clothing “[t]o make her

presentable to strangers” (262). However, the fact that, despite her gained confidence, she does not dare to defy convention and enter the public realm until she is directly pushed to do so by a male figure may suggest either that in the early twentieth century the public stage was still male or, in the best of cases, required male-backing. The use of possessive adjectives in the story’s final comment on Mehetabel, which notes that “on *her* tired old face [shone] the supreme content of an artist who has realized *his* ideal” may betray that art still was a primarily male realm to which females were just beginning to have access (265; emphasis added).

Like “The Bedquilt,” Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” (1917) has also been considered a paradigmatic woman’s literary piece about the relationship between quilting and writing. Unlike Fisher’s short story, which concentrates on the production of a text(ile), Glaspell’s focuses on the reception of such a text, demonstrating that reading is a gendered activity which men and women approach in different ways. Hence, “for feminist critics of American literature, ‘A Jury of Her Peers’ has been taken since the mid-1970s as a metaphor for feminist reading itself” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 146).

An often anthologized fictional piece, “A Jury of Her Peers” is, like “The Bedquilt,” based on a historical event. Linda Ben-Zvi discovered the source for both “Jury” and its dramatic predecessor, *Trifles*, as she was doing research for a biography on Glaspell. According to her, both literary pieces originated from the December 2, 1900 murder of John Hossack, a sixty-year-old Indianola, Iowa farmer who had received two axe blows on the head while he was sleeping next to his wife Margaret. The wife, who testified that she had heard a strange sound and the front porch door closing, claimed that she jumped out of bed, gathered her children and reentered the room with a lamp, only to

discover her husband fatally wounded in the middle of a pool of blood. Prowlers were initially held responsible for the murder, but as nothing seemed to be missing in the Hossack home, a coroner's inquest was called. The discovery of the presumed murder axe in the family's corn crib and the testimony of neighbors describing frequent arguments between the couple eventually led the Sheriff to arrest Mrs. Hossack while her husband's funeral was being celebrated ("Murder" 144)

Glaspell, then a young journalist working for the *Des Moines Daily News*, covered the case, writing a total of twenty-six reports on the murder, from her brief December 3rd, 1900 description of the events to the April 11th, 1901 report on the jury's decision at the trial. Ben-Zvi argues that changes in Glaspell's reporting, concerning in particular her attitude towards Mrs. Hossack, whom Glaspell initially described as cold and menacing and later on as a frail, aging maternal woman, may have been directly related to her visit to the Hossack home, which was later used as the setting for "A Jury of Her Peers" ("Murder" 146-50). Glaspell's fictionalization of Mr. Hossack's murder shares with the original events the sympathy the Sheriff's wife feels for the presumed murderess, the need to find a reason for the crime, and the destruction of evidence. Like Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, who erase the signs of marital trouble, the Hossack family strove to paint a picture of familial bliss so as to convince the jury that Mrs. Hossack lacked a motive for murdering her husband (West 233-34).

However, Glaspell gives Minnie Wright a right Mrs. Hossack had been denied: the chance to be judged by "a jury of her peers." The phrase had been originally used by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who defended women charged with infanticide, when she addressed the Legislature of the State of New York on February 14th 1854. There she

argued that women were denied the most sacred of rights, a trial by a jury of their own peers (Alkalay-Gut 77). In 1873 Susan B. Anthony, who had been accused of having attempted to vote illegally, picked up the expression to claim that she was being judged by men, who were her political sovereigns, and not by women, her peers (Fox and Langley 150). Unlike these females, Glaspell's Minnie Wright is "tried" by women.

In fact, "A Jury of Her Peers," which follows many of the conventions of the detective story, portrays two groups of investigators, one composed of men and the other one of women, who try to solve a puzzling crime. In line with traditional detective stories, the professionals, all of them male, fail to decipher a mystery which the amateur detectives, two females, unravel. However, in their attempt to understand the reasons that may have led Minnie Wright to murder her husband, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters privilege justice over law, identify with the homicide, lose the objectivity required of the male detective, and cast doubt on who the real criminal is. These deviations from the basic norms of the detective story illustrate that men and women use different strategies for deciphering hidden messages.

In reality, "A Jury of Her Peers" radically separates the worlds of males and females, creating the impression of a turn-of-the-century American society which is as radically polarized according to gender as it had been during the heyday of the ideology of the separate spheres, fifty years earlier. For men the significant world is located upstairs and outside; instead of remaining inside, in the domestic realm where the crime took place, they insist on "go[ing] *upstairs* first, then *out* to the barn and *around* there" (17; emphasis added). They, in other words, look for clues in the public realm—the barn—and in high spheres—the upstairs bedroom. As Sherri Hallgreen notes, the official

police investigation takes place “literally and figuratively both above and beyond the scope of women’s concerns” (208). Women’s world, on the contrary, revolves around private spaces, especially around the fireplace of the kitchen, which in the log cabin pattern Minnie was creating before being arrested represents the innermost part of the house. In fact, “A Jury of Her Peers” aptly demonstrates that women’s realm is indoors. Mrs. Hale moves from her kitchen to Mrs. Wright’s. Minnie, in turn, is transferred from her own to the prison, a space where, unable to function without her domestic tools, she asks for an apron “just to make her feel more natural” (26). Even when they are not in the kitchen, women are situated in the protected, unexposed, and seemingly irrelevant inner side. Minnie Wright, for instance, claims to have heard nothing when her husband was killed because “[she] was [sleeping] on the inside” (15).

Nonetheless, in a clear reversal of the situation in mid-nineteenth-century America, Glaspell places the inside at center stage. Obviously influenced by its dramatic predecessor in its inclusion of brief sentences indicating characters’ movements which remind the reader of stage directions and in its ability to concentrate all the action around one single space, that reproduced on the stage, “A Jury of Her Peers” makes the main action revolve around Minnie’s kitchen, which becomes the pivotal axis of the short story. On the contrary, public areas are relegated to irrelevant, non-represented spaces where only marginal occurrences take place.

In fact, in their insistence on solving Mr. Wright’s murder from their own male perspective, Sheriff Peters, the county attorney, and the main witness, Mr. Hale, fail to read Minnie’s kitchen and the female-coded clues it contains. They ignore domesticity itself as a text. For them Minnie Wright’s domesticity is an insignificant affair which Mr.

Hale describes as the “trifles” “women are used to worrying over” (18). Men attempt to impose on Minnie’s story a paradigm of violence which is defined in inherently male terms. As they associate violence with men and external areas, they search the barn and its surroundings for evidence, refusing to understand the importance of inner spaces in the perpetration of the crime. Furthermore, they are puzzled by the fact that Mr. Wright was strangled with a rope when he could have been killed with a gun. As Judith Fetterley masterfully expounds in “Reading about Reading,” the men in “Jury” are extremely prejudiced by the deeply ingrained belief that texts, being male, narrate a man’s story from a male point of view. As a consequence, they are unable to read a female text which tells a woman’s story from her own perspective:

[I]t is not simply that the men can not read the text that is placed before them. Rather, they literally can not recognize it as a text because they can not imagine that women have stories. This preconception is so powerful that, even though, in effect, they know Minnie Wright has killed her husband, they spend their time trying to discover their own story, the story they are familiar with, can recognize as a text, and know how to read. (147-48)

As their value system leads them to ignore domesticity as a text, the male figures officially in charge of the investigation fail to understand the relevance of the domestic in women’s lives and, therefore, are rendered unqualified to understand both Minnie’s reasons for murdering her husband and female experience in general. Furthermore, as American society failed to perceive the radical messages women had conveyed through quilts during the cult of True Womanhood, these male social pillars are likewise oblivious to the subversive potential of domesticity as a text. In fact, when asked by the

sheriff what of relevance he saw in the scene of the crime, Mr. Hale replies that there was “nothing [t]here but kitchen things” and accompanies his answer “with a little laugh for the insignificance of kitchen things” (17). For Mr. Henderson, the more learned county attorney, Minnie’s kitchen is equally devoid of meaning. Initially, he refers to its contents as “a nice mess,” which in his view proves the presumed murderess’s poor housekeeping skills rather than the exceptional situation she is going through (18). By the end of the story, Mr. Henderson, whose ignorance of women’s texts remains unaltered, dismisses the domestic evidence that might have convicted Minnie as “not very dangerous things” (45-46).

However, in “A Jury of Her Peers” Glaspell does not sever a potential relation between men and female texts. On the contrary, she presents males as potential readers. The fact that Mrs. Hale is compelled to alter Minnie’s log cabin quilt, the text where she had expressed her refusal—or her inability—to tolerate patriarchal violence any longer, indicates her awareness of the investigators’ potential for finding the evidence, deciphering its meaning, and using it to keep Minnie in jail (31-32). Moreover, when Mrs. Hale answers Mrs. Peters’ comment on the fact that men would laugh at the two of them for “[g]etting all stirred up over a little thing” muttering “[m]aybe they would, [. . .] maybe they wouldn’t,” she is implicitly acknowledging their theoretical potential as readers of women’s texts (44).

As Annette Kolodny asserts in “A Map for Re-Reading,” the men in “Jury” are educable; they can be taught the strategies necessary to understand women’s texts and, therefore, trained in interpreting them. Kolodny avers that “A Jury of Her Peers” not only does not exclude a male reader but also is “directed specifically at educating him to

become a better reader.” The story, nonetheless, emphasizes that “however, inadvertently, he is a *different kind* of reader and that, where women are concerned, he is often an inadequate reader” (463). Therefore, by depicting the sheriff’s and county attorney’s inability to decipher Minnie’s domestic messages, Glaspell’s short story also offers a reasonable explanation to account for the silencing of those women’s texts which have either been absolutely ignored or relegated to a secondary position in the canon. In this sense, “A Jury of Her Peers” demonstrates that, regardless of their intrinsic artistic merits, women’s texts have been absent from the literary canon because those who, like Mr. Henderson and Mr. Peters, were officially entrusted with reading them searched for their own male story and, consequently, never reached the existing female one.

While Mr. Peters and Mr. Henderson question another male, Mr. Hale, they follow supposedly scientific or professional methods to discover the truth, and end up encountering a void where they should have discovered meaning, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale find themselves, unwillingly but inevitably, running a parallel investigation which concludes rather more successfully. As they tidy up what the county attorney had described as “a nice mess,” they realize that the answer to the crime lies in the clues provided by Minnie Foster’s domesticity. While the discovery of a dead canary whose neck had been wrung provides them with a motive for the murder, the two women discover in Minnie’s log cabin quilt some crooked sewing from which they perceive that, unable to control her anger, Mrs. Wright acted and killed her husband.

In “A Jury of Her Peers” Minnie is a void, a female character whose absence testifies to women’s marginality in the male world and, in particular, to their legal inexistence. Her absence is also her silence. In “Reading Feminist Readings:

Recuperative Reading and the Silent Heroine of Feminist Criticism,” Carla Kaplan argues that “women’s silence, blankness, or absence must be translated back into visibility or audibility by a reader who is reader and rewriter both” (178). According to her, silences such as those of Minnie Wright need to be compensated for through a process of “overreading,” which she defines as “a strategy for reading between the lines, deciphering silence, decoding double-talk and filling in gaps” in order to minimize women’s repression (177). Following this definition, both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters constitute obvious examples of “overreaders.” Even though they wonder “why do you and I understand? Why do we know what we know this minute?,” they are able to understand a woman’s text that eludes male comprehension (43). In fact, most of the communication which occurs during the development of the plot is done through non-verbal, silent language.

Minnie Wright, absent and silenced, conveys meaning through her domesticity, especially through her quilt. Thus, “[h]olding [her unevenly sewn] block made [Martha Hale] feel queer, as if the distracted thoughts of the woman who had perhaps turned to it to try and quiet herself were communicating themselves to her” (33). In addition to communicating with Minnie through her textile, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters also make themselves understood to each other through non-verbal language. Like Glaspell’s biographer Linda Ben-Zvi, who in *Susan Glaspell* calls them “two virtually inarticulate women,” most critics have emphasized their virtual speechlessness (2). Victoria Aarons, for instance, claims that between both women there is “an unspoken alliance which holds them together through the story” (145). Sherri Hallgreen, for her part, notes that both ladies are “members of a group who speak the same language in a way that eschews

language” (204). In fact, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters often find language oppressive or inadequate and resort to additional channels of expression.

While the men are in the kitchen, their patriarchal discourse dominates the conversation, effectively silencing women, who do not begin to speak until they are alone. Thus, most of the important information they exchange is coded as physical messages. They begin by “draw[ing] nearer” in order to counteract male attacks on their domesticity and end up agreeing to destroy the evidence which would have incriminated Minnie Wright without exchanging a word about it. Moreover, as they progressively identify with Mrs. Wright, they realize the prison-like house patriarchy erected to silence all women, and try to verbalize the abuse they had been subject to, they stumble. Mrs. Peters’ halting description of her kitten’s killing testifies to the inadequacy of male language to convey women’s messages (41).

This partial exclusion from conventional language makes Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale keenly aware of other texts from which they might be able to derive some meaning. Thus, even before they enter the Wrights’ house, they understand that its “very lonesome” appearance is a reflection of Minnie’s isolation. However, the gist of Minnie’s text lies inside, in her log cabin quilt, a pattern which she had originally chosen to compensate for the warmth her domestic life lacked and through which she ultimately projected her angered rejection of patriarchal oppression.

As I explained in chapter two, the log cabin pattern, which is normally constructed around a central red block called the chimney, reifies the warmth of the hearth. Minnie’s election of this particular pattern responds to the need she feels to compensate for the loss of a sense of home. It represents her final attempt to counteract

the cold atmosphere of her house and her desperate search for a rewarding domestic life. In this sense, her quilt could be considered an escapist text through which she tried to evade the unpleasant coldness surrounding her life. In fact, her stove, old and broken, barely managed to heat the house. Its fire, Mrs. Hale notes, was not “much to brag of” (28). More importantly, Minnie’s house is not only literally but also metaphorically cold. Mr. Wright worked outside all day and provided “no company when he did come in.” Besides, his presence felt “[l]ike a raw wind that gets to the bone,” thus creating a cold atmosphere where new life could not hatch, as their childless status clearly indicates (36).

Nevertheless, the unevenness of Minnie’s sewing testifies to the extent of her failure. It reflects her inability to find peace in the domestic arts, thus revealing a troubled mind for which domesticity no longer provided any relief. Gladys Marie Fry asserts that while “the consistency of the stitching pattern; the relative length and evenness reflect a certain amount of inner harmony,” the different “[d]eviations from this pattern might well indicate that the quilt maker was nursing physical and emotional wounds” (1). In this sense, Minnie’s crooked stitching reifies her emotional crisis and her inability to control her anger in order to create a positive work of art. With her disorderly sewing, Minnie also defends women’s right to rebel against patriarchal oppression, thus challenging an educational system that used needlework to inculcate in women values such as patience or submissiveness, which were supposed to help them tolerate rather than fight patriarchal abuses.

In Minnie’s poorly sewn quilt block, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters also read the demise of female communities and its consequences. As I will explain in the following section, towards the turn into the twentieth century, female relationships began to be

attacked as unnatural and, subsequently, the conditions that had nurtured the creation of all-female communities began to disappear. Minnie's poor connecting stitches and the fact that neither Mrs. Hale nor Mrs. Peters had ever participated in a quilting bee with their neighbor indicate the demise of female communities and their connecting rituals in this new situation. In clear contrast with pioneer times, when women lived physically separated but had rituals that united them, early-twentieth-century American women dwelled geographically closer but were emotionally distanced from each other, as Mrs. Hale explains to Mrs. Peters. "I tell you," she says, "it's queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we lived far apart" (43).

"A Jury of Her Peers" presents a complete lack of nurturing rituals because the action is set in a transitional period between the progressive disappearance of old forms of connecting—quilting bees—and the emergence of new ones—telephones. In fact, the fictional female community portrayed in Glaspell's short story depicts an urgent need for elements or rituals that may bridge the distance between its members. The text mentions the advent of the telephone and its warm reception among ladies. According to Mr. Hale, "all the women-folks liked the telephones" (11). Nevertheless, the telephone as a new means of interaction arrives too late for Minnie Foster.

Deprived by her husband of the possibility of communicating with other women, Minnie becomes first increasingly isolated and later violent or insane. "A Jury of Her Peers" demonstrates that the stereotypical male model of development, which favors the rupture of ties with one's community, does not work for females. The inability to connect different scraps—or different women—which Minnie's bad sewing illustrates does not cause women's liberation but their imprisonment in heterosexual relationships which

separate women from each other in order to destroy them as individuals. This is especially evident not only in the varying degrees of alienation of the three females but also in Minnie's transformation from a lively woman with a voice of her own into a shabby old lady apparently condemned to silence.

Only Mrs. Hale partially escapes this fate. She is the first one to realize her similarities with Minnie and her complicity with a patriarchal system that creates artificial barriers between women. She is also the one who communicates to Mrs. Peters her belief that the real crime was not Minnie's murder of her husband, but their own neglect of her (43). As her name indicates, she is the one who "hales" the other female into awareness, into admitting that, given the right preconditions, all of them could potentially become Minnie Wrights. Unlike Mrs. Hale, who is also identified as Martha, an individual in her own right, Mrs. Peters, is only alluded to as "wife of." As she remembers her isolation as a homesteader in Dakota and her own violent reaction to unwarranted patriarchal abuse, she begins to identify with Minnie and "gradually comes to recognize that marital designation—wife of the Sheriff—offers her no more freedom that it does Minnie; in fact, it completely effaces her as an individual" (Ben-Zvi, "Murder" 156). In fact, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters' insistence on individualizing the presumed murderess as Minnie rather than Mrs. Wright, which is the only denomination used by the male figures in the short story, demonstrates that the relational model of the quilt does not compromise the distinctiveness of its female members.

On the contrary, it is a heterosexual relationship which destroys Minnie's individuality. In her youth, "she was kind of like a bird herself. Real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and—fluttery" (37). She was a woman with a voice of her own who "used

to sing real pretty herself” (33). She was also a member of a community who “used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town’s girls, singing in the choir,” and a female whose potential to nurture was indicated by her last name (25). Nevertheless, as Mrs. Hale notes, “that was twenty years ago” (25). In the narrative present Minnie retains little of her former self. On the one hand, she has been deprived of color and beauty; all the aesthetically pleasing artifacts found in her house are, like the box where the dead canary is deposited, associated to her youth and not to her mature years. On the other hand, the same adjective, “shabby,” used to describe both her emotional state and her clothes, indicates that deterioration affects her both physically and psychologically (25). By marrying Mr. (W)right she turned into “an emblematic romantic heroine of standard tales for women, whose potential is ‘fulfilled’ through the right man, when she becomes acceptable as ‘Mrs. Right’” (Alkalay-Gut 72). However, unlike the prototypical female character who marries and lives happily ever after, Minnie Wright is denied contact with other females, locked in an isolated prison-house where she is as trapped as her alter-ego the caged canary, and deprived of all means of expression, especially her voice.

Yet, despite this bleak panorama I agree with Linda Ben-Zvi that Glaspell does not present women’s victimization but rather their power. For Ben-Zvi “Glaspell does not actually present the victimization of women or the violent acts such treatment may engender; instead she stages the potential for female action and the usurpation of power” (“Murder” 157-58). In fact, the difference between the even sewing and the crooked stitching of Minnie’s log cabin quilt marks the dividing line between her passivity or victimization and her rebellion against patriarchal abuse. Minnie, violently deprived of

her voice, skillfully replaces paper, pen, and ink with her sewing implements, her cloth, needle, and thread, which become her text, a quilted legacy of pain and rebellion which Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters quickly interpret. As soon as they see Minnie's uneven sewing, "[t]heir eyes met, something flashed to life, passed between them," and Mrs. Hale immediately starts to erase it by "pulling out a stitch or two that's not sewed very good" (32-33). Her quilted message awakes her neighbors from their lethargy, makes them reflect on their own situation, and contributes to their emancipation, moving them to action and to making amends to a woman they had neglected for too long.

In fact, in "A Jury of Her Peers" thread is a liberating tool through which Minnie not only warns other females of their potential fate but also frees herself from the oppression of Mr. Wright. The description of her husband's murder and her "trial" by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters is brimming with metaphors of thread and cloth. Minnie's decision to make Mr. Wright "die of a rope round his neck," far from being the precipitate and thoughtless action of a madwoman, represents not only her ability to tie the silence her husband imposed on her to his strangulation of her bird but also her deliberate attempt to use a similar "silencing" method to make Mr. Wright pay for both crimes.

Furthermore, the two neighbors' concluding comments arguing that Minnie was going to knot rather than quilt her log cabin are also significant. Minnie's election illustrates her decision to tie up all the loose ends, to join all the different aspects of her life in one single element. Alkalay-Gut has also linked the quilting-knotting dichotomy to the difference between male law and female justice:

To quilt a blanket is to sew the joined patches to the lining all the way around the borders of the patch. It is to make a thin, flat quilt, in which all

the thicknesses are equal. To knot a quilt is to sew the fabric together, generally through a thicker lining, only at the corners of each patch. Quilting equalizes the thickness of the blanket; knotting emphasizes the distinctions. When the women inform the men at the conclusion that Minnie was planning to knot the quilt, although they had not discussed this matter between them, they determine to differentiate between the legal definition of the crime, in which all considerations external to the act itself are meaningless and equal, and their moral definition of the crime, in which nothing is even and flat. (79)

In summary, “A Jury of Her Peers” presents reading as a gendered activity which men and women approach from different perspectives. Glaspell’s short story constitutes a fictional account of the interpretation of texts in which men fail as readers, despite having traditionally been entrusted with providing official readings. On the contrary, women, whose ability to “know a clue if they did come upon it” is questioned by the official investigators, end up being the only ones who command the proper interpretative techniques and, therefore, the only ones who manage to read Minnie’s text. Instead of trying to impose a pre-established story on Minnie’s life, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale follow a quilt-like approach to reading that consists in tying the different aspects of their neighbor’s existence—her broken oven, her dead canary, her even sewing, her crooked stitching—and connecting them to their own buried experiences as women so as to decipher her rebellious message. Thus, through women’s reading of Minnie’s quilt, Glaspell boldly defends the need to read from a woman’s perspective those texts that, despite having been ignored by the male gaze, women produced sometimes successfully (“The Bedquilt”), sometimes less so (“Gospel Quilt”), but never effortlessly (“An Honest Soul,” “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story”).

3.3. FEMALE COMMUNITIES: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS

In the previous section I analyzed the production of text(ile)s as an anxiety-ridden process for women. I tried to demonstrate that, even though conditions somewhat improved in the early twentieth century, women writers' attempts at literary excellence were conditioned by a series of educational barriers and socio-cultural prejudices that seemed to render authorship incompatible with the prevailing definition of womanhood. The short stories which use the quilt as a metaphor for the written text reflect this conflict and the paralyzing apprehension it caused in female writers. I also made an attempt to show male blindness to women's writing, subtly expressed in "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" and more openly conveyed in "A Jury of Her Peers." The real-life correlate to this fictional blindness to female texts is best represented by the process of literary canonization in America, which extolled the values sanctioned in male literature at the expense of ignoring those explored in female fiction. As a consequence of privileging the socially unhindered development of the individual in spaces free from civilization, the American canon implicitly or explicitly disparaged the communal values that women's literature championed. In fact, since the emergence of the feminist movement in the late twentieth century the idea of female community has been increasingly emphasized to illustrate, among other things, that interpersonal relations constitute an essential part of women's development.

In this section I will analyze four short stories which focus on communities of women. Rather than being chosen for its opposition to a male model of personal development, the topic has been selected, primarily, for its relation to quilting. On the one hand, the quilting bee represents a distinctly American cultural institution which stresses

cooperation, nurturance, and egalitarianism among women. Designed as a space free from patriarchal interference, the quilting bee embodies the quintessential female community. In fact, the setting for three of the four short stories here studied is a quilting bee. On the other hand, quilting itself can be interpreted as the art of joining, the best example of the incorporation of completely different elements into a functional unit. Quilting allows the incorporation of the Other without compromising the unity of the whole. Making a quilt literally consists in connecting different components in order to create progressively larger units. Thus, scraps are incorporated into blocks, these into the quilt top, and finally, the top is stitched to the other two layers of the quilt. At the same time, the different fragments of the quilter's torn existence are joined into a more coherent whole.

Yet, the idea of female community is not a static concept, but a historically determined construct. In fact, the four short stories studied in this section illustrate how the socio-cultural transformations which occurred in nineteenth-century America caused deep changes in the fictional female communities they depict. The relationship between women featured in Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt" differs radically from that portrayed in Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Quilting Bee in Our Village." While Annette's short story and T. S. Arthur's "The Quilting Party" were published at the height of the cult of True Womanhood, when intimate female bonds were the norm, Freeman's piece as well as Marietta Holley's "Miss Jones' Quilting" came out after its collapse, as deep emotional relationships between women were starting to be defined as unhealthy and condemned as unnatural. Through women's relationship with quilts, these four short stories show a

progressive deterioration of female relationships derived from a series of socio-cultural factors which will now be explained.

As the ideology of the separate spheres gained ground in mid-nineteenth-century America, men and women became alienated from each other. One of the most direct consequences which the radical estrangement between the genders originated was the creation of a female world based on strong emotional ties. The most important of these bonds, which allowed women to enjoy a degree of power they were denied in the public arena, was that which linked mother and daughter. Far from depicting the mother-daughter confrontation that later became a prerequisite for the development of the offspring, during the cult of True Womanhood “[t]he diaries and letters of both mothers and daughters attest to their closeness and mutual emotional dependency” and illustrate that “the normal relationship between [them] was one of sympathy and understanding” (Smith-Rosenberg 15). The gendered division of society partially facilitated this closeness by restricting the interactions between youths of opposite sexes. However, Smith-Rosenberg emphasizes two internal reasons that strengthened the bond between mother and daughter: their shared experiences and the fact that women’s education was partially domestic.

According to Smith-Rosenberg, in this female world “[t]he roles of daughter and mother shaded imperceptibly and ineluctably into each other, while the biological realities of frequent pregnancies, childbirth, nursing, and menopause bound women together in physical and emotional intimacy” (9). Ritualistic behaviors associated to almost every important moment in a woman’s life reinforced their links while highlighting the breach with males, who remained ignorant of these bonding rituals.

Furthermore, “[c]entral to these mother-daughter relations is what might be described as an apprenticeship system” (Smith-Rosenberg 16). As nineteenth-century girls’ enrollment in schools was limited to relatively short periods of time, the education of all but the exceptional who got college degrees depended on the training in household management they received from their mothers or other older female relatives. Smith-Rosenberg asserts that “[s]uch training undoubtedly occurred throughout a girl’s childhood but became more systematized, almost ritualistic, in the years following the end of her formal education and before her marriage,” when the daughter was required to devote herself to searching for potential husbands and learning how to be a successful wife and mother (16). Annette’s short story accurately depicts this situation. The first-person narrator portrays a female world where the mother, who represents the central figure, is clearly in charge of her daughters’ education.

Especially when they attended boarding schools, girls also formed strong bonds of friendship with other females outside the family circle. Barred from contact with the opposite sex and exclusively surrounded by women, adolescent girls normally channeled their feelings towards the only outlet available to them, other females. Until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, female schools registered a significant number of cases of “smashing,” a sort of courting ritual in which a girl would send letters and presents to a schoolmate until she won her affection and they became inseparable (Sahli 21). As illustrated by the excerpts from mail exchanges between women included in “Smashing: Women’s Relationships before the Fall,” heavily sentimental language and actions that modern readers might consider sexual foreplay were socially sanctioned for most of the nineteenth century (18). As Smith-Rosenberg points out, “[t]he twentieth-century

tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genitality and platonic love, is alien to the emotions and attitudes of the nineteenth century and fundamentally distorts the nature of these women's emotional interaction" (8). However, by the 1880s these intense homoemotional relationships became tinged with elements of social subversiveness which eventually led to the disappearance of strong sentimental attachments between women. At about the same time, the social support of the cult of True Womanhood started to collapse.

As women became more independent, better educated, and increasingly more involved in the struggle for the same rights as men, their relationships with other females, which, as "The Patchwork Quilt" illustrates, were essential for their development, began to be perceived as a threat to patriarchal society. Although specific terminology did not appear until a decade later, psychiatrists started publishing articles on female sexual deviancy as early as the 1880s. However, as expected in a transitional period, blurred cases prevailed and, as a consequence, women "were likely to be labeled sexual perverts or inverts, not because they engaged in any variant sexual activities, but simply because they felt emotionally attracted to women or engaged in such suspicious practices as dressing in men's clothing" (Sahli 24). Therefore, both terms favored in the late nineteenth century—"invert" or "pervert"—and more modern ones such as "lesbian" and "homosexual" could be applied to sexual or emotional attitudes.

In America the end of socially sanctioned homoemotional relationships between women began with Carl von Westphal, a German psychiatrist who in 1869 studied the behavior of one woman who had done traditionally male activities since she was a child. Westphal defined the woman as a "congenital invert" and blamed her unconventional

actions on hereditary degeneration and neurosis, rather than on culturally determined factors. His disciple Richard von Krafft-Ebbing took Westphal's theories a step further in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892), where he defined lesbianism as a congenital disease affecting the nervous system (Faderman 239-41). In 1897 Havelock Ellis, also a disciple of Westphal's, contributed to cast unions between women in a negative light with the publication of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*. Although the female-female relationships he studied did not necessarily involve a physical component, Ellis accepted Krafft-Ebbing's theories about the congenital and pathological nature of these unions. Krafft-Ebbing's and Ellis's role in defining strong female bonds as perversions remains crucial not only because "it was primarily through [their] writings that the twentieth century received its stereotypes of lesbian morbidity" but also because they had a direct impact on how women perceived same-sex relationships (Faderman 241-44).

Faderman argues that these psychiatrists did not influence American thought as profoundly as they did European. For her, this was due to the geographical distance with Germany, the cradle of most of these theories; to the feeble impact of the Catholic idea of sin in the United States; and to the belief that America "in principle was dedicated to tolerance of individual freedom" (298). As a consequence, at the beginning of the twentieth century women's magazines continued to include fiction praising strong emotional bonds between females, a fact that demonstrates that there still did not exist a clear division between purely spiritual attachments and romantic infatuations that included physical contact. However, as America became obsessed with Freudian theories, the situation changed radically. Freud, who "captured the popular imagination especially in America as previous sexologists had not," differed from Krafft-Ebbing and Ellis in that

he did not consider inversion as a congenital defect but as the result of a childhood trauma (Faderman 314). From the 1920s onwards, high-circulation magazines popularized diluted versions of Freud's ideas, which interpreted all love between women as a consequence of traumatic childhood experiences.

Because for most nineteenth-century middle-class ladies, genital sex was what Faderman has defined as "the great bugaboo," a topic whose importance was generally nullified, the social redefinition of female relationships as deviant cannot constitute the only factor that led to the collapse of a separate women's culture (252). In fact, the basis for a distinct women's culture succumbed to forces which included the Civil War, the industrialization of the country, women's active participation in crusades such as temperance or suffrage, as well as the new social realities derived from westward migrations. Some of these situations required a degree of social involvement on women's part that nineteenth-century Americans had not witnessed for decades. "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" and "Miss Jones' Quilting," both published before Freud's theories became widespread, testify to the importance these additional factors played in the distancing between women. Both of them portray extremely deteriorated female communities which predate the popularity of Freud's theories among Americans.

As a consequence of this conglomerate of factors, there developed a cultural gap between mothers, who had been raised according to strict guidelines that emphasized their supposedly submissive and domestic natures, and daughters, who perceived signs of a less constricted future ahead of them. Hence, mother-daughter relationships, which had been at the core of the cult of True Womanhood, became tension-ridden "as daughters

pressed for education, work, mobility, sexual autonomy, and power outside the female sphere” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 15).

Loving mother-daughter relationships, which had epitomized the intensity of female bonds in a gender-divided society, became tinged with aloofness and, in the worst of cases, open confrontation. Instead of the continuity between the roles of daughter and mother that Smith-Rosenberg had interpreted as one of the main factors drawing females close to each other, there developed a generation gap based on the divergent cultural realities different-age women experienced. While mothers were products of a sphere-divided society who had been raised in a uniquely female culture where they interacted mainly with other women and remained tied to domestic spaces, daughters enjoyed new personal freedoms their progenitors could not have even envisaged and sought interaction with men, with whom they claimed more similarities than differences. This progressive detachment between women originated in the nineteenth century and intensified after WWI, affecting not only relationships between women of different generations but also those between females of similar ages.

However, when Annette’s “The Patchwork Quilt” came out in 1845, the conditions necessary for the development of functional female communities were idyllic. Set during the cult of True Womanhood, when women were not only encouraged to stay away from the public realm and from interaction with males, but also complimented for their successful adaptation to an exclusively female indoor world, “The Patchwork Quilt” is narrated in the first person by a woman who uses her quilt, a storehouse of memories, to tell the story of her life retrospectively. As she moves from one vital experience to the next following the different blocks of her quilt, the narrator emphasizes the important role

other women played in her development as an individual, reserving special praise for her mother.

Annette's short story resembles "Aunt Jane's Album" in that its narrator specifically states that "many passages of [her] life seem to be epitomized in [her] patchwork quilt" (11). Like Hall's short story, "The Patchwork Quilt" specifies that this type of textile form is a text where its maker records her vital experiences. Moreover, in a comment that anticipates the difference between male and female ways of reading portrayed in "A Jury of Her Peers," Annette's piece establishes a clear contrast between able readers of women's texts and poor interpreters of the messages expressed through quilts.

This short story masterfully describes the fact that quilts, despite being absolutely necessary texts in order to understand women's history, have been frequently overlooked, a theme that, more than half a century later, Susan Glaspell turned into the central axis of "A Jury of Her Peers." This idea, which eventually became the basis for the recuperative readings of many women's texts by late-twentieth-century feminists, is encapsulated in "The Patchwork Quilt" in the distinction between the "I" of the story and "the uninterested observer." For the narrator, the quilt constitutes a text brimming with meaning, "a precious reliquary of past treasures; a storehouse of valuables, almost destitute of intrinsic worth; a herbarium of withered flowers; a bound volume of hieroglyphics, each of which is a key to some painful or pleasant remembrance" (11). For "the uninterested observer," on the contrary, all the positive associations of the quilt disappear and the quilt itself is reduced to "a miscellaneous collection of odd bits and ends of calico" that have no ulterior meaning and little or no value beyond the strictly

material. However, given the deep connections between the different stages in the narrator's existence and her quilt, being unable to decipher the messages that lie hidden in her textile becomes equivalent not only to missing an individual woman's private account of her life, but also the history of an entire community of females who gathered around that textile in order to write themselves into it.

As the narrator changes the narrative focus of the short story from one piece of her quilt to the other, she describes her experience as a woman by detailing the most relevant aspects of her life. The scraps used to make the quilt come from clothes that belonged to her mother, her siblings, her friends, and the wider female community represented by her neighborhood. They cover very different aspects of her life, mixing happiness with pain, and spanning a period from her early years to her current maturity. Some of the pieces were chosen to indicate when she "first discarded pantalettes" and "first felt [her]self a woman;" others are reminders of her womanly education, of her attendance at a dancing school and her training in sewing; those coming from her pink apron prove the importance of domestic work in her life; and, finally, those "earned by [her] own exertions" remind her of her independence (13-14).

In *Sister's Choice* Elaine Showalter claims that "[t]he quilt's pieces, taken from the writer's childhood calico gowns, her dancing school dress, her fashionable young ladies' gowns, her mother's mourning dress, her brother's vest, are thus a record of the *female cycle* from birth to death" (151; emphasis added). In fact, the narrator describes the essential passages in the life of a woman who lives surrounded by other females. Thus, her earliest recollections take her to that "memorable period when I emerged from babyhood to childhood," to the emergence of her consciousness as an individual in her

own right, free from the physical attachment to the mother typical of the baby. This awareness of female self-identity is linked to “the commencement of this patchwork quilt,” which becomes a record of her life as a woman from the moment she internalizes her individuality to her present (11).

From that moment of self-awareness, she moves to her education, which represents a superb example of the teachings True Women received. Although there is no explicit reference to it, she was taught how to read and write, as her ability to produce a penned account of her own existence indicates. In addition to that, she attended a dancing school to learn genteel occupations which she could use to entertain and enhance the lives of those living with her. Nevertheless, the most essential part of her education depends on the training in domestic management that she receives from her mother. As her mother’s apprentice, she learns how to sew, the quintessential female activity for a woman living at the height of the cult of True Womanhood.

At the time “The Patchwork Quilt” was published, sewing was an integral part of the education girls received in academic institutions for females, which were intended to prepare these young ladies for their successful adjustment to the prevalent ideology of womanhood rather than for the job market, where opportunities for women had gradually begun to shrink. Thus, many of these schools emphasized the religious and practical component of their instruction, assuring parents that they were making an investment which would turn their daughters into pious homemakers. In her ground-breaking article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter mentions a number of women’s seminaries, including Mount Holyoke, the Young Ladies’ Seminary at Bordentown, New Jersey, and Keene Seminary in New Hampshire, whose stated aim was

to help women develop their religiosity and become good wives and mothers (153-54). As I noted in chapter two, this type of instruction also privileged quilting as a means of teaching women geometric proportions. Remembering the construction of perfect squares required for the making of a patchwork quilt, the narrator advises parents to use quilting as a didactic instrument. “Parents,” she writes, “never purchase for your children mathematical puzzles—you can teach them and amuse them by making patchwork” (11). Hence, she equates piecing patchwork with putting into practice the teachings of a discipline such as geometry at the same time as one is entertained.

Moreover, sewing also constitutes the centerpiece around which all the instruction the narrator receives at home revolves. She receives needlework lessons from her mother and encouragement from the entire community of neighbors, who praise her interest and reward her gradual steps towards achieving proficiency with additional quilt pieces. As she learns to sew, she is introduced to the jargon of the female community of needlewomen that has accepted her as one of its members. Furthermore, she portrays an educational system which consists in moving to progressively more difficult tasks at the same time that more specific vocabulary is learned. “What magical words,” exclaims the narrator, “were *gusset*, *felling*, *buttonhole-stitch*, and so forth, each a Sesame, opening into an arcane of workmanship—through and beyond which I could see embroidery, hem-stitch, open-work, tambour, and a host of magical beauties.” With these technical words, needlewomen create a series of stories, a number of “legends” as the narrator terms them, which emphasize their membership in a female community that shares a similar cultural background (12).

During the heyday of the cult of True Womanhood, sewing did not simply constitute an essentially practical activity that all females were expected to learn. It represented an effective way of instilling in women a series of values such as patience or submissiveness, which were considered vital components of the ideal personal traits a True Woman was expected to embody. Consequently, the narrator describes herself as a female who has learned to see in needlework not only all the positive characteristics that her society values in her as a woman but also her main channel of achieving social recognition. Hence, she presents herself as “a heroine” and, borrowing vocabulary from her religious background, as “a martyr under the pricks and inflictions of the needle” (12). From the pains inflicted by her sewing implements she receives “the first lessons in heroism and fortitude.” “How much,” she argues, “I learned of the world’s generosity in rewarding the efforts of the industrious and enterprising” (12). In summary, she comes to understand that her patchwork quilt, “the union of some little shreds of calico,” reifies “all the moral emotions and valuable qualities and powers” a girl should aspire to (11).

As she becomes an adolescent, the narrator moves beyond the influence of the quilt, out of the realm of women, for a brief period of time which corresponds with her personal development as an individual rather than as a member of a group or community. However, as she begins to be courted by a boy who escorts her home from her singing lessons, she realizes that her life is part of a female cycle which repeats the steps other women took before her. She says that while preparing for a potential marriage, “my thoughts and efforts were returned to my patchwork quilt,” a comment which reminds the reader not only of the important role quilts played in the dowries of nineteenth-century females but also of the intricate relationship between quilts and marriage (12). In fact, the

narrator resumes her patchwork quilt “in secrecy and silence,” as having done it publicly would have amounted to an engagement announcement which in her case never took place.

Thus, as the bleak prospect of remaining a spinster becomes a reality for her, she feels that the logical projection of her life has come to a halt and hands the patchwork quilt and all the dreams it embodies to her sister so that she can complete the female cycle. This exchange of the quilt is one of the images that best illustrates the uncompetitive nature of women’s relationships and the healthy state of the female community at the time “The Patchwork Quilt” came out. It represents such intimate a union between two women that the degree of communion between them is total, to the point that the narrator projects her frustrated illusions onto her sister and presents her sibling’s life as a continuation of her own. For the narrator, giving her patchwork to her sister “seemed like a transference of girlish hopes and aspirations” and, as they quilt, they spend “pleasant hours in which [the narrator] sympathized so strongly in all her hopes that [she] made them [hers]” (14-15). A successful gathering full of entertainment and happiness, the quilting bee held in honor of the bride-to-be takes to a neighborly level the healthy but diminutive community the two sisters had established.

As a consequence of remaining a spinster, the narrator had the opportunity to experience the independence that is normally associated with unmarried women. Her quilt includes “a piece of the first dress which was ever earned by my own exertions,” a reminder of a period of her life when she derived “a feeling of exultation, of self-dependence, of *self-reliance*” from the paid work she performed (14). This comment made by the narrator may be an allusion to Annette herself, a Lowell mill girl whose real

name probably was Harriet Farley or Rebecca C. Thomson. Lowell, Massachusetts, achieved popularity somewhere in between the age of homespun and the total industrialization of cloth production with a unique system that attracted many middle-class New England girls to its factories in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century. Their incorporation into the newly established cotton mills was accomplished under conditions that differed enormously from those of English factories in the first phases of British industrialization:

American industrialization, which occurred in an underdeveloped economy with a shortage of labor, depended on the labor of women and children. Men were occupied with agricultural work and were not available or were unwilling to enter the factories. This accounts for the special features of the early development of the New England textile industry: the relative high wages, the respectability of the job and relative high status of the mill girls, the patriarchal character of the model factory towns, and the temporary mobility of women workers from farm to town and back again to farm. All this was characteristic only of a limited area and of a period of about two decades. (Lerner, *Majority* 24)

As New England farm girls followed what had been traditional household industries for women into the factories, they were complying with the Protestant ideal that everybody should work to support oneself. In addition to that, they were lured by good working conditions and relatively high salaries which allowed them to feel a new sense of freedom. Furthermore, these “[b]right, ambitious [and] literate” girls, who were “rather like the girls from the same area who would be going to Mount Holyoke and Vassar in the next generation” enjoyed all the respectability that the so-called Lowell system had tried to instill into the factories (Douglas 70). The mill girls were lodged in

boarding houses especially designed to accommodate them. To make Lowell more attractive to both potential workers and their families, the housing system was operated by upright widows who demanded compliance with strict rules of conduct (Kiracofe 84). In order to ensure respectability even further, mill girls were required to attend church services and many of them joined clubs sponsored by the Universalist and Congregational churches. Furthermore, they took evening lessons in the subjects that women traditionally studied in the nineteenth century: music, botany, modern languages, etc. In addition to that, they enjoyed two amateur magazines where they channeled their need for self-expression. These two periodicals eventually merged into the *Lowell Offering*, which published Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt" in 1845 (Weatherford, *Milestones* 57; Douglas 70).

By the late 1830s these utopian working conditions had begun to vanish under increasing pressures. The degree of respectability associated with the cotton mills decreased and salaries were dramatically reduced due to the temporary nature of women's commitment to the workplace, the failure to unionize, improvements in machinery design that decreased the expertise necessary to perform most of the jobs, and the arrival of thousands of unskilled immigrants willing to work for substandard wages. The story of Lowell from the late 1830s onwards shows a progressive degradation of working conditions and the debasement of the ideal of respectability it had tried to instill in the factory workers. Strikes and petitions to the Massachusetts legislature for shorter work days were commonplace after the 1840s (Weatherford, *Milestones* 63-65). By 1869 the utopia that the Lowell system represented in its conception had collapsed; working women complained of wages so low that they failed to cover basic needs such as decent

lodging and nourishment and also of working days so long that they were undermining both their physical health and their morality (Fox and Langley 199). The narrator's comment noting that "Time has robbed [working for money] of some of its pleasures" may be a covert allusion to the degradation of working conditions in the mills or simply a sign of adjustment to a situation that is not novel any longer (14).

The narrator completes the vital cycle by adding some allusions to death to the references she makes to her mature years. Besides incorporating a scrap from her mother's mourning gown, the patchwork quilt has "dark stains at the top of it" which tell the story of her sister's disease and death. In fact, "[t]he patchwork quilt shrouded her wasted form as she sweetly resigned herself to the arms of Death," thus functioning as a temporary burial quilt not unlike those used by pioneers who couldn't find a casket on their way to the West (15). Throughout this long life journey, the presence of other females in the narrator's existence is essential. She supports, and is supported by, a community of women of all ages, among them her mother, her sister, a childhood friend, and "the kind old lady who expressed her gratification over [her] small stitches by a red broadcloth strawberry, which was introduced to [her] as an emery-bag" (12). All of them encourage her creative process by providing either moral or technical support as well as the materials necessary for the completion of her quilt.

Nonetheless, the narrator reserves special praise for her mother's role in her life. It is through her mother that she first comes into contact with the female community. As Nina Auerbach notes, "[t]he family is the first community we know, and it takes the shape of Mother" (36). The close emotional relationship between the two described in "The Patchwork Quilt" is illustrative of the importance the mother-daughter bond had

during the cult of True Womanhood. In fact, the mother is depicted as the prototypical “long-suffering” True Woman, whose defining characteristics are “patience and forbearance” (11). She constitutes the main pillar on which both the narrator and her artistic creation rest; the mother participates in all the quilting stages by furnishing her daughter with calico pieces, reassuring her during the actual making of the quilt, and helping her perfect her technique. The mother quilts with and for her daughter.

Her importance in the narrator’s existence is highlighted in her quilt, where the mother occupies the central spot. The narrator chooses a bright copperplate piece of cloth which came from her mother’s cushion for the quilt’s center. The election of this piece, referred to as the “*star*,” emphasizes the central role the mother plays in her daughter’s life and indicates that, during the cult of True Womanhood, mothers were the axes, the stars, around which their daughters’ lives spun. This mother-daughter communion is emphasized by the inclusion of an additional piece of cloth that was shared by all the female members of the family, a fact that points to the deep emotional bonds different generations of women shared and demonstrates that the generational confrontation typical of the turn into the twentieth century was an alien concept for True Women (13).

Within these closed women’s communities men play an apparently marginal role. In general, they are excluded from the rituals that unite women and give them a sense of belonging to a shared community. Their marginal position is represented by the narrator’s brother, whose insistence on contributing to the patchwork quilt is “rewarded” with an assignment to quilt a peripheral block made of dark pieces of calico which minimize his contributions to the quilt by rendering them virtually invisible. However, men’s role in the perpetuation of these communities should not be underestimated. It is men who

encourage the formation of female communities and trap unsuspecting women within them, as exemplified in the strategy followed by the narrator's father, who gave his daughter a "beautiful brass thimble [. . .] with the assurance that if [she] never would lose it he would one day give [her] one of silver" (12). This indeterminate promise emphasizes that patriarchal society tried to restrict females to the home and to domestic activities which allowed them to develop only within certain pre-established limits.

"The Quilting Party" (1849) testifies to this male interest in preserving the status quo. Published only four years later than Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt," T. S. Arthur's short story is completely different in tone. In fact, Arthur devotes "The Quilting Party" to bemoaning the imminent loss of female rituals and women's institutions, such as quilting and quilting bees, and to express nostalgia for the old days of his youth when women devoted most of their time to needlework. The narrator, who uses the first "quilting party" he attended as the focal point of his narration, provides a clear contrast between the situation in the narrative present and that of twenty years earlier, when quilting bees were welcome social occasions.

"The Quilting Party" was, like "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," written by a man. Unlike Harris's work, Arthur's piece was intended for a female readership. Therefore, although it stereotypically portrays women as mutable individuals, the short story as a whole does not constitute a misogynistic attack on women's culture like "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" does. This is probably due to Arthur's implication in nineteenth-century crusades that have traditionally been associated with women. As noted elsewhere, he published *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*, the most famous novel on temperance. He was also attuned to women's tastes because during his lifetime he effectively edited a number of

successful magazines targeting mainly women and families. In addition to that, Arthur also wrote over one hundred books, many of them intended as exempla, in which he sometimes advised adolescents, married couples, or any other individual in need of moral counseling (Holman viii). Although “The Quilting Party” does not constitute a prototypical fictionalized sermon, it does feature a narrative voice which compares the present, unsatisfactory circumstances to a former, more favorable situation which he would like to see preserved.

After comparing the expectations and interests women have in the narrative present with those of women living twenty years earlier, the narrator perceives negative changes in society which mainly affect women’s relationships with each other, their attitude towards sewing, and their command of the needlework knowledge necessary to make a quilt. Although the short story does not fictionalize any episode of direct confrontation between women, the ideal female community depicted in Annette’s “The Patchwork Quilt” has begun to disappear, as mothers and daughters no longer share the same activities or participate in the same bonding rituals. This discrepancy between the two generations particularly affects women’s attitudes towards quilting.

Older women are presented as knowledgeable in quilting matters, aware of the existing differences between each of the patterns, and well-acquainted with the implements necessary for making a quilt. In these women’s lives, quilts represent a crucial part of their existence because they are intimately connected with different stages in their vital cycle, especially with all the necessary preparations for marriage. In this sense, for the older generation, who grew up when “[h]alf a dozen handsome patchwork quilts were as indispensable [. . .] as a marriage portion,” “the quilting party was [. . .]

indicative of the coming-out and being 'in the market'," an essential institution in their lives (69). This situation, which refers to twenty years before the narrative present, does not differ significantly from the state of affairs described in Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt."

It is, however, radically opposed to the present circumstances of younger women's lives. The narrator says of "[o]ur young ladies of the present generation [that they] know little of the mysteries of 'Irish chain, 'rising star,' 'block work,' or 'Job's trouble,' and would be as likely to mistake a set of quilting frames for clothes as for anything else" (69). This discrepancy between mothers and daughters is directly linked to changes in the education young women receive, which the narrator dissociates from needlework in order to emphasize additional means of expression available to them, such as pianos or guitars, which are portrayed as essential elements in their lives.

Because of the generation gap "The Quilting Party" emphasizes, no images of healthy communities between different-age women are depicted. The intimate mother-daughter relationship which Annette had portrayed in "The Patchwork Quilt" is replaced here with a void, as no allusions to bonding elements between parent and child are described. In the narrative present there are no references to healthy relationships between females. In fact, all allusions to functional communities date back to twenty years earlier, when the narrator was in his youth. It was then that invitations to "quilting parties" were greeted with "a flutter of delight all around" and quilting bees themselves were celebrated in the midst of general merriment and widespread laughs (70-71). Of the present situation, nothing is mentioned. However, the grave tone of the piece and the exaltation of bygone times at the expense of modern ones indicate that the current

situation is no longer idyllic. Although the narrator claims that he “do[es] not belong to the class who believe that society is retrograding, because everything is not as it was in the earlier days of our life history,” the impression his writing makes on the reader is that he does (69).

In fact, the narrator subtly delineates two radically different social panoramas with his allusions to “quilting parties.” According to him, there was, on the one hand, a time when the quilting bee, the female community par excellence, played a vital role in providing women with a space for free interaction. In those days, quilting bees basically served a useful purpose: they provided women with time and space for the creation of a bedcover that marked a significant stage in their lives. In addition to that, they were welcome social events which gave near and distant neighbors the opportunity to interact with each other. As illustrated by Amy Willing’s “quilting party,” quilting bees were often mere excuses for socializing. In this sense, the main purpose of Amy Willing’s quilting bee is that of providing a suitable environment for interaction; therefore, as soon as a considerable number of guests are gathered around the quilting frame, the “but half-bound quilt was forcibly taken from the hands of the laughing seamstresses and put ‘out of sight and out of mind’” (71). After that, people devote their time to socializing and playing the courting games typically associated with these events (71-72). In the narrative present, on the other hand, social intercourse takes place “[i]n a wider sphere” where the narrator has “not found greater social pleasures” and where the female community does not seem to have a space of its own for interaction (69). Therefore, even though no direct confrontation between women is portrayed, female communities do not have the propitious environment for flourishing.

This nostalgia for the old days of successful “quilting parties” and healthy relationships among women is not accurate from a historical point of view. Historically, the span covered by the heyday of the cult of True Womanhood, which includes the publication date of “The Quilting Party,” constitutes one of the most favorable periods for the development of quilting. Taking into account that this ideology advocated compulsory domesticity for all women at the same time that it championed all forms of needlework, which were considered the main connecting point between females and their sphere, it would be difficult to argue for such an early demise of both quilting as an activity and the female communities that gathered around the quilting frame. It must be remembered that because of the vital role quilts played in raising funds for social reform movements such as temperance or abolition, the third quarter of the nineteenth century was especially favorable for the development of quilting and, consequently, for female interaction. Therefore, the grave tone and pessimism that dominate “The Quilting Party” may well indicate a covert fear that women may move away from the domestic realm of quilts, appropriate gradually larger portions of the public sphere for themselves, start interacting “[i]n a wider sphere,” and thus challenge male supremacy over the public arena.

Historically speaking, the nostalgia for the old days of successful quilting bees and healthy female communities that pervades “The Quilting Party” would have been more justified if the story had been written in 1898 when Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “A Quilting Bee in Our Village” was published. By then, the heyday of the ideology of the separate spheres had waned, its influence had practically vanished, and, therefore, the conditions that had sheltered women in the home, favoring the development of intimate

bonds between them, had disappeared. As a consequence, Freeman's short story replaces Arthur's nostalgia for vanishing female rituals with a detailed portrayal of the decadence of women's culture and their communities.

Unlike "An Honest Soul," which features the prototypical unmarried, independent female that feminists have so often praised in Freeman's fiction, "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" concentrates on a group of women who fear spinsterhood and are willing to engage in any action that would free them from the impending threat of remaining unmarried for the rest of their lives. Freeman even depicts spinsters as gossipy, jealous of other women, and trouble-making. This negative characterization of unmarried women is not totally exceptional in Freeman's oeuvre, even though it has generally been ignored by critics. More interested in portraying Freeman as a proto-feminist author who wrote about female characters who challenged or eschewed the restrictive definitions of womanhood imposed by patriarchy, feminist critics have favored independent Martha Patches over characters who strive to find and secure a husband.

However, Freeman's works often oscillate between portraying self-sufficient spinsters and depicting female characters willing to trade their personal autonomy for the social status of wifedom. Her biographer Leah Glasser notes that in Freeman's fiction there are abrupt shifts from the potentially homosexual ties to the heterosexual ones, which show that "Freeman could not rest easy within the homosocial network, and certainly could not accept such connections as conclusive" (*Closet* 154). In fact, her own life was plagued by the contradiction implied in being a spinster who highly valued her independence but felt powerfully attracted to the status of the married woman. She definitely understood marriage as a patriarchal institution which compromised women's

independence; actually, some of the letters she wrote during her courtship “document her fear that in marriage she might lose her own identity” (Pryse xiv). Yet, she was also poignantly aware that “[s]pinsterness was considered a social anomaly to be disparaged and avoided at all costs” and, as a consequence, she “resented her long, single status” which excluded her as well as any unmarried woman from the privileges associated with wives (Brand 85).

The attraction marriage exerted over Freeman ended up with her wedding at age fifty and a disastrous relationship with Dr. Charles Freeman. In “A Quilting Bee in Our Village,” the possibility of getting married leads to confrontation among women and to the portrayal of a decaying female community whose traditional bonding rituals fail to give them stability as a group. Thus, the quilting bee this short story fictionalizes is unsuccessfully celebrated in an emotionally and physically unhealthy atmosphere that does not create the necessary preconditions for the development of strong female communities.

The first obvious sign of a malfunctioning female community is provided by the neighborly coolness and indifference with which the news that a quilting bee is going to be celebrated is received. The story’s introductory paragraph reveals a situation that has radically changed from the times when pioneer women tried to lessen their isolation by attending distant “quiltings.” “A Quilting Bee is Our Village” shows that by the end of the nineteenth century circumstances had changed, towns had been settled for a long time, settlers had developed efficient mechanisms of social interaction, and enjoyed both the benefits and drawbacks of living in consolidated communities. Hence, there is an

overabundance of quilting bees which transforms what had been an appreciated female gathering into a heavy social burden:

One sometimes wonders whether it will ever be possible in our village to attain absolute rest and completion with regard to quilts. One thinks after a week fairly swarming with quilting bees, 'Now every housewife in the place must be well supplied; there will be no need to make more quilts for six months at least.' Then, the next morning a nice little becurled girl in a clean pinafore knocks at the door and repeats demurely her well-conned lesson: 'Mother sends her compliments, and would be happy to have you come to her quilting bee this afternoon.' (92)

As a consequence of such an abundance of quilting bees, these meetings lose their ritualistic meaning and become insignificant everyday events to which "[h]ardly any woman who was invited [. . .] was anxious to go" (93). A further indication that quilting bees have lost their celebratory character is that women no longer attend them wearing outer signs that testify to the importance of the event. On the contrary, females go to the bee dressed in old clothing (93).

The eminently negative tone in which the story begins pervades it in its entirety, as illustrated by the large number of unpleasant details which accompany the development of Brama Lincoln White's quilting bee. The first and most relevant of those elements is the atmosphere that permeates the setting. Far from being held in an emotionally warm and soothing atmosphere, Brama's bee is celebrated in a physical environment that grows from suffocating to sickening as the afternoon advances into the evening. The narrator focuses on depicting a scene where the unbearable heat constitutes the most relevant feature. Around the time of the quilting bee, "[t]he earth seemed to give

out heat like a stove, and the sky was like the lid of a fiery pot” (93). Instead of quilting in the winter, when farm work was scarcer and the long, dreary evenings needed to be filled with some useful occupation, Brama’s mother chooses the hottest day of a July week in which “the heat [. . .] was something to be remembered” for making the bedcover (92). This environment, which impedes the normal development of the quilting bee, suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century, women’s culture had become suffocating.

In fact, the story takes the idea one step further to suggest that a separate female culture could become a mortal trap. If the story begins with a protest against the “swarms” of quilting bees celebrated in the narrator’s village, by its end the swarms it alludes to are mainly composed of mosquitoes and moths which attack the quilters. As the insects invade the room, the environment turns sickening. As a result, women’s “faces were blazing with the heat, and even the pretty girls had a wilted and stringy look from their hair out of curl and their limp muslins” (97). In addition to pointing out the deep association between nineteenth-century females and flowers, the description of women as “wilted” emphasizes the decay of the concept of womanhood that prevailed for part of the 1800s and the decadence of women’s separate culture.

This decadence is highlighted by the diminutive space in which the guests are expected to make Brama’s quilt. In her parlor, the quilting frame “occupied nearly the entire room. There was just enough space for the quilters to file around and seat themselves four on a side” (94). Taking into account that the importance of quilting bees rested on the fact that they provided women with room for themselves and with space for their personal growth free from patriarchal intrusion, the fact that the quilting bee is

celebrated in such a cramped area indicates that by the late 1800s, quilting was regarded as an oppressive activity which trapped females in a domestic realm that neither satisfied them nor provided them with room for developing as individuals.

Given this negative environment, the quilting bee itself could hardly end up as a successful reunion where females celebrated the thriving state of women's culture. The main element that testifies to the decadence of a healthy women's culture is the quilt itself, which is composed of a "number of pieces almost beyond belief" (94). The tendency to include an increasingly larger number of pieces in quilts, which was widespread in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century, was partially triggered by the creation of a genteel class that enjoyed plenty of leisure. For Roderick Kiracofe "[t]he most plausible explanation for these painstaking constructions is that they were done in a spirit of competitiveness" among women (192). The emergence of this fierce competition among females is directly related to their gradual entrance into the public sphere, a realm heretofore considered exclusively male where individual success was not only praised but also preferred to the collective achievements of female communities.

In an interesting analysis of the impact of the rhetoric of advertising on publications which, like *Harper's Bazar*, regularly published Freeman's fiction, Monika M. Elbert suggests that advertising techniques also played an important role in creating feelings of inadequacy in women which ultimately resulted in open confrontation among them. According to her, beginning in the 1880s, women's magazines were allowed to decrease their price dramatically by increasing the number of paid advertisements they carried. Many of those ads highlighted a number of physical problems in order to get women interested in outlandish products that were supposed to work wonders so as to

solve them. In Elbert's view, "[i]f one were to look at a sampling of the ads in the back of *Harper's Bazar*, one could easily see the tension that such magazines created for woman: she was made to feel incomplete, unsatisfactory, and even neurotic" (259). She also notes that a quick review of books published at the end of the 1800s reveals that women dressed for the sake of other women so as to avoid criticism or provoke envy (261).

According to Elbert, this emphasis on female competition was especially evident in Freeman's early contributions to *Harper's Bazar*, which often portray "women [who] seem to be their own worst enemies" (261). Although "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" is neither one of Freeman's earliest works nor was published by *Harper's Bazar*, it presents the decadence of female communities through rivalry and competition between women. The main conflict revolves around Mr. Lucius Downey, for whose attention both Lottie Green and Lurinda Snell bicker. However, the decay of women's relationships is such that there need not be conflicting interests involved for females to attack each other. Brama, whose fiancé nobody seems to dispute, is criticized for "hangin' round Francis considerable before he was married," for having started the bedcover now being quilted before she was officially engaged, for being old, for marrying late, and for doing it in the wrong season (93-94). Forgetting the ritualistic character quilting bees used to have in relation to women's marriage, none of the attendants seems willing to celebrate the positive aspects of Brama's engagement.

Nonetheless, it is Lottie and Lurinda's open confrontation that "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" focuses on. Their disputes are representative of a section of Freeman's oeuvre in which women's emotional dependence on each other leads to loyalty as well as hostility. The story belongs to a group of works in which "Freeman consistently portrays

relationships between women as inequitable, often to an extreme. Many of her stories are based on a rivalry or power struggle—over a man, a possession, a reputation—between a dominant or strong woman and a much weaker one” (Reichardt, “Friend” 56). Besides not being rewarding in any possible sense of the word, the antagonism between Lottie and Lurinda demonstrates that disputes among women destroy the rituals that had traditionally sustained them. By interrupting the courting games and dances associated with quilting bees, women undermine the agglutinative qualities of the bee and, therefore, damage its ability to create and maintain communities of women.

The most telling evidence of the decadence of female communities is provided by Lurinda’s attempts to silence Lottie. For most of the nineteenth century, an effective patriarchal system had tried to silence women by keeping them away from the public sphere. Confined to the home, women had resorted to the tools domesticity afforded them so as to find alternative texts and innovative means of expression that allowed them to recover their kidnapped voice. Freeman’s story aptly demonstrates that, by the end of the nineteenth century, females had renounced these alternative texts—quilts, songs, domestic activities—and were no longer using them to fight the restrictions patriarchy imposed on them. On the contrary, “A Quilting Bee is Our Village” shows how women renounce or destroy the alternative texts they had created in order to attack each other. Lurinda’s interruptions of Lottie’s song perfectly illustrate this point:

Next Lottie Green was called upon to sing, as she always is in company, she has such a sweet voice [. . .] but Lurinda was taken with hiccoughs. Nobody doubted that she really had hiccoughs, but it was considered justly that she might have smothered them in her handkerchief, or at least have left the room, instead of spoiling Lottie Green’s beautiful

song, which she did completely [. . .] “Annie Laurie” with no accompaniment but that of hiccoughs was a failure. (96-97)

The actual silencing that takes place in this passage is especially significant because songs, together with quilts and gardens, have traditionally been considered the main unconventional texts accessible to women of all educational backgrounds. By severing the access to those texts or by rendering them ineffectual, females destroy their basic means of artistic expression and the potential for subverting or challenging patriarchal discourse with their own.

Finally, the pattern the attendants to Brama’s bee are quilting, a representation of the rising sun, has been interpreted as “a mocking allusion to the setting sun of women’s culture, and to the disappearance of its sustaining aesthetic rituals” (Showalter, “Piecing” 239). It could also point out the cyclical nature of women’s lives and experiences, indicating that the now decaying female culture may one day leave behind a dark period and rise like the sun with renewed energies. In fact, a story like “A Jury of Her Peers,” published only two decades later, emphasizes women’s need to combine efforts as the only way to survive in a patriarchal society that legally discriminates against them. Feminists answered the desperate call for the revival of women’s communities and female culture that Glaspell made in “Jury” by extolling women’s cultural contributions and praising institutions such as the quilting bee that had strengthened the ties between females.

“A Quilting Bee in Our Village” has been chosen as the third, and not the last, short story to be studied in a section that pays special attention to the treatment of the theme of community in fiction about quilts because, in spite of the evident decay of

women's bonds it portrays, certain redeeming elements remain visible within the group of quilters. Even though the story mostly depicts group-making activities that have been rendered inefficacious, it includes some communal rituals which continue to bond women. Thus, despite Lottie Green's frustrated attempts at finishing her song, "[t]he folks sat [in the front yard] until quite late, telling stories and singing hymns and songs," demonstrating their unity (97). In my opinion, food also serves as another distinctively female ritual that helps create and maintain a sense of communion and community among the guests participating in the quilting bee.

In *Sister's Choice*, Elaine Showalter, who argues that "[t]he supper is sickening in its vulgar abundance," interprets the viands prepared for the quilting bee from a very negative perspective (157). In my view, the food constitutes one of the few bonding elements present in this fictionalized gathering. In a short story that features women who constantly attack and criticize other females for no apparent reason, comments on the food are positive without exception. The narrator claims that "Mrs. White had a tea which will go into the history of the village. *Everybody* wondered how she and Brama had managed to do so much in that terrible heat" (95; emphasis added). Showalter's statement also contradicts the narrator's opinion, who argues that "[n]o woman in the village had ever given a better quilting supper than Mrs. Harrison White and Brama" (95-96). Furthermore, the repetition of the adjective "cold" in the description of some of the dishes the guests savor points out the soothing qualities of the food in the midst of the unbearable heat and suffocating atmosphere that pervade the celebration of this gathering.

In addition to that, the abundance of food should be considered a positive element in Freeman's fiction, which usually depicted semi-starving characters who struggle to

obtain basic nourishment. Taking into account the superfluity of food and the obesity problems it causes among late-twentieth-century Americans, mentioning a high-carbohydrate diet consisting of “seven kinds of cake, besides doughnuts, cookies and short gingerbread” in addition to “five kinds of pie, and cup custards, hot biscuits, cold bread, preserves, cold ham and tongue” might definitely sound “sickening” (95). However, Mrs. White’s supper should not be compared to the present circumstances but to the descriptions of nineteenth-century New England Freeman provides in most of her fiction. Freeman’s prototypical village is characterized by an extreme poverty that only allows its inhabitants to enjoy a full meal on Thanksgiving Day; the rest of the time “their fare consists of a bowl of soup or a cup of tea and bread or a serving of cornmeal mush.” As a consequence, needy characters are constantly threatened with losing their independence and ending their days as social failures in the poorhouse (Westbrook 55). Many of them resemble Martha Patch, who begins rejoicing because “thar’s plenty of meal an’ merlasses, an’ some salt fish an’ pertaters in the house” and ends up half-starved, fainting in a kitchen where shelves are completely bare, and compromising her independence when she receives her neighbor’s assistance (233). Taking into account the existence of these undernourished females who live on diets that are barely suitable for humans, the abundance of food cannot but be welcome, especially because it allows its maker to demonstrate her domestic artistry to a qualified audience of housekeeping women.

Besides its bonding qualities, food is also important in “A Quilting Bee in Our Village” because it works as a text that women who situated themselves outside the female community fail to read properly. It highlights how little females can gain from

competing against each other and trying to satisfy male agencies that cannot be appeased with women's offerings. In fact, the quilting supper gives both Lottie and Lurinda the opportunity to foretell their inability to win over their opponent because, regardless of what they do, the man whose heart they try to win cannot be pleased. However, both ignore food as a text and insist on filling Lucius Downey's plate with food. Even though at one point "there were five slices of cake and three pieces of pie on his plate," everything disappears (95). The consumption of the viands he is presented with is equivalent to a symbolic consumption of the women who supply him with the food; he gathers energy from both sources. While the cakes and pies give him literal energy, the dispute between women leaves both of them exhausted, but consolidates him in his superior position. Hence, "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" demonstrates that patriarchy takes advantage of the decadence of female communities, of the division among women so as to drain their debilitated energies and "swallow" them up, nullifying the challenge they might represent to the status quo.

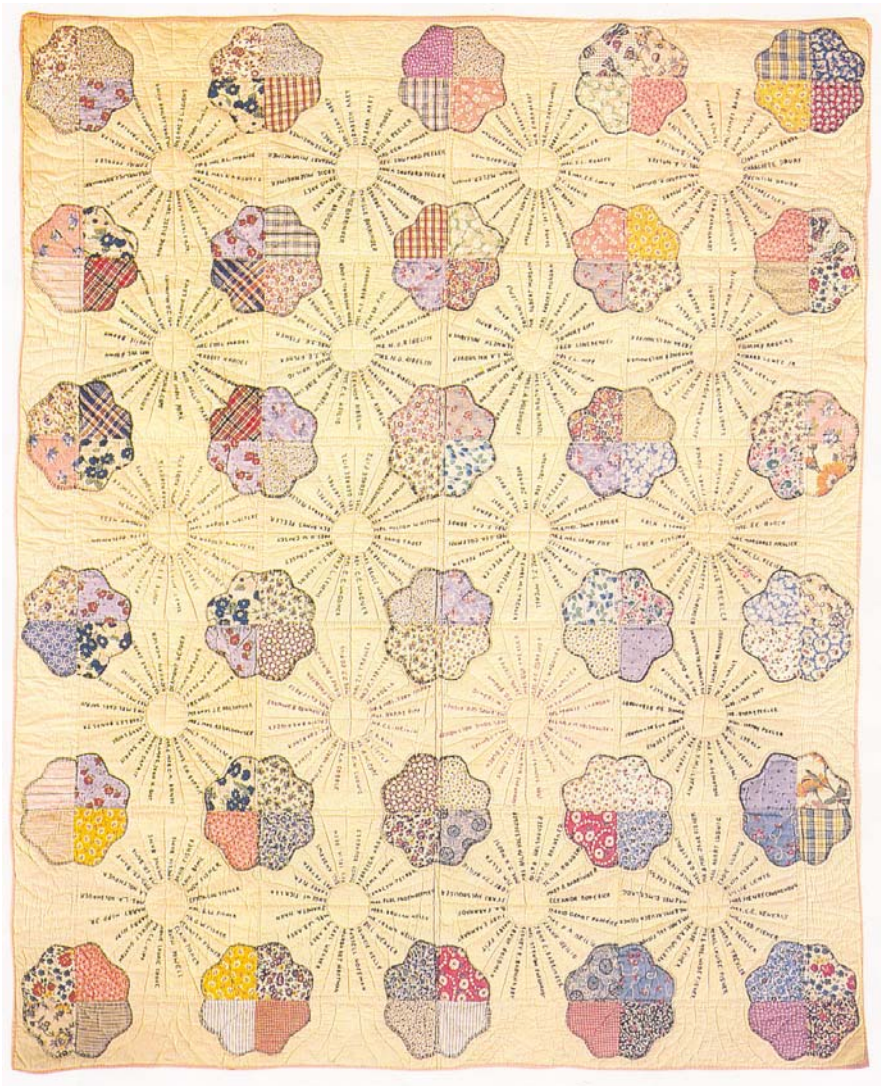
Despite having written "Miss Jones' Quilting" (1887) eleven years earlier, Marietta Holley is less considerate in her portrayal of female communities. Like Freeman's short story, Holley's piece also narrates the events that happened during the celebration of a quilting bee, even though in this case the ultimate recipient of the bedcover is not a bride-to-be but the local priest, who has been married for a year. Although the quilting is intended to pay homage to him, many of the quilters dishonor his name by criticizing both his looks and his choice of wife. However, most of the slandering falls on his wife, who is accused of being both extravagant and unfaithful.

Through women's unwarranted criticism of each other, Holley highlights the lack of nurturing rituals among women and explores the demise of female communities.

Superficially, "Miss Jones' Quilting" presents a situation that does not differ radically from what may have been encountered during the heyday of the cult of True Womanhood. It features a female narrator, a middle-aged woman named Samantha Allen, who emphasizes the important role religion plays in her life and recounts how her fellow parishioners joined efforts to maintain their priest's wellbeing by making a quilt. In fact, Samantha's attachment to the church responds to the prototypical reason that according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese drew True Women to religion—the need to come to terms with the dangers implied in childbearing and, particularly, with high infant mortality rates (*Plantation* 277). Thus, the narrator's opinion of the minister is related to the role he played in comforting her; she cannot forget "how he took hold of my hand and how his voice trembled and the tears stood in his eyes, when [her] little Joe died" (86). Holley herself took religion seriously. She was a Baptist who believed in God's guidance, in the power of personal faith, and in the existence of spirits. Although in her fiction she condemned the use of the Bible to advocate male supremacy, she believed in "the influence of the church as a central institution of moral authority in society" (Curry 58).

This attachment to the church had led many nineteenth-century women to make fundraising quilts for their local priests who, along with needy families, were the main recipients of this type of bedcovers. The quilt being put together in "Miss Jones' Quilting" perfectly illustrates this point. It represents a communal project in which "all the wimmen round had pieced a block or two" of the top. The materials for the remaining two layers had been purchased with the money raised from donations; the women "took

up a collection to get the batten and linin', and the cloth to set it together with" (85). The similarities with the prevailing situation in mid-nineteenth-century America end here. The short story makes some passing references to changed conditions so as to concentrate on the depiction of a community of females which uses its traditional bonding elements to attack other women.



Fundraising
Quilt
1945
Rowan County,
NC

Women's Guild
of the First
Evangelical and
Reformed
Church of
Salisbury

Source: *North
Carolina Quilts*,
p. 156

Among these changed socio-cultural circumstances the narrator mentions female education and the collapse of a concept of womanhood that defined women as morally superior individuals. In “Miss Jones’ Quilting,” it is possible to see how economically privileged girls have access to higher education. Maggie Snow, for instance, represents the emancipated late-nineteenth-century American female who has received formal education. Samantha describes her as a lawyer’s daughter who “ain’t afraid of anybody” and “has been to Boston to school” (90). The connection between women and education is highlighted by the fact that the local school teacher is a woman as well. It is also possible to see that by the late 1800s women are no longer considered domestic angels, but people who criticize others because “they feel as if their own goodness is in a totterin’ condition, and if they fall, they want somebody to fall on, so as to come down easier” (90). In fact, through her characters’ insistence on attacking other women verbally and, sometimes, even physically, Holley demonstrates that by the end of the nineteenth century individual interests prevailed over the communal good and, thus, a strong sense of community among women completely disappeared.

Holley’s portrayal of an endemic confrontation among women begins with the different perspectives of life the narrator, Samantha Allen, and the main gossip, Betsey Bobbet, have. The Samantha-Betsey dichotomy is a Holley’s classic. Samantha, who has been called “the first female comic protagonist of relevance,” represents Holley’s alter ego (Winter, “Profile” 3). Usually protected from charges of radicalism by the “Josiah Allen’s Wife” label, Samantha is a women’s rights advocate who champions female suffrage and argues for the need to make readjustments in the separate spheres ideology. Unlike the prototypical impractical and vain female drawn by nineteenth-century

humorists, Samantha is defined by “her common sense and ‘megumness’ (mediumness). She is practical, independent, strong-minded, assertive, and good-natured.” With the average female character portrayed by other writers, she shares her loquaciousness (Ross 14). Betsey, on the contrary, stands for the stereotypical ugly spinster who devotes all her energies to finding a husband in order to secure for herself the status of wifeness. However, Holley treats Betsey as a product of patriarchal society rather than as an object of contempt (Ross 15). Taking this polarization as a basis, Holley creates a short story in which the feeling of sisterhood women derived from communal activities such as quilting has totally disappeared.

In “Miss Jones’ Quilting” there is no room left for female solidarity because women have destroyed all their communal rituals or left them completely devoid of meaning. The very essence of the quilting bee has been perverted. Quilting bees were originally intended as spaces free from patriarchal control where women could freely express themselves. They also functioned as shelters from a male world that discriminated against females and imposed on them a negative self-image. Therefore, these female gatherings allowed women to develop a sense of personal freedom and self-esteem that they could not achieve anywhere else. Thus, the emphasis was on communion rather than on open hostility and verbal confrontation. Miss Jones’ “quilting,” however, undermines the positive characteristics associated with the bee by presenting a group of females who constantly attack each other.

Even Samantha, who in her bias sets herself apart from the other slandering women, devotes her asides, often bracketed, to recounting the thorniest episodes of her co-quilters’ lives. Most of her descriptions, concise and often irrelevant for the

development of the plot, highlight women's physical defects. Thus, she describes Lucinder Dobbs as "the one that studies mathematics to discipline [sic] her mind, and has the Romen nose," Ophelia Dobbs as "the one that has her hair frizzled on top, and wears spectacles," and Miss Graves as "a fat old lady with a double chin" (86). These descriptive sentences emphasize the inherently negative tone of the short story.

The narrator's attitude is imitated by most of the other quilters. Hence, during the celebration of the quilting bee, "the path-master was demoralized, the school-mistress tore to pieces, the party to Ripleys scandalized [sic], Miss Brown's baby voted a [sic] unquestionable idiot, and the rest of the unrepresented neighborhood dealt with" before criticism concentrated on the minister and his wife (86). The minister is attacked for having apparently chosen the wrong wife and for being too attractive. According to one of the quilters, "handsome ministers don't turn out well, they most always have somethin' happen to 'em sooner or later" (90). His wife, on the other hand, is accused of being both too extravagant and of dressing in clothing that "looked so scrimped and stingy" that puts her husband's congregation to shame in front of the Baptists (87). This kind of criticism that condemns both one course of action and its exact opposite proves that women do not have set standards for judging one another and are, therefore, doomed to become victims entangled in webs of their own making.

These direct and unwarranted attempts at annihilating other women evidence the death of female communities. Communal quilting had been one of the main rituals women had used around the mid-1800s in order to create a sense of community that allowed them to survive psychologically in an adverse atmosphere and eschew some of the restrictions that patriarchal society imposed on their own development. However, by

the end of the nineteenth century, socio-cultural changes began to define these female communities as unhealthy and unnatural and, as a consequence, the quilting bee lost its ability to shelter and comfort women. In “Miss Jones’ Quilting” Holley aptly demonstrates that as women appropriated increasingly larger shares of the public realm, mainly through access to education, the quilting bee became a chance for women to assert their individuality by attacking other females rather than an opportunity to reinforce their membership in a community of women. In other words, this short story shows that traditional female sanctuaries had been desecrated by the end of the nineteenth century because of the incorporation of rules belonging to a competitive male realm in a space that had traditionally been free from rivalry.

One of the most telling examples of the inability of quilting bees to protect women from aggressions is provided by the functional changes their sewing implements undergo. For most of the 1800s, sewing tools had been used to fight against an oppressive patriarchal system that restricted women to the domestic realm by hindering their participation in the public sphere. In such a hostile environment females had redefined their needlework, turning it into a fundraising instrument that allowed them to enter a male realm without appearing to threaten the status quo. They had also turned quilts into a text through which they explicitly voiced their political opinions and implicitly rejected their discrimination from the public sphere. By noting that Ophelia Dobbs “would have pricked [Mary Ann Jones] with her quiltin’ needle, if old Miss Graves hadn’t spoke up,” Holley illustrates how sewing tools, originally intended as defensive implements against outside threats, had become offensive weapons deployed against the very members of the female community (86).

Other elements in the story that indicate the death of communal quilting as a valid ritual for uniting women are its dissociation from vital cycles and its complete absence of meaning. Quilting is no longer presented as a celebration of an essential episode in life: the priest is offered a quilt one year after his wedding. Furthermore, the failure of the quilting bee to achieve its intended aim of honoring the minister emphasizes how devoid of meaning this type of female reunion had become. The combination of all these negative elements as well as the lack of other bonding elements highlights the disappearance of a strong sense of community among women.

Unlike Freeman's "A Quilting Bee in Our Village," "Miss Jones' Quilting" does not feature elements alternative to quilting that may unite women. It portrays no activities characterized by their group-making qualities that minimize or at least partially compensate for the death of quilting bees as empowering and bonding institutions. Although the short story alludes to two rituals—eating and visiting—that could potentially create a sense of community between women, both of them fail. On the one hand, quilters do not derive the sense of communion from the quilting supper they get in Freeman's short story. The unanimous praises Brama Lincoln White and her mother receive in "A Quilting Bee in Our Village" are not reproduced in Holley's short story. Although Samantha describes the meal as "splendid," Miss Jones argues that "there wasn't anything on the table fit to eat" (90). These divergent opinions demonstrate that food fails to unite women. The same applies to visiting. Although it could potentially help establish and maintain intimate relationships among women, Betsey's decision to call on her neighbors is used to propagate an unfounded rumor about the minister's wife's unfaithfulness. Thus, visiting serves to widen the breach in the female community rather

than to bring women closer to each other. The concluding sentence, in which Samantha notes that she “haint seen none of the quilters sense [the celebration of the bee],” highlights the distancing between women, their isolation, and the death of female communities (91).

Through “Miss Jones’ Quilting” and the other three short stories studied in this section, I have tried to demonstrate that fiction about quilts illustrates how the main socio-cultural changes that occurred in nineteenth-century America affected female communities. Annette’s “The Patchwork Quilt” shows that women developed strong bonds with each other as they were confined in the home by the separate spheres ideology. Quilting, which thrived with the cult of True Womanhood, represented an essential part of women’s lives and helped establish and maintain many of these bonds. By the late nineteenth century, the communion among females that Annette depicted in 1845 had vanished. The generation gap that T. S. Arthur anticipated in the 1840s became a reality several decades later, as the influence of the cult of True Womanhood waned, females had increasing access to education, and women’s relationships were condemned as unnatural. Through the demise of quilting bees as spaces for bonding, Freeman’s “A Quilting Bee in Our Village” and Holley’s “Miss Jones’ Quilting” show the progressive deterioration of female communities in the midst of increasing opportunities outside the home. In summary, by focusing on quilts and quilting bees in nineteenth-century America, these four short stories illustrate that the development of female communities paralleled that of a separate women’s culture: both flourished, wilted, and died together.

3.4. CLAIMING WOMEN'S CULTURE: THE QUILT AS HERITAGE

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "The Bedquilt," the latest of the eleven short stories studied so far, was published in 1927. Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," chronologically the first of those included in this final section, came out in 1973. From the publication date of the former to that of the latter there is an unintended chronological gap of more than four decades. I have not been able to find any short story published from the 1940s to the 1960s in which the image of the quilt featured prominently. Despite not being limited by genre as this dissertation is, a compilation of literature on quilts such as Cecilia Macheski's *Quilt Stories* does not include any literary piece published in that span. Her collection features nothing on quilts from 1932 to 1973. Even if they cover a broad historical period, outstanding critical essays on the fictionalization of needlework also illustrate a scarcity of literary materials about quilting in the central decades of the twentieth century. Elaine Showalter's "Piecing and Writing," which concentrates mainly on short stories, is a case in point. Despite studying both fiction and non-fiction, Elaine Hedges' "The Needle or the Pen" constitutes another representative example. Hedges' article, which analyzes all forms of needlework, mentions a couple of poems from the 1950s and 1960s which do not allude to quilting but to other sewing arts. This void is not accidental. In fact, it parallels a historical period in which actual quilting virtually disappeared.

In the three decades from 1940 to 1970 the production of quilts decreased so dramatically that the socio-cultural importance quilting had had in American women's lives in the nineteenth and early twentieth century virtually disappeared. In relation to this phenomenon, Susan Bernick posits that "[a]lthough some women had continued to quilt

between 1940 and 1976, quilting, in its richest social, artistic, and psychic complexity, had nearly ceased being practiced” (138-39). The reasons that led to the near demise of quilting in America are varied in nature. On the one hand, the aggressive commercialization of quilt kits had radically dissociated the creative process from quilting, reducing the production of quilted bedcovers to mindlessly following a series of predetermined steps. On the other hand, as cheap and effective manufactured bedcovers and improved heating systems became widely available, there developed a strong association between quilts and the poverty Americans had endured during the Depression (McMorris 37-38).

In addition to this, the importance of women’s massive incorporation to the workplace in the early 1940s cannot be underestimated. According to Labor Department data for 1945, seven million women had been employed outside the home in the previous four years so as to replace men fighting for the Allies in Europe or the Pacific. Many held conventional clerical or sales-related jobs, but others were hired to perform what had been considered traditionally male activities until then. A number of the four hundred thousand who served in military units reserved for women were pioneers in several fields:

Women teach all-male classes in celestial navigation, instrument flying, gunnery, and many other topics. They also work as chemists, cartographers, electricians, weather forecasters, and even dog and pigeon trainers. They operate teletypes, send up balloons, sort mail, spot enemy aircraft, run motor pools, play in bands, and literally perform hundreds of tasks beyond the kitchen and laundry duty to which many military men originally intended to assign them. (Weatherford, *Milestones* 267)

Despite all these astonishing new tasks they were assigned during WWII, once the war was over, women were encouraged to return home. A Gallup poll showed that the armed conflict had had little impact on changing attitudes towards women's work. The data it gathered in 1946 revealed that 80% of men believed that a married female should not work if her husband did and, perhaps more surprisingly, it also showed that 75% of women agreed (Weatherford, *Milestones* 279). As in 1936 a *Fortune* magazine poll had estimated that 85% of males and 79% of females did not think a woman with an employed husband should work, these data did not differ radically from pre-war figures (Fox and Langley 225).

However, a significant number of females never returned home from the workplace. It is generally argued that these women lacked time to quilt. Others, on the contrary, were lured by the dominant ideology into going back to the domestic space to raise large, traditional families. Mostly white and middle- to upper-class females, these new embodiments of womanhood were supposed to enjoy the time their working sisters lacked.³⁹ However, they did not take up quilting either. Therefore, after WWII quilting ceased being considered a prominent female activity. In fact, it was preserved only by those women who, having learned to quilt in the 1920s and 1930s,

³⁹ African-American and lower class women were excluded from this restrictive version of femininity. While for white middle-class females working eventually became a liberating force that freed them from domestic imprisonment, for other females it represented an unavoidable need, a daily reality and, in many cases, the very source of exploitation. In an interview for the *Missouri Review*, Bobbie Ann Mason, commenting on her Southern farming family, declared that she "didn't know of any women trapped at home in a fifties paradise with nothing to do. The idea of working outside the home as a matter of principle was a middle-class notion that I had little knowledge of. My mother worked in a factory some of the time, and she didn't do it to prove a point. She did it for money" (94). bell hooks, on the other hand, argued that, although the feminine mystique did not directly target blacks, its principles created gender tensions among them. In her view the dominant discourse reached African-Americans: ignoring the peculiar historical socioeconomic exploitation of their race, black women expected their partners to be the sole providers for their families; black men, for their part, demanded subordinate behavior from women, forgetting that African-American females had to assert themselves in the workplace day after day (*Aint' I a Woman* 178).

enjoyed it and wished to leave a legacy of love and artistry to their descendants. As these women grew older, quilting, increasingly associated with aging women, became an anachronism (Sullivan, *Quilts* 6).

Taking into account the outstanding development quilting underwent while the ideology of True Womanhood swept the country in the nineteenth century, it is somewhat surprising to see how little popularity quilts enjoyed among these new epitomes of womanliness who, in many cases, “no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur the children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands” (Friedan 17). However, if quilts are interpreted as text(ile)s which allow women the freedom to express their worldview, their marginality becomes understandable in a period that preached conformity and denied white middle- and upper-class women the possibility of growing to become full individuals with a voice of their own.

Betty Friedan, who probed into this era in her ground-breaking *The Feminine Mystique*, argues that “as the Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings” (77). In Friedan’s analysis, this situation, which caused affected subjects to feel disenchanting and purposeless, emerged mainly as a consequence of women’s isolation from each other, of Margaret Mead’s teachings, and of the popularization of Sigmund Freud’s theories.

According to Friedan, female isolation arose as a consequence of the supposed lack of common goals. “The fact,” she writes, “is that to women born after 1920, feminism was dead history. It ended as a vital movement in America with the winning of that final right: the vote.” There still were women who fought for “human rights and

freedom—for Negroes, for oppressed workers, for victims of Franco’s Spain and Hitler’s Germany. But no one was much concerned with the rights for women: they had all been won” (100). Furthermore, since the importance of the quilting bee had vanished in the early twentieth century when females had started to pay to have their tops quilted by professionals, women were now deprived of the institutions that had traditionally provided them with a sense of community. This failure to connect with other females led to women’s isolation in the home where they were bombarded with apologies of traditional femininity and eulogies to their adjustment.

The feminine mystique took from anthropologist Margaret Mead the exaltation of the female sexual function, which led many to see the solution to their disillusionment with life in procreation. This, in turn, caused an unprecedented baby boom (142-43). From Freud, Friedan claimed, the mystique adopted the concept of “penis envy.” Although she does not blame Freud himself directly but those who popularized a diluted version of his theories, Friedan notes that “[i]t is a Freudian idea, hardened into apparent fact, that has trapped so many American women today” (103). Instead of interpreting the idea of penis envy as a culturally relative notion which might have been appropriate for Freud’s nineteenth-century patients but may not remain relevant in a different country several decades later, the concept “was seized in this country in the 1940’s as the literal explanation of all that was wrong with American women” (105). Therefore, all those females who nurtured the idea of pursuing a career became defined as maladjusted women, envious of male roles, and responsible for all of their husbands’ or children’s potential problems.

As a consequence, many white middle-class females abandoned their career aspirations and became imprisoned in the house, where women's magazines provided them with fictional counterparts to help them adjust to their new role. Friedan notes that "[b]y the end of 1949, only one out of three heroines in the women's magazines was a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife" (44). Denied access to the professions, women lost interest in education, which was often seen as a marriage bar, married at increasingly lower ages, founded their own home, and bore an average of four to five children (16-17).

As those feminine mystique females accepted a definition of femininity that emphasized domesticity, they were targeted by home sewing industries. However, those females who sewed proved problematic for an ideology that emphasized conformity to pre-established models. Needlewomen were, more often than not, "the active, energetic, intelligent modern housewives, the new home-oriented modern American women, who ha[d] a great unfulfilled need to create, and achieve, and realize their own individuality" (Friedan 222). This personality type directly clashed with an industry that marketed mass-produced patterns, all of them identical to one another. Therefore, home sewing concentrated on targeting conformist women who had not developed a personality of their own:

[E]ven sewing can't be too creative, too individual, according to the advice offered to one pattern manufacturer. His patterns required some intelligence to follow, left quite a lot of room for individual expression, and the manufacturer was in trouble for that very reason; his patterns implied that a woman "would know what she likes and would probably have definite ideas." He was advised to [. . .] appeal to the "fashion-

insecure woman,” “the conformist element in fashion,” who feels “it is not smart to be dressed too differently.” For, of course, the manufacturer’s problem was not to satisfy woman’s need for individuality, for expression or creativity, but to sell more patterns—which is better done by building conformity. (Friedan 223)

Owing to the fact that quilting is an implicitly creative enterprise, once creativity became a superfluous component of the whole process and quilting was reduced to following a series of steps enunciated in kits, very few women found this formulaic version of quilting attractive. Moreover, creating a text(ile) that reflected one’s viewpoint required a degree of self-analysis and introspection that these female mystique women could not achieve without realizing their maladjustment to the prevailing definition of womanhood and, therefore, seemingly endangering their families’ well-being as well as their own.

Friedan’s book, which revealed a widespread malady among suburban housewives, sparked a wave of changes which awoke the dormant consciousness of many females who would later become feminists. These 1970s feminists appropriated quilters’ vocabulary and incorporated it into their own jargon. As Showalter notes in “Piecing and Writing,” all forms of needlework became metaphors for women’s writing and feminist criticism:

For at least the past decade, too, metaphors of pen and needle have been pervasive in feminist poetics and in a revived women’s culture in the United States. The repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, net, knot, and tat, has become that of the feminist critic, in whose theoretical writing metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web, abound. (224)

Feminists argued that quilting represented a metaphor for women's non-hierarchical relationships, which counteracted the individualism underlying traditional models of male development. The ubiquitous nineteenth-century quilting bee, with its group-making qualities and warm atmosphere, best illustrated women's cooperative approach to life. In fact, some writers began presenting their oeuvre as a block in the metaphorical quilt they were creating in collaboration with their literary foremothers and contemporaries.

The quilt became one of the most important images for feminists. It also became a source of information for those researchers interested in daily aspects of women's lives. Its multicentered composition came to symbolize the decentered structure of women's texts. Because of its incorporation and unification of distinct, seemingly incoherent and incompatible pieces, the quilt also stood for the way in which "women must reconstitute the female histories in a scattered social order" (Levy 226). The tearing and piecing involved in their making was reinterpreted as women's search for self-identity in the midst of fragmentation. Furthermore, the quilt became a link between the present and the past, between women's commitment to the domestic and to art, and between the public and the private selves. In summary, unlike their nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors, who had disparaged all forms of needlework as signs of gendered oppression, 1970s feminists claimed their grandmother's quilts as their own heritage. In fact, in the late twentieth century, there was as much, if not more, emphasis on claiming quilts as on their production.

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," Bobbie Ann Mason's "Love Life," and Paula Kay Martin's "The Quilt Addict" illustrate this point. In Walker's short story, one of the

main characters, Dee Johnson, who lacks practical quilting knowledge, returns home to claim her ancestors' quilts as part of her own African-American heritage. There she is faced by her mother, a quilter who ends up offering her family's needlework treasures to another quiltmaker, her daughter Maggie. In "Love Life," another wandering character who cannot quilt, Jenny, also goes back to her origins to try to find in quilts some meaning for her life. In "The Quilt Addict," on the contrary, the emphasis is on an active quilter.

Alice Walker published "Everyday Use" in 1973, as part of her short story collection *In Love and Trouble*, shortly after the emergence of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and in the midst of the formation of the feminist movement of the early 1970s. The ideological rhetoric underlying these movements was based on the need to take pride in one's race or gender and reappraise contributions which, like quilts, both African-Americans and women had made to a society traditionally dominated by white men. Walker's short story presents Mrs. Johnson in the compromising situation of having to decide which of her two daughters, who stand for very different notions of art and heritage, should inherit one of these cultural contributions, her family's quilts. Dee represents the self-fashioned child who made it outside the depressed South, came into contact with new ways of thinking, and now returns to her origins in order to claim the bedcovers as part of her heritage. Maggie, on the contrary, is presented as the victim, the one who stayed or was left behind. Herself a quilter, Maggie defends the usefulness of art against Dee's attempts to transform her family's everyday utensils into static art, art for art's sake.

According to David Cowart, “Everyday Use” “addresses itself to the dilemma of African-Americans who, in striving to escape prejudice and poverty, risk a terrible deracination, a sundering from all that has sustained and defined them” (21). With this quotation Cowart is implicitly referring to Dee Johnson (a.k.a Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo), who in her desperate search for what she considers to be her “true” heritage, replaces her mother’s culture with the African ways black nationalists had made fashionable. In fact, the agenda of the Black Power movement, which revolved around the need to uplift the whole black race, aimed to eradicate the negative self-images and unsatisfactory Otherness that African-Americans had developed as a result of centuries of discrimination by, among other things, promoting a refashioning of their physical appearance which highlighted their links with Africa. However, this cultural return to the home continent was not exempt from dangers.

On the one hand, black nationalism was often considered a threat to African-American matrilineage. Joan Korenman argues that in black women’s fiction “[t]he search for African roots is shown to ignore—and thus to efface—the mothers, aunts, and grandmothers whose lives constitute a vigorous African-American legacy” (144). “Everyday Use” reifies this rejection of maternal culture through Dee’s refusal to accept the quilts when she initially left for college. Pieced by Grandma Dee and quilted by her aunt Big Dee and her own mother, the quilts constitute a link between all the females in the Johnson family which Mama’s oldest daughter originally dismissed as “old-fashioned, out of style” (54). This first rejection of the maternal bond is reproduced in the story’s present as Dee confronts Mrs. Johnson. In fact, Dee’s behavior perfectly exemplifies that of the prototypical daughter who “see[s] rebellion against [her] mother

as the necessary gateway to autonomy, to the freedom to become a person in one's own right" (Fox-Genovese, Foreword xv).

On the other hand, black nationalists' embracement of African culture as their own often led to an idealization of the continent of origin and to the adoption of an inauthentic way of life. As Fox-Genovese aptly notes in *Within the Plantation Household*, black slaves could not have preserved unaltered their West African culture in America because, in addition to lacking its material basis, they were not allowed to establish independent communities and, therefore, were inevitably influenced by whites (51). However, Dee concentrates all her efforts on erasing or ignoring the American component of her culture and refashioning herself according to an African model.

Her attitude is coherent with that of many supporters of the Black Power movement, who appropriated the motto "Black is Beautiful," grew Afro hairstyles, and idealized African culture. Walker, who was a student in Africa and lived there long enough to be able to discern myth from reality, illustrates through Dee that "an American who attempts to become an African succeeds only in becoming a phony" (Cowart 22). A number of elements indicate Dee's lack of authenticity. First, Dee is in tune with fashion but not in harmony with nature. Mrs. Johnson feels her "whole face warming from the heat [the long stylish dress Dee is wearing] throws out" because in it "[t]here are yellows and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun" (49). Second, she is not earnestly committed to Muslim values. On the contrary, she "is merely dazzled by the current fad" (Wilson 178). The superficiality of her bond is indicated by her diet, which incorporates "chitlins and corn bread, the greens and everything else" her mother prepares (179). That everything else includes the pork her companion Hakim-a-barber had just rejected as

“unclean” (52). Third, her new vocabulary and fashionable looks, far from linking her to a specific African region, represent an inauthentic pan-Africanism that shows how elusive her ties to Africa are. According to Helga Hoel, Dee uses “a pan East African mixture of names and phrases” and wears a “long, flowing dress, which is a West African feature” (38).

Wangero’s decision to request her family’s old quilts years after she had disparaged them needs to be related to her newly-discovered “African” self. By asking for the old bedcovers, Dee is not claiming her heritage as a woman. In fact, her initial rejection of quilts, her conformism to an ideology defined in male terms that relegated women to a secondary position, and her confrontation with Mrs. Johnson indicate her distance from the women’s culture her mother embodies. She is, on the contrary, claiming her idiosyncrasy and her African roots. As I pointed out in chapter two, despite the fact that quilts are considered a distinctively American artistic phenomenon, the techniques used in quilting have their ultimate origins in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, it has also been claimed that some quilts designed by African-Americans differ radically from those made by Americans of European descent because of the influence of African textile traditions.

Although African-American quilts were conditioned by material dearth and the marginal social position blacks occupied in American society, some scholars have argued that African-Americans were able to retain elements from their African cultural heritage and incorporate them in their quilts. After proving that certain features present in African-American bedcovers were linked to African design traditions, researchers argued that some black quilts illustrate what Cuesta Benberry calls “an unconscious cultural memory

in the quiltmakers of their far-away motherland” (15). For instance, the appliqué tradition found in Harriet Powers’ works, which prevailed in slave areas of the South, bears strong resemblance to Benin tapestries in West Africa, where “stories from oral tradition and history are illustrated with appliquéed figures. Animals are used to symbolize kings or central figures of proverbs or folktales” (Fry 12). Gladys Marie Fry also contends that African-Americans incorporated elements from African cosmology and mythology such as representations of the sun; the Congo cross; snake-like motifs reminiscent of Damballah, the West African god of fertility; or the use of red and white colors linked to the Shango cult in Nigeria (7).



Appliqué work from Dahomey, Africa

Source: *The History of the Patchwork Quilt*, p. 30

In spite of the sporadic use of African elements such as these, motifs in African-American quilts tend to be Euro-American, while color and form disposition illustrate African influences. In an authoritative essay entitled “Aesthetic Principles in Afro-

American Quilts,” Maude Wahlman and John Scully divide black quilts’ distinctive elements into five major categories. According to them, most African-American quilt tops use long, narrow strips of cloth as the main organizing principle. The width of these strips, generally that of a hand, corresponds with the width of West African narrow loom cloth strips (86). For Wahlman and Scully the second defining feature is the use of large scale designs, visible from the distance and highly favored in galleries devoted to contemporary art. As a third outstanding element they mention how African-American quilts incorporate bright contrasting colors in unusual combinations such as “purple-green, purple-yellow, red-white, orange-green, and black-pink” in order to emphasize certain elements, draw attention to improvisations or highlight variations in pattern (88-89). In their view, African-American quilts also stand out for favoring design variation and “off-beat patterning,” a term that describes how black quilters tend “to master a pattern, and then to break or bend it” deliberately (90). Finally, Wahlman and Scully note that “[t]hrough variations in strip width, color contrast, and patch shape African-American quilters create the impression of several patterns moving in different directions or multiple rhythms” (91).

Yet, in spite of the presence of African-inspired elements in some quilts made by African-Americans, most of them show remarkable similarities to those designed by whites. Because many black quilts do not follow Wahlman and Scully’s guidelines, Fry argues that “[p]erhaps it could be more accurately said that African-American quilt styles are eclectic—ranging from quilts with strong African influences to those that almost completely merge with Euro-American design traditions” (10). Although Dee’s interest in forgetting the American component of her heritage leads her to value only those

cultural forms which she considers purely African, scholars generally acknowledge that black and white quilters have influenced each other over time, creating many quilts where the dividing line between one group and the other is extremely blurred.

These mutual influences are so pervasive that even Dee, who insists on extolling African values, approaches quilts as art from a western point of view, demonstrating, once again, the superficiality of her commitment to African culture and a high degree of mental colonization or cultural slavery. Dee's understanding of art equates her with the people she is trying to free herself from, white middle-class Americans. Unlike Africans, for whom art has served a predominantly useful purpose, Westerners, who defend the idea of art for art's sake, create aesthetically pleasing objects mainly for display. Thus, Dee's intention to hang the quilts links her to an understanding of art that protects the artistic object from everyday use by confining it in a museum.

In fact, Dee's intended use for the quilt resembles that of curators, who also try to preserve valuable artifacts from soiling, tearing, wearing, and changes to the original format. Dee, who believes that her mother and sister "just don't understand" their heritage, is mainly concerned because her sister Maggie will "probably be backward enough to put them [the quilts] to everyday use" and "in five years they'd be rags" (54). Her worries parallel those of a curator like Jonathan Holstein, who in *The Pieced Quilt* included a statement of purpose phrased in terms that strikingly resemble Dee's arguments. Holstein noted that he was writing the book with "the sure knowledge that thousands of these objects were being put to mean uses and destroyed every year, before anyone had had a chance to evaluate their significance." "I hope," he concluded, "to prompt more caution in dealing with them" (9). From her privileged position as a traveled

and educated young woman, Dee believes herself to be the only person in her family who understands the meaning or “significance” of the quilts. She also perceives herself as the curator-like figure who can save the quilts from “mean uses,” from everyday use, by doing something artistic with them.

Dee intends to transform every useful item she tries to take from her mother’s house into a showpiece. She will “think of something artistic to do with the dasher,” hang the quilts, and turn the churn top into “a centerpiece for the alcove table” (52-54). In many respects, these attitudes are typical of the 1970s when quilts began to attract a multitude of people—curators, businessmen, feminist critics—that had not been directly involved in their making. Although some of these people approached quilts with the sole intention of making a profit, others tried to preserve them in private or museum collections, often at the expense of severing the ancestral link between the quilt and its maker. In fact, even Holstein himself has been charged with dissociating quilts from their original environment because of his insistence on privileging purely aesthetic aspects over the importance of the quilter. During a visit to the storage facilities of the International Quilt Study Center in Lincoln, Nebraska, I had the opportunity to see how a large percentage of the quilts included in the “Holstein Collection” lists the quiltmaker as “unknown.” Dee’s intention to turn the quilts into art as defined by Western society also separates these bedcovers from their makers.

Maggie, on the contrary, does not share Dee’s concept, use, or understanding of art. While for Dee the quilts are mere artifacts that can easily be metamorphosed from out-of-style implements into the key to a newly discovered heritage that she believes nobody but herself understands, for Maggie they represent living art, the text(ile) where

she proficiently reads her family's cultural history as she continues to write it. Walker's choice of the quilt to symbolize the cultural background of African-American women and of Maggie as the epitome of the black quilter is not fortuitous, as both black females and their quilts have been suppressed to the point of becoming invisible to the mass. As noted in chapter two, the contributions of African-Americans to the American quilt tradition are often minimized or ignored.

Most critics also accept Mrs. Johnson's initial view of Maggie as a practically invisible figure, "a lame animal" who has walked "chin on chest, eyes on the ground, feet in shuffle, ever since the fire that burned the other house to the ground" (47). However, I agree with Nancy Tuten that "[t]he subsequent action of the story [. . .] in no way supports Mama's reading of her younger daughter" because Maggie shows disgust rather than envy towards her sister (127). Even Mrs. Johnson gradually changes her perspective on Maggie as she embarks on a process of empowerment, indicated by a narrative shift from the present tense to the past, which is triggered by Mrs. Johnson's role as a mother when the visiting daughter mentions her change of name from Dee to Wangero. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that Mama undergoes an epiphany after which she not only understands that she has been using Dee's standards to judge her younger daughter but also learns to appreciate Maggie's value.

A reevaluation of Maggie must necessarily pay attention to her non-verbal communication. Because of the gaps Maggie's verbal paucity leaves, the reader can only decipher the messages she sends by resorting to overreading, the same strategy Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters used in order to decode Minnie Foster's text. By focusing on her alternative means of communication—her smiles, her grunts, her actions—it is possible

to discover a Maggie that rejects Dee's rupture with women's culture rather than one that "ey[es] her sister with a mixture of envy and awe" (45). Maggie conveys meaning through "uhnnhs" when she first sees her sister's Africanized appearance, when Mama Johnson notes that Dee's hair "stands straight up like the wool on a sheep," and when her sister confronts her mother in order to explain her reasons for having changed her name. These timely chosen grunts reflect Maggie's disapproval of Dee's adoption of a cultural heritage that disparages or neglects the maternal link. Furthermore, by refusing to shake hands with Hakim-a-barber, whose name means ruler or leader, Maggie rejects a patriarchal ideology that relegates women to a subservient or secondary position. She also expresses her rejection of her sister's decision to take the quilts through actions like slamming the kitchen door. Finally, on one of the few occasions when she speaks, she does it softly but emphatically to show that she has opinions of her own that do not coincide with her mother's: "Mama, when did Dee ever *have* any friends?" (48).

These elements indicate that, despite her obvious limitations and Mama's initial failure to recognize it, Maggie is quite a complex character. A superb blend of the African and the American, Maggie perfectly embodies the black-and-white-together creed defended by Walker. In spite of Dee's insistence on artificially Africanizing her appearance, Maggie naturally looks more African than her sister because she has darker skin and hair that is not as "nice" (47). She also acts more African. On the one hand, the fact that she will probably put the quilts to everyday use indicates that her concept of art comes from the home continent. On the other hand, she values the bedcovers according to their emotional connotations and not to the American commercialism and materialism which lies behind Dee's definition of the quilts as "*priceless*" (54). Yet, her ability to

quilt ties her to the innumerable United States women who transformed a foreign craft into a distinctively American artistic phenomenon.

The Johnsons' quilts, which mix an American form with an African use, perfectly embody Maggie's mixed heritage. In fact, for Maggie, like for many other African-American women before her, the quilts constitute surrogates for the books they could not peruse. Barely literate but a proficient quilter, Maggie "stumbles along good-naturally" as she tries to read traditional written texts, but when she concentrates on quilts she faces no interpretative challenges (48). However, the information one derives from books differs in nature from that obtained from quilts. Instead of the official version of history or culture supplied by the former, the latter provide "stories" and information about culture as experienced at the personal level. Thus, the quilts Maggie inherits record the stories of her family, stories of too powerless a people to enter history books. Yet, these quilts are the records of illiterate Southern black females. Unfortunately, not everyone has been educated in quilts long enough to be able to read them proficiently. It is at this point that Maggie reverses roles with the formally educated Dee.

Dee, the versed decoder of official, written culture, the one who "used to read to us [Mrs. Johnson and Maggie] without pity; forcing words, lies, other folk's habits, whole lives upon us two," now becomes the person whose quilt-reading skills are too superficial to give her a comprehensive view of her cultural heritage (47). For her, the quilts represent a legacy that she exclusively associates with her grandmother, who according to her not only did all the stitching by hand but also provided all the basic materials. Mrs. Johnson and Maggie, both of them expert quilters, are fully aware of the deeper reality. For them the quilts do not simply embody Grandma's culture, a culture

that needs to be preserved, kept unchanged, or “hanged,” because it is either already dead or dying. For Maggie and her mother, the quilts embody women’s living culture, a heritage that is naturally preserved as well as necessarily modified with the “everyday use” it traditionally was put to in Africa.

Hence, Maggie and Mrs. Johnson do not approach the quilts as the work of an individual artist which must remain unaltered once it is finished. On the contrary, they understand the quilts as the result of a cooperative effort which records the lives of both their makers and those around them and which speaks of women as well as men, of lives lived on the margins of history and of history itself. Even though Dee associates the quilts exclusively with her grandmother, arguing that the scraps they are made of “are *all* pieces of dresses Grandma used to wear,” Mama and Maggie know that reality is more complex than Dee believes it to be (53; emphasis added). In fact, “[i]n both of them were scraps of dresses Grandma Dee had worn fifty and more years ago. Bits and pieces of Grandpa Jarrell’s Paisley shirts. And one teeny faded blue piece, about the sized of a penny matchbox, that was from Great Grandpa Ezra’s uniform that he wore in the Civil War” as well as lavender scraps provided by Grandma Dee’s mother (53). Failing to acknowledge the different elements present in this textile is equivalent to ignoring the subversive component of quilts and her own family’s struggles against slavery, thus minimizing their contributions towards the physical and psychological freedom of African-Americans. Furthermore, Dee’s superficial connection with the quilts prevents her from seeing that they also served as liberating tools for black women, who resorted to them in the midst of extremely adverse circumstances with the hope of finding emotional comfort and personal peace.

Because the quilts represent living culture they need to be kept in the hands of someone who can guarantee that the family tradition remains alive; someone who can add to them new scraps telling new stories; someone who can preserve the maternal bond, the link between women living in the present and the mother, aunt, grandmother, and great-grandmother that contributed to them; someone who can maintain their openness; someone who, in sum, would not, literally or metaphorically, hang them, “[a]s if that was the only thing you *could* do with quilts” (54). As “[t]he meaning of an aesthetic heritage, according to Walker’s story, lies in continual renewal rather than in the rhetoric of nostalgia or appreciation,” the quilts and the tradition they represent need Maggie, not Dee (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 165).

Nonetheless, Mama’s rejection of Dee as a potential recipient of the family heirlooms is not simply based on the latter’s Western understanding of quilts as art for display, but on her more general neglect of the traditional women’s culture represented by the quilts, as well as on her refusal to acknowledge the tools her family used to survive whole in the midst of economic slavery and physical degradation. In fact, Dee’s decision to erase the painful memories that she associates with slavery means not only that she ignores the material penury, the emotional struggles, and the dangers that threatened the stability of the family, but also that she fails to acknowledge the existence of African-American institutions that emerged as a weapon against such oppression. In addition to her obliviousness to the psychological relief and bonding qualities present in quilts, Dee ignores the importance of naming and the value of the home among African-Americans.

In an article included in *Yearning* and appropriately entitled “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” bell hooks asserts that houses have traditionally “belonged to women,

were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls.” In her view, it was in the home that African-American children “learned dignity, integrity of being” (41). Although hooks notes that black women did not have the educational advantages necessary to master the specific vocabulary required to articulate the importance of the home, “[t]hey understood intellectually and intuitively the meaning of homeplace in the midst of an oppressive and dominating social reality, of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle” (45). According to hooks, “African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension” because “one’s homeplace was the site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects” (42).

Mama, a remarkable example of these understanding black women, begins her narration relishing her swept clay yard, which in *Dirt and Desire* Patricia Yaeger identifies as a custom carried from Africa (190). Her description emphasizes the comfort she gets from her fragile wooden home, a home whose value “most people”—Dee included—do not know or understand. Dee had, in fact, hated the old house to the point of enjoying its burning. Too trapped in the materiality of the house to see the home and its anti-establishment value, Dee interprets the house not as a site of resistance where her ancestors tried to become subjects, but as a site of entrapment in poverty and personal failure. She is not able to understand that the relevance of the house does not depend on

its economic value but on its potential for sheltering the family from outside threats as well as on its ability to function as a site where its inhabitants can develop as individuals.



Interior of an African-American cabin of the late nineteenth century. The bed is enhanced with a handmade bedcovering

Source: *Stitched from the Soul*, p. 11

Dee is also oblivious to the fact that nowhere where poverty is endemic, be it the Northern ghetto or the depressed South, is there a fire with enough purifying power to eradicate the material dearth she despises or the socioeconomic conditions that originate it. Thus, visual manifestations of penury, far from disappearing, repeat themselves. Consequently, the new house is a replica of the old one:

I have deliberately turned my back on the house. It is three rooms, just like the one that burned, except the roof is tin; they don't make shingle roofs any more. There are no real windows, just some holes in the sides, like the portholes in a ship, but not round and not square, with rawhide holding the shutters up on the outside. This house is in a pasture, too, like the other one. (48)

Neither can the fire destroy the warm relationships and communal activities which turn the house into a home nor the egalitarianism prevailing in those relationships that allows the process of self-fashioning to take place.

Dee is also unaware of the combative nature of naming practices among African-Americans. In trying to justify the reasons that have led her to renounce "Dee" in favor of the Africanized "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo," Mrs. Johnson's oldest daughter declares that "[she] couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress [her]" (50). However, in her attempt to free herself from her oppressors, Dee rejects the maternal bond and ignores the key role names played in maintaining family ties. Naming was one of the strategies used to confront the threat of family segregation, a threat that was ubiquitous in slavery times. In an interesting article on names and family dispersion, Cheryl Cody avers that "the names for children were selected to preserve symbolically kinship ties" and thus counteract, at least metaphorically, the physical fragility of the slave family. Therefore, the resulting naming system "must be viewed as a response by slaves to the threats and realities of separation imposed by their owners" (57).

Cody also notes that names were selected from those of distant relatives; Dee's, which comes from her aunt Dicie, is a case in point. This double aspect of African-American naming practices points both to a history of resistance as well as to a distinct

understanding of what family is. While for white Americans family equates with the nuclear unit formed by parents and children, the African-American definition is more inclusive and incorporates distant relatives. Nonetheless, Dee's cultural blindness prevents her from visualizing the entire picture and makes her equate her name not with a strategy of resistance against oppressive circumstances but with slavery, with oppression itself.

Her aversion to her "slave" name concludes with the adoption of the barely pronounceable Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo, which destroys the family bond, undermines her family's cultural practices, and links her to an elusive, ancestral pan-African family. This denomination not only is composed of meaningless names but also fails to connect her to her true origins on the West African coast:

These important names Dee bases her new-found identity on resemble Kikuyu names, but at least two of them are misspelt. Wangero is not a Kikuyu name, but Wanjiru is. It is one of the other original nine clan names of the Kikuyus. The last of the three names is also distorted. The correct Kikuyu name is Kamenju. One of my informants told me he knew a lady from Malawi who was called Leewanika, so it is at least a mixture of names from more than one ethnic group [. . .] Dee has names representing the whole East African region. (Cody 37)

Renaming herself is also an act of defiance towards her mother. Charles Wilson argues that by giving up the name her family had assigned her in favor of Wangero, Dee "usurps the mother's right to name a child and denies her the pride she has taken in so doing" (177). By changing her name, Dee detaches herself from her mother, the culture she

represents, and from all those female relatives who were connected to her through her original name.

In fact, Dee's obliviousness to the cooperative and combative nature of the quilts, as well as her ignorance of other surviving strategies that prevailed among African-American women, leads to a progressive separation from a family that she feels has been subjugated by slavery. Dee's distance becomes literal when she leaves for school with the money the community had raised for her but without the quilts, without the cultural legacy her mother offers her. Once she returns, she establishes a metaphorical gap with the family through her camera and her sunglasses. Through her Polaroid camera she manages to avoid any sort of direct engagement with her mother's world; she frames it so as to "define its borders, give it a wholeness which then allows her to handle it without being a part of it" (Whitsitt 448). With the sunglasses she puts on after her mother's refusal to give her the quilts, she "hid[es] everything above the tip of her nose and her chin," that is, everything she does not, literally and metaphorically, want to see—their ingrained sense of community, their deep understanding of their cultural background, and their own concept of heritage (55).

Dee's detachment from her mother's nurturing culture parallels her acquisition of formal education and verbal skills she eventually uses to oppress her own family. In fact, Mama asserts that, when Dee read to them, both she and Maggie felt "trapped and ignorant *underneath her voice*," which tried to instill in them an alien cultural reality, "a lot of knowledge [they] didn't necessarily need to know" (47; emphasis added). Nonetheless, it is Dee herself who most directly suffers the consequences of distancing herself from women's culture. Estranged from her family and metamorphosed into

Wangero, Dee lacks a name that bonds her to her female relatives, a shelter that protects her from oppression, and a text where she can read about her family's strategies for survival. She is, in summary, deprived of the defense mechanisms African-American women have traditionally used to fight oppression and, therefore, left at the mercy of new oppressive forces which, like the Black Liberation Movement of the 1960s, continue to relegate females like herself to a subservient or secondary position (Thielmann 67).

Like Walker in "Everyday Use," Bobbie Ann Mason also presents two opposing concepts of women's cultural heritage in "Love Life" (1988). Unlike Walker, who favors a traditional approach to quilts through Mama's refusal to let Dee have the bedcovers, Mason does not offer an easy solution to the conflict her short story portrays. One may wonder whether Maggie and Mama's strategies for survival are useful in late twentieth-century America. It is legitimate to question how valuable reading quilts could have been in the 1970s for a woman with a second-grade education and another one who "stumbles along good-naturedly" when faced with written culture. One may even reach the conclusion that Dee's formal education and ungendered culture were absolutely necessary requisites in the day and that, therefore, she is better equipped for survival in the modern world. In fact, Mama does not approach Dee in a prejudiced way that prevents her from seeing Dee's strengths or the positive aspects of her oldest daughter's emancipation. She financially contributes to Dee's education, claims to like her long dress as Dee moves closer, and makes an earnest attempt to get used to "Wangero," her oldest daughter's new name. However, through Mrs. Johnson's narrative voice Walker ends up privileging Maggie's traditional culture and rejecting not only the inauthenticity of Dee's commitment to her newly adopted values but also the fact that by asserting

herself she oppresses others. Above all, Mrs. Johnson rejects Dee's refusal to value women's culture until it becomes fashionable, her superficial understanding of it, and her inability to ground her new self on the cultural basis that had nurtured the Johnson women for generations.

Mason's approach is different. Although "Love Life" resembles "Everyday Use" in that in both it is the younger character who claims women's culture, Mason reverses some of the parallelisms Walker establishes in her short story by dissociating the older generation from the staunch defense of traditional values. In fact, Mason's approach to historical change differs radically from Walker's. While in works such as "Everyday Use" Walker tends to extol the virtues of life in the past and see with dismay the changes brought about by urbanization and technological development, Mason hardly ever presents the past as an unproblematic or ideal period. In her interview with Lila Havens, the Kentuckian author asserted that not all her characters willingly accept the changes of the present but "I don't want," she added, "to romanticize the good old days or quaint, charming places. I don't like to see poverty romanticized" (91). In another interview, published more than a decade later, Mason elaborated on the issue.

There she set herself apart from those people or authors who tend to idealize previous times. Mason claims that "[t]he past is very appealing to a lot of Americans. They see it as something to hold on to, something more cohesive than this fragmented, chaotic life that we mostly live now. But I find the chaos very exciting. People are getting free of a lot of that baggage of the past and I think that's good" (Lyons and Oliver 26). It is from this perspective on history that Opal's rejection of the past needs to be approached. Opal, an aging spinster retired from her job as a teacher, concentrates her

energies on avoiding thinking about the old days and the life of repression she led in a small Kentucky town by resorting to alcohol and MTV videos. For her, the burial quilt her niece Jenny repeatedly claims represents a history of suffering and unhappiness which functions as a permanent reminder of “[a]ll those miserable, cranky women, straining their eyes, stitching on those dark scraps of material” (15).

In addition to its negative physical impact, the quilt, as seen from Opal’s perspective, constitutes the reification of a burdensome cultural tradition that imposed on women a task that relegated them to the domestic space and prevented them from developing as full individuals outside that realm. Testimonies of women who identified the different blocks of their quilts with missed experiences rather than with lived ones are not uncommon. In *Gatherings*, Kathlyn Sullivan mentions one such example, which, like “Love Life,” contrasts the idealization a niece makes of her family’s quilts with the negative connotations her aunt associates with her quilting routines:

Barbara Lennox, a volunteer with the Lancaster County Quilt Harvest Project (PA), recalled one woman she dubbed ‘the reluctant quilter.’ That woman did not want to come to quilt day. Her niece had read about the documentation and was very excited. She literally dragged the aunt along. The older woman very nearly refused to be photographed with her quilt. Barbara reports her relaying that, ‘when she was a little girl, her quilt block had to be completed before she could go and play with her brother... she could point to every block and recount what she missed while she stitched.’ The woman fairly quivered with indignant emotion as she thought about the ball games, the snowball fights, and the hikes through the woods she had missed. She wanted no reminders of that youthful experience. (24)

For Opal the oppressiveness of the quilt is related to the need she once felt to conform to a prescribed definition of womanhood that allowed her to play the traditional female role of educator, but made her repress her morally relaxed attitudes, her scandalous laugh, her drinking problem, and her casual love affair with an unknown man she nicknamed “Imperial.”

Opal’s rejection of former times is typical of Mason’s middle-aged characters. According to Edwin Arnold, some of her older characters “try to remove themselves from past beliefs that have not protected them from the incomprehensible present” (137). In her attempt to avoid the pain inflicted by the past that the burial quilt represents, Opal concentrates on “try[ing] to be modern” by taking up activities such as aerobic dancing or motorcycle riding which are generally practiced by much younger people (10). Above all, Opal tries to follow her own advice to Jenny: “Don’t look back, hon” (17).

Opal’s story is that of a woman who rejects history and tries not to become part of it. By renouncing her prescribed role of quilter and forbidding Jenny to add her name to the burial quilt, Opal not only dismisses the cultural roles inherited from the old days but also severs her ties with future generations. She refuses to project herself into the future. For her, “[o]ld age could have a grandeur about it [. . .], if only it weren’t so scary” (2). In order to avoid the pain of the past and the fear of the future, she lives in a present that does not seem to be part of a historical continuum. In fact, Opal shows a predilection for times and spaces which lack deep ties to history. “Love Life” illustrates this point by showing how Opal erases all the traces of her presence in the motel room she shared with “Imperial,” a room which she especially liked because of “how devoid of history and association” it was and which she left “as neat as if she had never been there” (11). Opal

achieves her aim of staying in an ongoing present through peppermint schnapps and television.

Opal's behavior is typically alcoholic. Although she refuses to face her problem, her dependency on alcohol is such that she hides to drink, does it in forbidden places, warns Jenny "not to stop at the same liquor store too often" because "she doesn't want [her niece] to get a reputation for drinking," and derives a soothing feeling of happiness from alcohol, which allows her to nullify the pain she might have felt if she were to confront reality (1, 8). Nonetheless, watching television plays a more important role in Opal's attempts to avoid being mentally dragged into the past or projected into the future than alcohol does.

Most critics have seen in Mason's works a tendency to use popular culture, especially television and music, to serve both positive and negative ends. Scholars have noted that while Mason often resorts to popular culture as a means of establishing communication between characters, she also portrays individuals whose engagement with television prevents them from distinguishing real life from fictionalized reality. Leslie White, for instance, notes that "[a] vital piece of popular culture may favorably shape one's view of the world, enable him to become more engaged in life, allow him to read and respond to the images of his world with greater precision. At its worst, pop culture wipes out the immediate reality by occupying the space where real engagement might take place" (70). Mason has, on the contrary, defended the role of television in people's lives.

"I don't think," the writer said in a 1989 interview, "TV is the great destroyer that people want to think it is" (Gholson 41). She generally argues that her characters get a lot

of outside information from the small screen, which she sees as a main source of pleasure for them. However, she has also repeatedly noted that cable has turned the experience of watching TV into a less meaningful activity because, paradoxically, the wider availability of channels has derived into an apparent content emptiness (Gholson 41; Lyons and Oliver 26). In an interview with Dorothy Hill, Mason defended the role of television by asserting that she “understand[s] where it comes from and why it’s there,” but she also clarified that “of course [she] [does]n’t think it is altogether good” (112). In my opinion, “Love Life” is one of those examples in which the role of popular culture as embodied in television is not “altogether good.”

Mason has denied the importance of the MTV videos Opal watches. “It wasn’t really important,” she said, “what those images that Opal watched mean. I think they’re actually literal images, some videos I took notes on” (Todd 141). On the contrary, I believe that not only the images but also the impact they have on Opal are relevant to understand her rejection of the cultural past the burial quilt embodies. The constantly changing images of the TV set are responsible for Opal’s historical amnesia and temporal dislocation because they trap her in an ongoing present that leaves no room for reflection on the past or for projection into the future. In fact, the videos allow her mind to wander “erratically” at the same pace that the images change, enabling her to avoid reflecting on her lack of connection to the actual, rather than the televised, present. Ultimately, “Opal loses track of time” with them (17). By erasing who she was and who she might become, television prevents Opal from achieving a coherent and complete perspective of herself as an individual.

The danger implied in Opal's use of television does not lie in the fact that it allows her to minimize the importance of the past. It does not rest on the fact that the engagement with the immediate present MTV videos stand for severs her links with Southern women's cultural tradition as embodied in the burial quilt. In fact, as noted elsewhere, Mason herself has claimed that discarding some of the baggage of the past is positive for her characters. This is especially so if "the legacies of Southern women's culture are not simply healing" but "also have a darker side that speaks of secrecy and repression, of women's self-destructive commemoration of patriarchal traditions in which their own freedoms had been thwarted, and of commodification within a sentimentalizing ideology of American womanhood" (Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 165). The real danger of Opal's addiction to MTV videos does not rest on the fact that they allow her to reject her ties to the burial quilt, to the oppressive cultural traditions of the past, but on the fact that they also allow her to avoid the deep intimate bonds and sense of belonging that the quilt also represents. Thus, television constitutes a barrier to establishing the meaningful relationships quilts have traditionally embodied.

Nevertheless, unlike Walker, who punishes Dee for going beyond the realm of traditional women's culture, Mason does not seem to condemn Opal. Neither does she censure—or praise—Jenny for embarking on a process of self-discovery that reverses her aunt Opal's detachment from the burial quilt. Jenny is the reflection of what Opal would have looked like if she had been born thirty years later. Physically, they astonishingly resemble each other. According to the narrator, "Jenny is enough like Opal to be her own daughter. She has Opal's light, thin hair, her large shoulders and big bones and long legs. Jenny even has a way of laughing that reminds Opal of her own laughter, the boisterous

scoff she always saved for certain company but never allowed herself in school” (2). Even though they have had casual relationships with males, both refused to commit because they understood that men could not provide them with what was missing in their lives. The two of them share their search for solitude and an unwillingness or inability to verbalize their emotions until the burial quilt brings to the surface their most deeply-buried feelings. For both, life is as chaotic and incoherent as the images Opal watches on MTV.

Nevertheless, there are radical differences between them that explain their opposing attitudes towards the burial quilt and the women’s culture it represents. Opal’s life has been constricted by a set of moral codes and a definition of womanhood that have hindered her potential for self-development. Even though she makes an earnest attempt to forget the past, she “retains strong ties to [it] both in her attitudes and her surroundings of quilts, muumuus, and verandas” (Roberts 266). Jenny, on the contrary, represents “the New Woman of the 1980s, whose casual love affairs and backpack existence suggest the dissolution of the female world and the loss of its cultural traditions” (Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 165). She is neither hindered by regressive socio-cultural beliefs nor attached to the past. Unconstricted by the moral codes or social practices that thwarted Opal’s self-fashioning, Jenny’s ties to her origins have been severed “through geographic mobility, historical dislocation, and transient social relationships, unrecognized by ritual or tradition” (Price 101).

“Love Life” materializes Jenny’s sense of displacement and her estrangement from her roots by describing at length her perception of the locals as prototypical grotesque types who go unnoticed by their neighbors:

During her first two days there, she saw two people with artificial legs, a blind man, a man with hooks for hands, and a man without an arm. It seemed unreal. In a parking lot, a pit bull terrier in a Camaro attacked her from behind the closed window. He barked viciously, his nose stabbing the window. She stood in the parking lot, letting the pit bull attack, imagining herself in an arena, with a crowd watching. The South makes her nervous. Randy Newcomb told her she had just been away too long. (3-4)

So as to bridge the gap that has developed between her and her roots, Jenny tries to resort to stories, which could have helped her fill her existential emptiness. However, she finds her search “exasperating” because Opal, who has refused to be a quilter and, therefore, a storyteller who incorporates her own personal account in her family’s quilted history, “doesn’t tell any stories” (8).

Jenny uses the quilt, which functions as the antithesis of her “backpack existence,” to counteract her rootless life and to mourn for all the relationships and personal ties that her wandering life has not allowed her to develop. Opal’s niece, who “knows that what she really needs is a better car, but she doesn’t want to go anywhere,” resorts to the quilt in search for rootedness (5). Jenny derives a sense of belonging from the burial quilt, which represents the home, a link with her family, and women’s tradition while it opposes the life of restlessness and displacement she has led. Her description of the small section of the woods she bought in order to build a home as “her block on the quilt” emphasizes the connection between the quilt and a sense of permanence or belonging (13). In fact, the burial quilt not only allows Jenny to put down roots but also helps her find her place in a historical continuum which is represented by the different

branches of the family tree the burial quilt includes. As Showalter aptly notes in *Sister's Choice*, the quilt stands for Jenny's way of "stitch[ing] herself back into history, to create her context" (166).



Double Irish Chain, ca. 1870, Transylvania County, NC
This is part of a bedcover made by Sarah Eliza Lyon McLean. Intended as a memory quilt made in remembrance of her sister Hannah, this bedcover helped Sarah minimize the pain of her sister's death. The red fabric comes from the dress Hannah was wearing when she drowned in the French Broad River at age sixteen
Source: *North Carolina Quilts*, p. 18

In this dissertation I have studied a number of short stories that present different approaches to women's culture as embodied in quilts. The exaltation of quilts and homosocial relationships portrayed in Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt" directly opposes

the demise of women's culture described in "Miss Jones' Quilting," where sewing tools and institutions are used by some women to unwarrantedly attack other females. Furthermore, this contrast between different perspectives on quilts and women's culture constitutes an intrinsic part of some of the short stories I have used. Even though the conflict is superbly described in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," much earlier works such as T. S. Arthur's "The Quilting Party" or Alice MacGowan's "Gospel Quilt" also allude to a confrontation between an older generation of females who perceive quilts and, by extension, women's culture as an integral part of their lives and younger women for whom this female world is, in MacGowan's words, "an old story." "Love Life" differs from all of them not only in that it is the only short story in which the youngest generation seeks women's culture while the oldest struggles to avoid its grasp, but also because no other fictional piece featured in this dissertation leaves the conflict as open-ended as Mason's work does.

Although they show different degrees of understanding towards the youngest generation's point of view, Walker's "Everyday Use," MacGowan's "Gospel Quilt," and Arthur's "The Quilting Party" privilege a traditional approach to quilts and women's culture. "Love Life" is designed to provide as evenhanded a treatment of the topic as possible because it is structurally organized around a series of ten narrative blocks, resembling quilt blocks, which are made with scraps of present and past lives as well as painful and joyful memories. The point of view changes from block to block so as to illustrate the coexisting but opposing perspectives on women's culture. Four of those blocks are devoted either mainly or exclusively to Jenny; three to Opal, including the initial and final ones; and three to the interaction between the two of them. This

distribution suggests that the dichotomy between the modernity Opal tries to embrace and the ties to tradition Jenny is seeking cannot be solved by privileging one over the other. Oftentimes, as Mason explains in her memoir *Clear Springs*, “[t]he answer is the mingling of sunlight and shadow; it is ambiguity, not either-or” (281). The use of the present tense with its connotations of weak authorial control and powerlessness is remarkably appropriate for highlighting this ambiguity. As Mason herself points out, “the uncertainty of the present tense said a lot about what we were making of the late twentieth century or were unable to make of it” (Lyons and Oliver 53). Thus, its use is perfectly coherent in a short story which features characters who wander somewhat aimlessly in search of their own identity.

Paula Kay Martin’s “The Quilt Addict” (1988) differs from Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” and Bobbie Ann Mason’s “Love Life” in that it focuses on a woman who quilts rather than on one who claims the quilts made by her foremothers. While Walker and Mason offer a fictionalized equivalent of the appropriation of needlework arts by feminist scholars, who since the 1970s have claimed quilts as an essential component of their heritage as women, Martin describes the quilt revival that paralleled the emergence of needlework metaphors in feminist theoretical discourses. By presenting the narrator’s attachment to quilts as an addiction, a personal problem which causes a social dis-ease that must be eradicated, Martin illustrates how an activity whose radical messages had traditionally been disregarded became an easily recognized threat to patriarchy once feminists started highlighting its disruptive potential.

On the surface, the situation Paula Kay Martin portrays in “The Quilt Addict” does not differ radically from what might have been found at the height of the cult of

True Womanhood. Not only does the narrator present her quilted work as her main way of achieving social recognition but she also emphasizes the strong bonds she is able to establish with other women through quilting. Like Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt," the short story studied in this dissertation which most clearly idealizes women's culture and homosocial relationships, "The Quilt Addict" portrays an intimate mother-daughter bond. The uncompetitive nature of their relationship is indicated by the fact that while the daughter quilts for the mother, to whom she presents her first masterpiece, the mother helps her child achieve recognition by displaying her work.

Martin's short story also resembles "The Patchwork Quilt" in that the first-person narrator does not depict women's lives as self-contained units but as part of the continuum that women's experience constitutes. In Annette's short story the quilt is transferred from the narrator to her sister and back so that all the stages of the female cycle can be included. Thus, the narrator incorporates scraps dealing with childhood and adolescence and then passes the bedcover over to her sister so that she can write about marriage and motherhood, stages the narrator herself could not complete because of her spinsterhood. After her sister's untimely death, the quilt is retrieved so as to comment on old age. The quilt addict also projects her life onto the basis of another woman's existence. By completing the unfinished quilts she had purchased at the sale of Elly's belongings, the narrator adds her own voice to the late person's while giving closure to the stories Elly's death had prevented her from bringing to an end.

Like the narrator in "The Patchwork Quilt," who is nurtured and supported by a community of women in the making of a text(ile) which summarizes the key episodes in her life, the quilt addict also derives a sense of belonging to a female community from

her needlework. After talking on the phone to another woman going through a similar situation, she feels “a changed woman” who is “not alone” any longer (23). In fact, she emphasizes the importance of the community of quilters by making a clear distinction between those who belong to the circle of needlewomen and those who are outside it. “I shared something,” she says, “with these women that outsiders could not understand. I felt connected again, for the first time in a long time” (22). What differentiates the conditions described in “The Quilt Addict” from those of a short story about female communities written in the heyday of the separate spheres ideology is, particularly, that by 1988 outsiders do understand.

Through a large part of the nineteenth century women were able to express through quilts disruptive messages that went largely unnoticed. As I pointed out in chapter two, political quilts were a direct attack on a social system that relegated women to domestic spaces and forbid them from having a say in public affairs. The odd-shaped scraps and dark colors which predominated in crazy quilts also constituted signs of rebellion against the neat divisions established to hinder women’s development as individuals. Yet none of these elements were understood as potentially threatening. Nonetheless, as early as 1917 Susan Glaspell had warned in “A Jury of Her Peers” that “outsiders,” people who did not belong to the community of needlewomen, were educable, could be taught how to read women’s texts, and could therefore decipher the radical messages quilts often contained. By the late twentieth century, after feminists not only tried to challenge stereotypical images of womanhood in male writing but also explored the subtle ways in which women empowered themselves, highlighting the

importance of female communities and the role needlework played as a channel of self-expression, quilting could no longer be considered a totally harmless occupation.

“The Quilt Addict” shows that quilting could not be a patriarchally sanctioned activity after feminists claimed quilts as an integral part of the female heritage and incorporated quilting metaphors and vocabulary into their own jargon and imagery. Even though the quilt addict defends herself by noting that “[q]uiling is a productive, artistic endeavor,” her attachment to quilts becomes a sign of maladjustment, a personal disease that ultimately results in social dis-ease (23). In fact, an excessive fondness for quilting is described as an illness with clearly identifiable symptoms. Quilt addicts are set apart from average women by the physical deformation apparently caused by their supposedly unhealthy attachment to quilts:

A trained observer can spot a quilting addict a mile away. Since they have been known to quilt through the night, they all have bags under bloodshot eyes. Quilting addicts have a mild curvature of the spine resulting from long hours of sitting at a quilting frame or sewing machine. They never look at you in the eye. Instead, their eyes fixate on your clothing, since they have a strong attraction to color and fabrics. The third finger on their right hand is either white from never seeing daylight, or punctured and callous from serving as a thimble. (22)

However, the most obvious symptoms of physical malfunctioning occur before the quilt addict speaks and before she starts quilting:

My hands were sweating; my heart was pounding. A sea of faces stared up at me, waiting for words to emerge from my mouth. My knees wanted to fold up and go home. I rallied my courage, “I’m... uh... I’m... uh...”

I tried again, a little louder this time. "I'm a quilting addict." There, I'd said it. The audience applauded. My heartbeat slowed. Before me sat 50 poor, suffering souls that were in the same boat. (22)

These initial paragraphs are paraphrased in the final one, where the very same symptoms are used to describe what the narrator feels in anticipation of quilting. This parallelism not only highlights the equivalence between quilting and the assertion of one's voice that I have tried to emphasize in this dissertation but also draws attention to the fact that by the late twentieth century quilters were considered individuals who could "threaten the 'health' of both the physical and social body" (Przybysz 168). In fact, a narcissistic involvement with quilts leads to claiming time and space for oneself and this, in turn, "potentially disrupts the family, whose smooth operation has depended on an unequal exchange of sex/affective energy" (Przybysz 181). "The Quilt Addict" directly explores this issue.

Furthermore, Jane Przybysz notes that many conversations at quilt festivals revolve around women who cannot keep their hands off fabric or secretly stroke their scraps and concludes that this may "indicate some women find working with fabric an autoerotic activity" (181). Martin's short story includes paragraphs which feature the quilt addict constantly touching her quilt, a fact which, following Przybysz's analysis, should be read in sexual terms:

I borrowed a quilting hoop, raced home from work each evening, sat myself in my newly appointed quilting chair, and *curled over my quilt*, pushing the needle *in and out, and in and out*. The Dresden Plate popped up as I quilted around it. I *found my hand running over and over the*

curved surface. I sat and stared at the colored prints while tracing the quilt thread streams with my finger. (22; emphasis added)

This search for personal satisfaction or even pleasure in quilting radically opposes a definition of womanhood that stresses female selflessness and “hence challenge[s] dominant cultural notions of [woman] as the eternal comforter, self-sacrificing wife, mother, and America” (Przybysz 174). In addition to this narcissistic pleasure the quilt addict derives from her handling of fabric, her interest in quilting leads her to strengthen her ties to a homosocial world which flourished with the quilt revival of the late twentieth century. However, reinforcing the female bond is ultimately detrimental to a heterosexual relationship which can only function if a woman subordinates her personal development to her husband’s well-being. Thus, as soon as the quilt addict realizes that “[her] life revolved around fabrics,” her family begins to rebel and show signs of discomfort or dis-ease. Her “husband threaten[s] to leave [her]” and “[her] kids refused to wear any more quilted clothing,” thus rejecting a situation in which the female is not only claiming time and space for herself but also imposing her world view on her family (22). Her reluctance to be cured indicates her refusal to accept quilting as a reprehensive activity that causes familial and social dis-ease. Finally, her decision to achieve a balance between her need for self-expression and her family life shows the need to find a model of womanhood which differs both from male individualism and from patriarchally imposed selflessness.

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate that fictional quilts can be used as texts which offer valuable information on women’s culture. In my analysis of Eliza Calvert Hall’s “Aunt Jane’s Album” I intended to show the deep connections which existed in

nineteenth-century America between quilts and women's lives and then proceeded to study short stories in which quilting figures as a prominent metaphor for women's writing. Through the five short stories studied in the second section of this chapter, I tried to illustrate that women writers used fictional quilts to explore the problematic relationship between females and the written text by creating fiction which describes both successful and failed attempts to produce women's literature. It was also my intention to show that some of the barriers that women writers encountered when they took to the pen were fictionalized as obstacles faced when quilting. A comparison between "An Honest Soul" and "Elizabeth Stock's One Story" revealed that the problematic relation between womanhood and authorship could be more easily addressed if described in needlework terms which allowed the writer to express her writing ambitions covertly. The third section revolved around the topic of female communities not only because quilting emphasizes connections between fabrics or individuals but also because community as a theme repeatedly appears in women's writing. Finally, in the last section I tried to illustrate how the theoretical appropriation of needlework made by feminist critics was reflected in quilt stories in which the focus shifted from the traditional quilter who produces quilted bedcovers to the modern female who claims her foremothers' culture as an integral part of her own heritage as a woman. The inclusion of "The Quilt Addict" not only reflects the revival actual quilting underwent after the 1970s but also shows the impact the incorporation of women's traditional activities in the theoretical discourse of the feminist movement had on exposing the disruptive potential of women's culture.

CONCLUSION

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In their introduction to *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, Judy Elsley and Cheryl B. Torsney note that “[t]he history of quilts is, in many ways, the history of our country” (1). Although their claim seems to be at least partially justified by historical evidence, my arguments in this dissertation have been less ambitious and far-reaching. By following the development of early quilts in the United States, it is possible to trace the vicissitudes of a country that struggled to establish its autonomy from a colonial power beyond merely political independence. In quilt history the fight for gradual cultural, economic, and political autonomy was reflected in the progressive incorporation of autochthonous materials, in the emergence of distinctively American patterns, and in the creation of quilting institutions such as the bee which had not flourished as social gatherings in the mother country. Beyond these early stages, the history of quilting also offers valuable information on the various historical processes that had an impact on America as a country, if by such history we understand the reasons that led women to this art form, the themes they expressed through quilts, and the social evils they tried to target, from nineteenth-century slavery to recent armed conflicts.

Nonetheless, I would like to qualify the statement quoted above by arguing that the history of quilts reflects the cultural history of American women, the history of the United States as experienced by one half of its population. To put it differently, quilts as historical tools reveal a female point of view. Thus, quilts made by pioneer females illustrate women’s isolation, the lack of a female community whose rituals could help pioneer women go through life’s cycles, and a desperate craving for color and beauty, but

fail to express directly the economic issues that caused the migrations by creating the (often illusory) opportunities for self-advancement that lured males into moving westward. Those made for the different armed conflicts in which the United States has participated also tend to emphasize a female point of view which highlights issues of comfort and support rather than the aggressive and destructive values that prevail in the strife itself. In addition to that, the use of quilts in helping pass the amendment to the Constitution that forbade the sale, manufacture, or transportation of alcohol was also conditioned by a female perspective that interpreted alcohol as the root of women's problems in violent heterosexual relationships where they were subject to abuse.

Because the prevailing point of view in quilt history is female, I have interpreted quilts as texts that offer information on cultural issues that affect, or have affected, women. The revival of quilting in the late twentieth century stemmed from a series of factors, such as the counterculture movement of the 1960s, which are not directly linked to the emergence of the feminist movement. However, criticism of fictionalized versions of needlework such as my own have been inspired and inevitably influenced by the emergence of feminism, in particular by feminists' tireless attempts to validate women's culture. Within this context, all forms of needlework, but especially quilting, were initially idealized and romanticized not only as distinctively female channels of expression but also as images that opposed a male viewpoint.

Thus, the quilt, with its equally important blocks and its ability to create a unified whole from a variety of different materials, came to embody not only a female approach to writing which stressed the importance of multiple foci of attention over a single climatic moment but also the supposedly egalitarian relationships that women established

among themselves. Quilting institutions such as the bee were idealized and identified with a cooperative approach to life that openly contradicted the individualism that a male point of view had established as a prerequisite for personal development. The scholarly studies which romanticized sewing and saw in needlework a sign of rebellion against patriarchal constrictions eventually made room for the emergence of some voices that warned against an excessive idealization of women's relationship with the needle. Elaine Hedges' "The Needle or the Pen" clearly illustrates that sewing often functioned as a barrier for those females who felt the need to write and sought some degree of literary achievement. For many of them, Hedges argues, the needle was not a liberating tool but an oppressive obstacle they tried to free themselves from (340). Yet, it is my impression that quilting is perhaps the needlework art that most often avoids this type of negative criticism.

Scholars often contend that the training in sewing girls received in the 1800s prevented them from being formally instructed in reading or writing. They also note that needlework was used to build conformity in women who were expected to act as submissive and patient individuals as well as the fact that even today women are forced to labor for subsistence wages in sweatshops all over the world. Nonetheless, when the emancipating effects of the needle are mentioned, the quilt tends to become the focus of attention. The use Susan B. Anthony made of quilting bees to educate females about women's rights, the making of quilts to fight social injustice, and the creation of bedcovers that expose modern concerns such the AIDS epidemic repeatedly turn up in scholarly studies.

When the quilt and its related institutions are idealized, one may easily forget that the history of quilting is a history of struggle in the midst of extremely unfavorable odds and that, as such, it can hardly be a fairy tale. Whether we choose to believe that the emergence of the quilt was triggered by cloth scarcity or by a need for self-expression, its origins are based on shortages or absences—of materials or of alternative channels for expressing oneself. Moreover, women have celebrated happy events such as births, engagements, or marriages through quilts but they have also used this type of bedcover to mourn for the dead, to fight insanity and isolation, and to expose their political invisibility and their powerlessness in marriages where domestic abuse is widespread. Even the idealization of the quilting bee ignores the fact that the most important aesthetic choices are made by one single woman who chooses the pattern and the materials, and then builds the top by herself.

I hope I have been able to provide an explanation for the importance of quilts in American women's lives that neither totally idealizes them nor reduces this type of needlework to a mere barrier for women's personal development. I claimed in the introduction that quilts were absolutely necessary texts in order to understand women's culture from the inside. I still do. I have tried to demonstrate in this dissertation that through actual and fictional quilts American women have commented on the issues that worried them the most. I have particularly focused on proving that quilts are texts through which females have not only explained the difficulties they faced when creating a text(ile), but also explored some of the topics that concerned them. Likewise, I have noted that by the late twentieth century women claimed those texts as part of their own cultural heritage as American females.

I also hope I have elucidated that the use of actual quilts as texts was determined by the barriers women experienced when they attempted to gain access to the conventional, written text, and that the use of fictional quilts as texts derives from the fact that needlework was an integral part of female culture. As I have pointed out in chapter two, as the obstacles that hindered women's access to means of expression other than the quilt began to disappear, reading female culture through quilts became increasingly more difficult. However, even when there seemed to be few other alternative channels of expression, it was possible to see a conflict between accepting the quilt as a text that enabled women to convey messages that they would not have been allowed to express otherwise, and rejecting the fact that quilts were the reification of women's inability to use conventional, written texts. By the time women claimed quilts as part of their own heritage in the late twentieth century, this dichotomy was no longer as relevant as it had been because women did have access to texts other than the quilt. Therefore, the quilt became a symbol of female heritage that helped women understand their own cultural background as American females without preventing them from developing as individuals outside the domestic realm or from having access to other texts. In fact, both Jenny, who works as a typist for the courthouse, and Dee, who has attended college, have had direct contact with written culture before they claim their family's quilts.

A study of quilts as texts reveals a certain urgency to find a balance between the need for unhindered self-expression, which might take the female beyond the domestic realm of the quilt, and the necessity of belonging to a community of women that validates female experience. This balance constitutes an integral part of the quilt itself, which tends to be the individual creation of one woman who incorporates in her bedcover the lives of

other females from whom she gets materials, technical advice, emotional support, and help in quilting the three layers. As a consequence, I cannot conclude by pointing out that using the quilt as a text reveals an idyllic female culture which has historically nurtured all women.

Through the fourteen short stories I have studied, I intended to demonstrate that quilts were extremely important texts in women's lives not only because they escaped patriarchal control until the feminist movement exposed their potential for subverting patriarchy but also because through them women conveyed messages that they would not have been allowed to express in writing. However, I also tried to point out that the female culture quilts represented and the quilts themselves as a means of expression did not suffice for many women. The fluctuation between, on the one hand, an uncritical or welcoming acceptance of the quilt and what it represents and, on the other hand, an open rejection of its connotations is historically determined by general socio-economic, cultural, and political factors. Therefore, it could be argued that the quilt is a historically determined text.

Thus, an analysis of female culture through quilts reveals information on the issues that worried females at a specific point in time and shows that the use of the quilt as a metaphor for the creative process, as a crucial component of the contents women explored in their fiction, and as a pivotal element for a theoretical claiming of women's heritage was—and still is—determined by historical factors which directly affected women's lives. However, that same analysis does not allow me to make generalizations about whether women's culture has nurtured women's lives or narrowed their options. The answer to that dilemma seems to depend on the historical conditions that prevailed at

a given time. Therefore, women's culture, as embodied in the quilt and its related institutions, has been both nourishing and repressive for women.

Bobbie Ann Mason's "Love Life" perfectly illustrates this point. In her short story the juxtaposition of Opal's and Jenny's perspectives on their family's burial quilt provides an excellent contrast between a critical viewpoint and an idealized vision of women's culture. For Opal the quilt constitutes a reminder of an oppressive past, a symbol of a life in which she was expected to conform to a model of womanhood which she could not fulfill and which, therefore, led her to be beset by an unremitting anxiety or fear of revealing her true, "unwomanly" self. For her niece Jenny, who has grown up in a world where gender roles have become gradually blurred, the quilt symbolizes a woman's culture that she hopes will help her achieve a better understanding of herself and find her place in a modern world that uproots the individual. Although not always as clearly expounded within a given short story, the confrontation between a woman who tries to escape the symbolism of the quilt and another one, usually of a different generation, who extols the values the quilt embodies has proven recurrent in these fourteen short stories.

In the section devoted to the analysis of female communities, this conflict is perfectly visible. Annette's "The Patchwork Quilt" provides an idealized portrayal of what quilts represented in women's lives, highlighting in a very enthusiastic tone the scraps of her quilt that mark crucial stages of her life. In spite of writing from a much more pessimistic point of view, T. S. Arthur also associates the pleasure of socializing with the existence of quilting institutions, even if the narrator of "The Quilting Party" mourns their inexorable decadence. Some forty years later, by the time Freeman wrote

“A Quilting Bee in Our Village” and Marietta Holley composed “Miss Jones’ Quilting,” the nurturing qualities of quilts seemed to have disappeared. In Freeman’s short story, the quilts represent a female culture which is as oppressive or burdensome as Opal believes it to be a century later. The version of women’s culture Freeman provides in “A Quilting Bee in Our Village” depicts women’s institutions as suffocating and unhealthy. In this short story the fact that women’s culture does not allow females room for self-development is also emphasized through a metaphor of confinement in an extremely narrow space. “Miss Jones’ Quilting” takes the issue one step further so as to illustrate not only the disappearance of a nurturing female community but also how the supposedly nourishing rituals of a separate women’s culture can be deployed to threaten the physical and psychological well-being of females themselves.

In the short stories used to study the parallelisms between the creation of a quilt and that of a written text, the perspective is less bleak because the emphasis tends to lie on the fact that it *is* possible for women to create a text(ile) despite overwhelming odds. In fact, my comparison between Freeman’s “An Honest Soul” and Kate Chopin’s “Elizabeth Stock’s One Story” revealed that in the late nineteenth century women writers could safely articulate their writing ambitions if they covered them with cloth—that is, if they presented writing as quilting. Characters who, like Elizabeth, try to write, try to go beyond the domestic realm of quilts, are eventually punished for their defiance. In “An Honest Soul” Freeman describes quilting both as a nurturing female activity and as an undertaking which can sap women’s energies and bring them to the verge of physical collapse, especially if the interference of forces external to the creative process is powerful enough. On the contrary, Alice MacGowan’s “Gospel Quilt” illustrates that

women's culture may nurture women even when social conventions define its manifestations as artistic failures. Through Keziah Mase, MacGowan shows that regardless of their aesthetic merits, quilts comforted women from the disappointments of living in a patriarchal system. Finally, in "The Bedquilt" Dorothy Canfield Fisher describes women's culture from a more optimistic perspective by presenting a quilter who is both nurtured by her work and socially praised.

Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers," for its part, provides an illuminating insight into the consequences of letting women's culture die by illustrating how the disappearance of female institutions such as the quilting bee results in female isolation and leaves women at the mercy of patriarchal figures. Nonetheless, "A Jury of Her Peers" is, above all, a story which urges sympathetic readers to approach women's text(ile)s from a new angle in order to understand female experience in its full complexity. This raises the question of whether such a reader exists. In "Everyday Use" and "Love Life" respectively, Alice Walker and Bobbie Ann Mason seem to answer in the negative because none of the main characters they feature in their short stories have the understanding of women's culture required to approach quilts from an unbiased perspective. None of them is able to visualize the full picture. Opal rejects quilts because she sees in them both a reflection of the burdensome cultural roles imposed on women and the pain she associates with the life of repression she has led in a small Kentuckian town. In general terms, her perspective is similar to that of women's rights activists who at the turn into the twentieth century interpreted all forms of needlework as a symbol of women's unpaid labor and female subordination within the patriarchal system. She fails to acknowledge the relevance quilts had as an expressive outlet when few other channels

of expression were available to women as well as their role in challenging patriarchally imposed restrictions. Jenny, on the contrary, approaches quilts from an extremely optimistic outlook, hoping to find in them her link to the past, some understanding of the present, and an end to her rootless life. Her romantic vision of the quilt parallels the idealization of needlework feminists initially made. She fails to see that quilts flourished in the context of female socio-economic and political invisibility.

In “Everyday Use,” Dee’s approach to the quilt is also positive, but equally biased. On the one hand, her initial rejection of the quilts and her ignorance of the stories embedded in them suggest her inability to perceive their intrinsic value. On the other hand, her intention of “hanging” the quilts indicates that, though she may be able to preserve them intact, she can not keep women’s culture alive. Maggie, who does understand the complex cultural baggage the quilts represent, is ill-equipped as a reader because, even if she is able to conceptualize the importance of the quilt, she is not able to articulate her knowledge. Finally, Paula Kay Martin suggests in “The Quilt Addict” that, as Glaspell had anticipated in “A Jury of Her Peers,” a male readership may interpret female culture for their own ends, which often oppose women’s.

In order to reach an adequate understanding of women’s culture, it is necessary to take into account all these divergent perspectives on it. Scholars interested in the topic should ideally combine the features and critical attitudes Walker and Mason ascribed to their different characters. They should, like Dee, be equipped with the theoretical knowledge necessary to approach women’s culture from a scholarly and abstract point of view. They should also understand, like Maggie does, the process from the inside, the specifics, because only by knowing the particulars can accurate generalizations be made.

Finally, even though they should, like Opal, be aware of the darker side of women's culture, they should also join Jenny in celebrating the nurturing qualities embodied in quilts and the women's culture they represent. They should, in short, realize that women's culture has been recorded in quilts as a perfect blend of lights and shadows, as a mixture of successes and defeats, which cannot be ignored. In order to understand women's culture, both sides, lights and shadows, joy and pain, should be taken into account regardless of whether we choose to emphasize one over the other. Even though both points of view appear in the short stories I have used, their authors, with the exception of Marietta Holley and Freeman in "A Quilting Bee in Our Village," tend to favor the positive connotations of the quilt over its negative associations. Even though in my own approach to the topic I have also tried to acknowledge the dark underside of women's culture, I emphasized the positive role quilts have had in women's lives.

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