CONSTRUCTING WOMANHOOD: THE INFLUENCE OF CONDUCT BOOKS ON GENDER PERFORMANCE AND IDEOLOGY OF WOMANHOOD IN AMERICAN WOMEN’S NOVELS, 1865-1914

A dissertation submitted to Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Colleen Thorndike

May 2015

Copyright

All rights reserved
Dissertation written by

Colleen Thorndike

B.A., Francis Marion University, 2002
M.A., University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2004
Ph.D., Kent State University, 2015

Approved by

Robert Trogdon, Professor and Chair, Department of English, Doctoral Co-Advisor
Wesley Raabe, Associate Professor, Department of English, Doctoral Co-Advisor
Babacar M’Baye, Associate Professor, Department of English
Stephane Booth, Associate Provost Emeritus, Department of History
Kathryn A. Kerns, Professor, Department of Psychology

Accepted by

Robert Trogdon, Professor and Chair, Department of English
James L. Blank, Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ....................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 1: Conduct Books .......................................................................................................... 11

Chapter 2: Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Advice for Girls ........................................ 41

Chapter 3: Bands of Women: the Women’s Club Movement and Female Friendship ............... 69

Chapter 4: Edith Wharton and the Changing of Social Customs ............................................... 95

Chapter 5: Balancing Self and Motherhood in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Story of Avis* ............................................................................... 119

Epilogue: Self-Made Women and Conduct Books ...................................................................... 148

References .................................................................................................................................. 154
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not be possible without the support and guidance of many people and a few unexpected discoveries along the way. I received a research grant from the Kent State University Graduate Student Senate which enabled me to travel to the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University, the Winterthur Library in Winterthur, Delaware, and the Library Company of Philadelphia to conduct archival research. I owe a debt of gratitude to the wonderful librarians at each of these libraries; I was able to be highly productive in my limited time because of their assistance and knowledge of the special collections.

I would also like to thank my committee, Dr. Wesley Raabe, Dr. Robert Trogdon, Dr. Babacar M’Baye, and Dr. Stephane Booth, for their guidance, support, and invaluable advice throughout this process. Also, my friends and family for listening to me ramble on about conduct books, archival research, and women writers most of them had never heard of, especially Betsy Newman for repeatedly reassuring me that my chapters did make sense, pointing out when they didn’t, and being my go-to source for linguistic information.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the wonderful professors I had at Francis Marion University, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and Kent State University for inspiring me, pushing me to always do my best, and supporting all of my academic endeavors, however crazy they may have sounded at the time. And especially Dr. Rebecca Flannagan who inspired me as an undergraduate to be a serious scholar and who first introduced me to *The Story of Avis* which was my original inspiration for this project.
Introduction


At the turn of the 21st century, scholars began re-evaluating the idea of separate spheres in 19th century America and pointing out that “the line between the spheres [was] much finer and the boundaries blurrier than was maintained in the past” (Elbert 2). However, in the first fifteen years of the 21st century, scholars are still discussing separate spheres ideology and culturally there seems to be an even bigger divide between genders, especially in regards to equal pay and reproductive rights. Recent cultural and political pushbacks against the equal rights movement and women’s health issues have attempted to re-establish clear gender lines. This shift is part of a continual push-pull struggle that is an integral part of American history and culture. This struggle can be situated along gender, race, and class lines throughout American history and has brought about significant changes including the Civil Rights Movement, the various waves of feminism, and more recently the Marriage Equality Movement; however, for every political advancement—women’s right to vote, the end of Jim Crow laws, the growing number of states allowing gay marriage—there is an equal cultural reaction of holding on to the sepia-toned “good ole days” when men were men and women were women and everyone knew his or her place.

Throughout the nineteenth century the prevailing ideology of womanhood was that of the True Woman, an ideal that women were meant to uphold. According to Barbara Welter,
the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (152)

These virtues were disseminated through conduct books and showcased in novels throughout much of the first half of the nineteenth century. This propagation of ideals was an important way of establishing and maintaining the status quo and these conduct books are a source of instruction on how to properly perform class and gender. In *Dimity Convictions* (1976), Welter furthers her discussion of True Womanhood by examining how conduct books established and maintained an ideology of womanhood. Using a similar methodology, Frances Cogan explores the idea of Real Womanhood in *All-American Girl* (1989). Cogan’s Real Woman ideal “advocated intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage: it was, in other words, a survival ethic” (4). Cogan and Welter use conduct books to establish these ideals of womanhood and apply them to novels of the period.

While both Cogan and Welter rely on the idea of separate spheres to inform their ideologies, the separate spheres concept has been reevaluated since the turn of the twenty-first century. The separate spheres ideology is rooted in the inequality of the literary canon of the 1970s. During the recovery of nineteenth century women writers and second-wave feminism in the 1970s it became evident that some women writers had been overlooked because of their gender and the types of novels they wrote. Separate spheres ideology enabled the creation of American women’s literature as a subsection of American literature. Moving beyond the
recovery movement and second-wave feminism, Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher’s *No More Separate Spheres!* (2002) and Monika Elbert’s *Separate Spheres No More* (2000) both center around the idea that at the end of the turn of the twenty-first century separate spheres ideology is no longer necessary as a primary way to discuss nineteenth century American women’s literature because, ostensibly, there is now more equity in the critical literary canon. Also, many critics find separate spheres problematic because it does not accurately, realistically, or fully represent nineteenth century society. These four integral texts along with Nina Baym’s *Women’s Fiction* (1978) are the critical basis for my discussion of the influence of conduct books on American novels.

Since women in the nineteenth century did not have a lot of autonomy and were limited in what they could do to become independent, they sometimes used writing as one socially acceptable means of making money and therefore gaining some autonomy. Women writers of this time did not limit themselves to fiction; some like Lydia Maria Child wrote conduct and advice books in addition to novels, some like Kate Chopin wrote only novels and short stories, and some like Catharine Beecher strictly wrote conduct and advice books. In *Women’s Fiction*, Baym argues that the woman’s fiction she discusses is “shaped as novels of education (not as bildungsroman, which value self-expression over self-discipline), they aim to forward the development, in young, female readers, of a specific kind of character” (xix). Baym’s idea that these novels were meant to help develop the characters of their readership provides a crucial link between novels and conduct books. Many conduct books integrated stories to show the consequences of bad behavior and the rewards of good deportment. Because conduct books were popular gifts and staples in many homes, many novels reflect the advice and ideology of conduct books. The authors that Baym discusses see their novels functioning in a similar way to conduct
books; the authors that I discuss use their novels to react to the conduct books—and societal expectations of women—to help enact change. This difference in the way authors use conduct information in their novels is a sign of the changes in society after the Civil War; Baym’s *Women’s Fiction* focuses on novels a generation before the novels that I discuss in this dissertation.

Although Baym, Cogan, and Welter wrote their texts in the 1970s and 1980s, it is important to re-engage in this discussion of womanhood because conduct books illuminate the subtext of novels by Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Kate Chopin, and Edith Wharton. Looking at these novelists alongside conduct books forges connections between these texts and authors that has not been fully examined. This dissertation expands the discussion of American women writers and the construction of womanhood by looking at the tension inherent in novels by women writers that contain female characters who follow the social codes of conduct and societal expectations set forth in conduct books and those female characters who break the codes of conduct and expectations. By including characters who both follow and break rules, the authors show the tension inherent in women trying to live up to an ideal. Nineteenth century writers such as Wharton, Chopin, Phelps, and Alcott struggled with reconciling the societal expectations for women in the nineteenth century and the realities for women. Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* is a damning look at the marriage market and exposes the lack of agency for unmarried women in the leisure-class. Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* explore the hardships of marriage and motherhood, which was so engrained in society that even women who did not wish to marry or have children, like Avis, found themselves married with children. Each of these authors shows how influential the social codes of conduct and societal expectations of women were throughout the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.
In recent years a number of history and literary scholars have revisited the sources of Welter’s and Cogan’s work. Sarah E. Newton’s *Learning to Behave: A Guide to American Conduct Books Before 1900* (1994) is an invaluable catalogue of conduct books for children, men, and women. Sarah Leavitt’s *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (2002) examines the cultural work of conduct books from the mid-nineteenth century to present day, and she traces a lineage of conduct advisors shedding light on the literary and historical value of these advice books. Jane Donawerth’s *Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Woman’s Tradition, 1600-1900* (2012) expands the argument of her 2002 article “Nineteenth-Century United States Conduct Book Rhetoric by Women” and chronicles the decline of women’s conversational rhetoric, which she argues is found throughout conduct books of the nineteenth century. More recently, Caroline Chamberlin Hellman’s *Domesticity and Design in American Women’s Lives and Literature* (2011) examines the ways in which authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, and Edith Wharton use domesticity in their novels to engage with social and political issues of the time period. Hellman utilizes domestic advice manuals, architecture plans, and magazine articles to establish the social and political issues these authors were concerned with and uses these primary sources to illuminate the subtext of their minor works. Similarly, Alexandria Peary discusses the subtext and subversion of genre in her 2012 article “Eliza Leslie’s 1854 *The Behaviour Book and the Conduct of Women’s Writing*.” Peary argues that throughout Leslie’s conduct book is advice for women who wish to become writers, which is emphasized in two later chapters of Leslie’s book, “Conduct to Literary Women” and “Suggestions to Inexperienced Authors.” Peary points to these chapters as well as the subtle writing advice in earlier chapters as examples of Leslie
undercutting the advice book genre by encouraging women to take up writing as a profession. Peary sums up Leslie’s conduct book as “rebellion camouflaged as convention” (233).

In the years after the Civil War, the portrayals of women in novels challenged preconceived notions of gender and showed audiences that some aspects of gender were a performance dictated by societal rules and expectations not inherent biological traits. These codes of conduct and gender expectations were propagated in the conduct literature of the time period. Many novels of the post-Civil War era include a subtext of these codes of conduct and societal expectations, especially in regards to women. Analyzing these novels alongside conduct texts shows the pervasive nature of these behavior guides and highlights the act of gender creation through performance of these codes of conduct and societal expectations.

When examining conduct books from the era, similarities and patterns emerged that coincided with how female characters were portrayed in novels. These social expectations laid out in the various types of conduct books were seamlessly woven into the subtext of many novels of the time period. In much the same way that contemporary societal expectations can be gleaned from television, movies, and novels, nineteenth century codes of conduct can be recovered from novels and conduct books of the time for a more fully formed idea of what the ideals and realities were. These advice books add a historical and social context to the novels and provide new insights into the cultural discussion in which authors of various types of books were involved. Looking at conduct books as a source of the ideals and expectations of social conduct makes it clear that the tension between what was expected of women and how women writers portrayed women, became a source of resistance or reification of those ideals and expectations. This tension shows how women writers were fighting against the ideals of womanhood that had been
established in the early nineteenth century and shows how these women writers were giving women who did not fit the ideal a voice to enact change.

What these books have in common, regardless of type, is establishing cultural and societal notions of the ideal woman. Lizzie R. Torrey writes in *The Ideal of Womanhood* (1859), that “the Ideal of Womanhood…. embraces all womanly dignity and virtue, as manifested in the various relations of wife, mother, daughter and sister, all the high and sacred duties and obligations of woman to herself and her home; to God and her country” (12). Grace H. Dodge summarizes “the qualifications of an ideal woman [as] Purity, honesty, faithfulness, charity, cheerfulness, consistency, self-forgetfulness, sympathy, thoughtfulness, punctuality, and possessed of good temper, patience, principle, strength, tact, courage, perseverance, neatness, and common sense” (*Thoughts* 7). Just from these two explanations of what being an ideal woman entails, it is clear that these books set a nearly impossible standard. These conduct books along with the cult of True Womanhood set societal standards for women; in order to meet these standards, women must perform their gender in a specific way.

While advice books were written for both men and women, I have chosen to focus on women (and white, middle-class women) because the advice books for women and the novels I discuss converge in interesting and significant ways. These books present different views of womanhood and how social codes of conduct were enacted and performed. Advice books for men more directly serve the trope of the self-made man. The ways in which writers of advice books for women and women writers engage in a push and pull with societal expectations, gender performance, and the creation of ideologies of womanhood has not received as much scholarly treatment. Because of the breadth of experiences women had in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to focus on one subset of women in this dissertation: I selected white, middle-class
women because a majority of conduct books were written for them and a number of women
writers of the time period were white, middle-class women. In chapter three, I discuss the plight
of working-class women, but in relation to the ways in which middle-class (and leisure-class)
women were working together to improve working conditions for these women and the resulting
relationships that formed during the larger women’s club movement. I have not discussed any
African American women in this dissertation because white middle-class ideology was only one
ideology against which African American women were working. The works I have chosen
represent a privileged class and race; however, my hope is to continue exploring the ways in
which advice books and novels converge and future projects will focus on other women’s
experiences, so that every woman’s voice can be heard.

Conduct books were written for all ages, and the content of these texts changed with the
age range of their intended audience. With this in mind I have organized this dissertation in
chronological order of a girl’s age, from adolescence to adulthood. The first chapter gives an
overview of conduct books in general and discusses the differences in these advice books for
different ages and changes in advice over time. Conduct literature for children and adolescents
focuses more on preparing children for a healthy adult life and teaches them basic obedience,
while advice books for young women stress self-education by listing subjects worthy of study
and detailing customs of society. Newly married women or women trying to make a marriage
match receive advice about manners and etiquette in a variety of social situations; finally,
mothers and wives were given advice that focuses on maintaining a happy and healthy home life.
The first chapter also gives historical and literary context as well as reviews recent developments
in conduct book scholarship.
From a general overview of the primary source material in the first chapter, the second chapter looks at conduct books for girls, and how these changed after the Civil War and how Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* exemplifies these changes. This chapter engages in a discussion of ideals of womanhood and how those ideals begin with conduct literature for girls and children’s literature such as *Little Women*. The changes in prescribed behavior for girls after the Civil War then leads to a discussion of ideologies of womanhood in the third chapter. Chapter three focuses on young women of the working class employed in factories or mills who formed working girls clubs for intellectual stimulation. This chapter also looks at the women’s club movement and literature of working girls to discover the changes that women themselves were making in how ideals of womanhood were constructed in the end of the nineteenth century. These changes highlight the integral work of women’s clubs, especially in establishing cross-class friendships exemplified in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* and in the real-life example of Grace H. Dodge and the New York City Working Girls Club.

From the lives of working girls, chapter four moves on to women engaging in the marriage market of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This chapter analyzes two Edith Wharton novels, *The House of Mirth* and *The Custom of the Country*. These novels bookend the turn of the century—*The House of Mirth* is set in the last decade of the nineteenth century while *The Custom of the Country* is set in the beginning of the twentieth century—and show the changes in social structure and customs in the United States as the nouveau riche strived to move into the leisure-class circles once denied them. Both Wharton novels deal with the marriage market and the limited options available to young ladies. Building on this chapter, the last chapter delves into the lives of married ladies as portrayed in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Story of Avis*. These novels detail the ways in
which women felt trapped into marrying and shows how ingrained social codes of conduct regarding domesticity are in late nineteenth century American culture. Finally, in the conclusion I establish connections between conduct books and the idea of self-made woman. I also briefly discuss contemporary advice books and the lasting influence advice literature has on establishing and maintaining ideals of womanhood.

For centuries conduct books have doled out advice, established gender expectations, and maintained social codes of conduct. These books prove to be valuable resources for looking at how womanhood was defined throughout the nineteenth century and for showing how ideas about gender roles and proper behavior changed with the make up of society. Using these cultural texts alongside of Alcott’s, Phelps’s, Chopin’s, and Wharton’s novels enlarges the discussion of these women writers and their portrayals of women. Each of these authors included characters in their novels who challenged codes of conduct. The novels discussed in this dissertation explore the tension between the reality and the ideal of womanhood, and these novels highlight the gender performance required in attempting to live up to the societal expectations of women.
Chapter 1: Conduct Books

“The true life, the life that may be made the fullest and most satisfactory, where there is most room for the exhibition of virtue, and where vice dare not lift its hand, is that which is lived in a well-conducted Christian home,” –Marianne Farningham, *Home Life, or How to Make Home Happy* (1869)

One of the most popular types of books published in the nineteenth century was conduct, or domestic advice, books: these books were aimed at young men and women and provided instruction about the proper ways to conduct oneself in a variety of situations. Conduct books\(^1\) rose to popularity in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and coincided with the rise of the middle-class. The purpose of many of these books was, as Marianne Farningham states in the epigraph above, to help the reader live a true, fulfilled, Christian life. Many conduct books also helped the members of the emerging middle class learn the proper behavior of the leisure-class society to which they aspired. The majority of conduct books included general rules of society and domestic affairs, and many were meant as instructional or reference guides for young women and newlywed brides. The topics covered range from cleaning the house to making and receiving afternoon calls to conducting oneself at parties. Some books even included details of

---

\(^1\) For my purposes, I will be using the term conduct book to mean any instructional or gift book that focuses on proper conduct and is aimed at young girls and young women. Scholars do not have a consistent term; some, such as Sarah E. Newton, Jane Donawerth, and Nancy Armstrong, use the term conduct book; others, such as Jane Hunter, Sarah Leavitt, and Elizabeth White Nelson, use the term advice book. I have chosen to use the term conduct book because it emphasizes not only the expected behavior or conduct, but implies an act of performance as well.
personal care, grooming, dressing, and manners. Most of these books for women also included sections on home care and fulfilling marital and motherly duties. These books clearly laid out societal expectations of behavior.

Arthur Schlesinger notes in *Learning to Behave* that “aside from frequent revisions and new editions, twenty-eight different manuals appeared in the 1830s, thirty-six in the 1840’s and thirty-eight more in the 1850’s” (18), and the publication rates increased “between 1870 and 1917, greatly surpassing even the record before the Civil War” (34). These publication rates indicate the popularity of these types of books. These conduct books were mass produced and much of the same advice was included in women’s magazines, such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and *The Ladies’ Home Journal*. This ease of obtaining conduct advice guaranteed that many people were familiar with this advice.

By making conduct and domestic advice so readily available in a variety of forms, writers of this advice—and publishers—guaranteed some level of cultural influence whether it be in the choices middle-class women made in decorating their houses and raising their children or in the writings of a variety of authors, both popular and canonical. In *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart*, Sarah Leavitt outlines their purpose and pervasiveness

The advice books ranged from collections of simple household tips to fictionalized tomes meant to influence and inspire. The books could be passed along from friend to friend, read aloud, or passed on to the next generation. They helped middle-class women navigate the confusing consumer world and make sense of their belongings. (6)

Since so many conduct books espoused very similar advice, it seems as if these authors were making a concerted effort to normalize, or maybe even create, the American household
experience. Nancy Armstrong links conduct books with “enabl[ing] a coherent idea of the middle class to take shape” (100), which seems plausible, as a goal of many in the nineteenth century was to help create an American identity. Conduct books were influential in establishing a status quo for the middle-class which included a well-appointed home and a happy family.

Conduct books helped to establish and maintain clear gender roles and expectations; however, what these concepts entailed were altered over the course of the nineteenth century and reflected greater social changes. As American society changed from the antebellum era to the post-Civil War era to the fin de siècle, these conduct books changed to reflect the different societal expectations of conduct and behavior. Early conduct books, written in the eighteenth-century, were mainly written by men and “warned women against speaking too much, being too witty, and gaining too much education” (Donawerth 6). Even as women took over writing these manuals in the early nineteenth century, the majority kept to the same formula and advice. The major difference between the conduct books written by men and the ones written by women is the tone of the author. The male authors have a fatherly and authoritative tone; the female authors have a sisterly rather than an authoritative tone. This is not an absolute: some women authors who take a more authoritative tone, but those are the earlier nineteenth-century works. Jane Donawerth explains, “United States conduct books by women theorized women’s cultural roles in writing and speaking and taught women conversation skills and letter-writing” (6). There seems to be a clear shift in tone and authorship during the mid- to late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The late-century conduct books also cover issues concerning working women. This shift in tone and authorship also represents a shift in subject matter; when the subject of advice becomes working women, the tone shifts to more sisterly rather than authoritative. Early conduct books focused on domestic advice and piety—very much keeping
women in the cult of domesticity that Barbara Welter describes in *Dimity Convictions*. However, during and after the Civil War conduct books for women began to broaden their scope to include working women, the rising middle-class, and education outside the domestic sphere for women.

The tone and scope of these conduct books changed, most likely because there were more widows and single women due to the number of war casualties and because of the economic changes brought on by the Civil War. Schlesinger illustrates the changes while focusing on male conduct

after the Civil War social and economic conditions fashioned a new matrix for American manners, one that endured with little change till the first war with Germany shattered the mold…. The worship of the Golden Calf came to engross all types of people, and as the careers of such persons as Jay Gould, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie show it was not unusual for the very poor to vault into the ranks of the fabulously rich. (27)

The post-Civil War era ushered in the ideal of the self-made man, which propelled the rise of the middle class. Moving into the twentieth century, conduct books expanded their reach to include working girls and immigrants who wanted to rise up the socio-economic ladder and assimilate into middle-class American culture. While Schlesinger contends that there was little change in the “matrix [of] American manners” from 1865 to 1914, his focus on advice for men causes him to miss an important shift in conduct books for women. In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century an influx of conduct books for working girls focused on self-education as well as proper societal behavior. These books show a clear change in tone, intended audience, and purpose of American conduct books.
Conduct books reflect social expectations in regard to behavior and gender roles; these expectations and gender roles are explored in novels of the time period as well with characters’ behavior following and resisting these rules of behavior and gender. Studying conduct books and novels together sheds light on how some female characters struggle with the gender ideals and expectations that conduct books disseminate. Since conduct books lay out the rules of proper society, they make gender expectations clear, which adds a deeper level of cultural understanding when reading nineteenth century novels that reflect these societal codes of conduct. While these societal expectations and gender roles may not accurately represent reality, these ideals are found in many cultural artifacts from works of literature to advice manuals to periodicals, and these ideals about gender roles and separate spheres became part of the national psyche during the nineteenth century.

Conduct Book Scholarship

The cultural influence of conduct literature is pervasive and almost invisible—advice columns are still found in many newspapers, magazines, and online outlets. Even *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has an advice column regarding academic workplace etiquette. Because of this pervasiveness of advice and conduct literature, Armstrong and Tennenhouse’s edited volume connects conduct literature to “redefin[ing] what men were supposed to desire in women and what women, in turn, were supposed to desire in men” (11). Armstrong argues that “conduct books imply the presence of a unified middle class at a time when other representations of the social world suggest that no such class yet existed” (101). As Stuart Blumin explains, the middle class as we know it emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century, so it can be construed that conduct books were promoting a lifestyle that later became known as the middle class lifestyle. Building from Armstrong and Tennenhouse’s ideas of conduct books’ helping to form a unified middle class, Jane Donawerth grounds her discussion of conduct books in rhetoric and analyzes the cultural roles these books allow women to have.

Sarah E. Newton provides an in-depth study of conduct books and an extensive annotated bibliography of hundreds of texts. Newton asserts that these books “both perpetuate and reflect American cultural gender expectations, but they do so, at least most of the time, out of genuine concern for the well-being of the young and inexperienced” (*Learning* 96). Most writers of conduct advice were concerned with the morals and education of young people, especially during the nineteenth century when major cultural shifts were taking place and the idea of adolescence was recognized. These conduct book writers were concerned with the moral development during this crucial period of life. Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone discuss the changes that took place—the emergence of adolescence as “a new and often disquieting concept in the late nineteenth century” (3). Vallone and Nelson’s edited volume explores the cultural shifts
affecting girls in the nineteenth century and the changing connotation of the word girl. Sarah
Leavitt takes a sociological and historical approach to cataloging domestic advice books
spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Leavitt traces the lineage of modern day
domestic advice mavens, such as Martha Stewart, back to the early nineteenth-century advice
writers such as Lydia Sigourney. Leavitt’s and Newton’s works are both exhaustive and integral
studies of conduct books, which provide keen observations and background material for my
discussion of these books.

Because conduct books are a product of their time period, they provide rich cultural data
and are important artifacts when considering the values of that society. Leavitt argues, “the
writings of domestic advisors demonstrate cultural ideals, not cultural realities…. [and] illustrate
the ways in which cultural ideals could be embedded in household furnishings and
ornamentation” (5). When more women began writing domestic advice books in the nineteenth
century, it became a way for them to advocate autonomy, at least in domestic matters, for other
women. In looking at the ideals of these domestic advisors and the way that novelists portrayed
domicity and societal expectations, it becomes clear that there is a correlation between these
two genres; therefore, conduct books are influential in the culture.

In a sense, conduct books give us insight to the formation of cultural gender ideals,
desires, and expectations in nineteenth century America. Since conduct books quickly became a
popular gift book and were mass-produced, some novelists—mainly of domestic, sentimental
fiction—drew inspiration from these books and wove bits of conduct advice into their own
works. Nina Baym discusses this influence extensively in Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels
by and about Women in America, 1820-1870. Leavitt and Baym both agree that the influx of
women authors of domestic advice and domestic fiction had a positive influence on women’s
autonomy and sense of self. Leavitt specifies that this writing “allowed for women themselves to be in control of a collective, female moral destiny. They contributed to a national dialogue about character and its importance to their vision of society” (39). Baym furthers this idea, explaining that she “perceive[s] the novels as meaning to perform and performing emancipatory work by persuading women readers to insist on their right to personhood” (xx-xxi). These early to mid-nineteenth century works—conduct and fiction—laid the groundwork for the variety of conduct books and fiction produced later in the century and into the next; works that engaged with definitions of womanhood. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, more women writers were incorporating ideas and expectations from these pervasive conduct books into their fiction, so that the influence of domestic advice writers expanded to include not just Hawthorne’s infamous “mob of scribbling women”—sentimental fiction writers—but also well-respected authors such as Edith Wharton.

While conduct books have always upheld the status quo for women and domesticity, they also played an integral role in educating women in the early nineteenth century, and, as Jane Donawerth implies, challenged societal notions about gender: “These women writers of conduct books promoted women’s education and negotiated the gendered constraints of speech and writing with great ingenuity, while not challenging them outright until after 1850” (6-7). This challenging of gender constraints, at least of speech and writing, coincides with the beginnings of the women’s rights movement and Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848. Conduct books after 1850 changed from the popular books of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to reflect the changing role of women in society, which can be traced not only through the changing characterizations of women in novels, but also through the expansion of subjects and types of conduct books published.
Conduct books differed by intended audience—children, young women, adults—which also correspond to different stages of a woman’s life. The common thread of these books—regardless of audience age or purpose—is the presence of gender performance, self-making, and ideologies of womanhood. For children and adolescent girls the focus and purpose is to learn proper habits of behavior to prepare children to be successful and healthy adults. Once a girl is out of adolescence, conduct books for young women and working girls focus on self-education and encourage women to continue a pursuit of knowledge. Other conduct books for young women and newlyweds focus on teaching women the proper etiquette and manners for a variety of social situations and on helping women obtain a marriage match and social standing. After a woman has married, domestic economy books help her to learn to run healthy and happy households. These books are instructing women and young girls on how to perform their gender, thus laying out an ideology of womanhood. Similarly, these women, especially in manners and etiquette books, are being taught a socially acceptable form of self-making for women. While women were largely kept out of the business world, they were encouraged to fashion themselves into ladies.

The patterns found in conduct books are gender performance, self-making, and ideologies of womanhood: the ways in which these patterns are presented changes over time. From the early to mid-nineteenth century the books prescribe gender performance that falls in line with being a True Woman, and self-making is couched in terms of how women can fashion or make themselves into True Women or Ladies. These conduct books focus on proper comportment in various social situations and help guide young women to make proper marriage matches. After the Civil War, the rising middle-class and the national character of the self-made man are reflected in the conduct books for women in the form of the New Woman and a renewed interest
in education beyond the domestic sphere. These books focused on encouraging young women to enhance their knowledge beyond domesticity. Simultaneously, there are books like Catharine Beecher’s that equate women’s domestic work with men’s work in an effort to work within the separate spheres system to provide women with more power and autonomy.

*Defining Womanhood*

There are various points of view on the construction of womanhood in the nineteenth century. Barbara Welter’s *Dimity Convictions* (1976) explains the Cult of True Womanhood, Frances Cogan’s *All-American Girl* (1989) uses a similar methodology as Welter to show what she designates the Ideal of Real Womanhood, and in 2002 Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher edited *No More Separate Spheres!*, a collection of essays writing against the notion of separate spheres, which was made popular by Welter’s work. These three books, along with Monika Elbert’s *Separate Spheres No More*, are touchstones for the scholarly discussion of ideals of womanhood. Welter and Cogan both use conduct books to formulate their ideals of womanhood. After culling these books for common advice and the construction of womanhood, Welter and Cogan use nineteenth century novels to show the connection between the ideals given in conduct books and the fiction of the day. Welter and Cogan show how influential ideas of societal expectations and gender performance are in culture formation.

The separate spheres ideology as a concept for discussing novels of domesticity, generally written by women, was rooted in the inequality of the literary canon. During the recovery of nineteenth century women writers in the 1970s, it became evident that some women

---

2 The separate spheres ideology stems from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835; 1840) and his discussion of separate spheres for men and women. This idea was strengthened by historians in the 1960s, and furthered by Barbara Welter’s “Cult of True Womanhood.”
writers had been overlooked because of their gender and the types of novels they wrote. Separate spheres ideology enabled the creation of American women’s literature as a subsection of American literature. *No More Separate Spheres* is constructed around the idea that at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century separate spheres ideology is no longer necessary as the primary way to discuss nineteenth century American women’s literature because ostensibly there is more equity in the critical canon. Similarly, Elbert’s *Separate Spheres No More* explores ways in which male and female writers of the nineteenth century were utilizing similar genres and tropes ultimately arguing that writers of both sexes should be taught together and in conversation with each other. Separate spheres ideology is also problematic because it does not accurately, realistically, or fully represent nineteenth century society. These books along with Nina Baym’s *Women’s Fiction* (1978) are the critical basis for this discussion of the influence of conduct books on American novels.

The various ideologies of womanhood were disseminated to the public via conduct books, newspaper advice columns, novels, and essays. From the Revolutionary War image of the Republican Mother to the early to mid-nineteenth century True Woman to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century New Woman, American womanhood has been signified by strict characterizations. The changes in each of these ideologies reflect changes in society as industrialization paved the way for the self-made man and the rising middle class the women idealized by society had to change to meet the demands of an industrialized and socioeconomically mobile society, resulting in the New Woman.
Barbara Welter’s 1966 article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” gave the first solid definition of True Womanhood; while recent scholarship points out that this ideology of womanhood was not strictly followed nor universal to American women in the nineteenth century, Welter’s seminal study is nonetheless important in providing a grounding for many studies of women’s fiction and American culture of the time period. In a 2002 reconsideration of Welter’s article, Mary Louise Roberts notes, “since then, we have become much more suspicious about the ‘natural’ appearance of gender norms, including the cult of true womanhood…. The true woman only appeared to transcend time; in fact, her ‘trueness’ was part of the ideological work she performed. In short, we began to realize that the domestic ideal was not natural but naturalized” (151). In reconsidering and revisiting Welter’s work, Roberts argues that the ideology of true womanhood that Welter postulated as having a firm hold on nineteenth century American women was a social construct imposed upon women that they were not powerless to fight against. In fact, Nancy Hewitt argues that many “women manipulated the ideals as a means of expanding their sphere and their influence” (158). The continuing scholarship on women’s culture of the nineteenth-century has challenged and furthered Welter’s original ideas on True Womanhood. Nearly 50 years after Welter’s article was first published, a more well-rounded view of womanhood in the nineteenth century is emerging, one which shows how women followed and pushed against this ideology found in domestic advice sources of the day.

Welter’s original theory of True Womanhood was based on her readings of conduct books and similar cultural texts. A look at conduct books from the 1830s onward reveals that many of these advice texts, especially those written by men, focus on Welter’s four tenants of True Womanhood—piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. William D. Sprague’s Letters
on Practical Subjects to a Daughter (1835) includes letters addressing humility, marriage, devotion, Christian Benevolence, and Christian Zeal; John S.C. Abbott’s The School-Girl, or Principles of Christian Duty Familiarly Enforced (1840) likewise focuses on various forms of piety and the conscience. Abbott’s text details such topics as having a devotional spirit, being polite and kind, obedience to parents, and the “influence of a good conscience upon happiness” (7). Even as late as 1897, Charles H. Parkhurst was espousing True Womanhood ideals in Talks to Young Women. Possibly in response to the growth and power of the New Woman, Parkhurst includes chapters on “The True Mission of Woman,” “Marriage and its Safeguards,” and “Memories of Our Childhood Homes.” Parkhurst reinforces the ideal of womanhood that Sprague and Abbott advocate and the ideal of womanhood that the New Woman and many women authors were fighting against.

The New Woman

While the True Woman was the ideal for much of the nineteenth-century, towards the middle of the century a new ideal became the standard. A product of the succeeding generation’s Women’s Movement that began in the 1850s, the New Woman was “Typically defined as white, educated, and middle class, the New Woman appeared as a suffragist, progressive reformer, and woman’s club member, and, in the popular press, as the independent consumer or the bloomer-wearing bicyclist” (Patterson “Beyond Empire”180). Many historians see the New Woman as the daughter of the social activists of the 1850s, yet the New Woman grew up in an age of active women’s clubs effecting civic change. The New Woman can be seen as an ideology that women themselves finally had a hand in forming. The ideologies of womanhood before this, the True
Woman and the Republican Mother, were formed mainly by men through various advice and religious tracts. Finally, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, women were defining womanhood for themselves.

While the term New Woman was not coined until 1894 “during a debate between Sarah Grand and Ouida in the *North American Review*” (Patterson *Gibson Girl* 2), this new woman had been forming since the 1850s Women’s movement. Natasha Kraus summarizes the goals of the women’s movement:

The 1850s movement for Woman’s economic rights had explicitly material goals. Yet, a reparation of its history demonstrates that it fully interimplicated the cultural with the political economic. *In other words, the 1850s woman’s rights movement was not simply engaged in a material and legal struggle, as a battle for economic rights is usually understood, but was necessarily engaged in a discursive struggle over the every conception of Womanhood and its relation to contract, the economy, and the nation—that is, the popular conception of woman’s place in the daily social order.* (22, emphasis in original)

As early as the 1850s, women were attempting to take ownership of not only themselves and their bank accounts but the definition of womanhood that had previously been prescribed by various men. As Kraus notes, the Women’s movement had far-reaching consequences beyond its original goal of economic rights. Martha Patterson illuminates the definition of the New Woman:

Signifying at once a character type, a set of distinct goals, and a cultural phenomenon, the New Woman defined women more broadly than the suffragette

---

3 Linda Kerber coined the term and explains “the Republican Mother’s life was dedicated to the service of civic virtue: she educated her sons for it, she condemned and corrected her husband's lapses from it” (229).
or settlement worker while connoting, even in its seemingly more socially conservative deployments, a distinctly modern ideal of self-fashioning. Not simply shorthand for a commitment to changing gender roles, the phrase could signal a position on evolutionary advancement, progressive reform, ethnic assimilation, sexual mores, socioeconomic development, consumer culture, racial ‘uplift,’ and imperialist conquest. *(Gibson Girl 2)*

The New Woman label applied to a wider variety of women than the True Woman label did; this definition of womanhood was developed over time by women to combat the more rigid ideology of True Womanhood. During the transition from True Woman to New Woman, women such as Catharine Beecher worked to elevate women’s work and the domestic sphere to be equal to men’s work, thus laying the groundwork for the New Woman to emerge.

Beecher’s most well-known book is one written with her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman’s Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science; Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (1869), and is an encyclopedic tome of domestic science. Beecher is recognized as a leading voice in this type of conduct book. Books such as Beecher and Stowe’s were veritable compendiums of domestic advice and knowledge focused on professionalizing women’s work so that society would accept it as actual work and not a part of woman’s nature. Beecher and Stowe include subjects such as scientific domestic ventilation, home decoration, and healthful food in their book. In the chapter dedicated to scientific domestic ventilation, Beecher and Stowe explain how much air a person breathes and how to properly ventilate a house: “every pair of lungs vitiates one hogshead of air every hour…. Just in proportion to the number of persons in a room or a house, should be the amount of air brought in and carried out by arrangements for ventilation”
Domestic science books go beyond the scope of other conduct books and detail the more scientific aspects of the domestic sphere. In the chapter on home decorating, Beecher and Stowe detail economical ways in which to decorate the home, including making curtains and pillow cases without wasting fabric. This economical approach along with health-mindedness is carried on into the discussion of the best layout for a house, which is accompanied with a detailed diagram of the floor plan, one which Beecher and Stowe assert is suitable for most families because of its versatility. This book and others like it provide an array of domestic information meant to help women take control of their households and keep families healthy. This control was the first step in women being able to define womanhood for themselves.

Leavitt points out that “Beecher was an influential person in making this transition. In her opinion, domestic life was more important than any other aspect of women’s existence” (15). Beecher’s influence went beyond the scope of conduct books; she founded a Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, which “include[d] domestic education, educating women for their presumed profession as housewives and family caretakers” (Leavitt 16). Beecher and Stowe explain that their “more elevated views of the true mission of woman—of dignity and importance of her distinctive duties, and of the true happiness which will be the reward of a right appreciation of this mission, and a proper performance of these duties” (15-16). Beecher is considered an authority on domestic science and educated women to be housewives; however, she, like many other domestic-advice book authors, had a profession outside of the domestic sphere. While her books served as a bridge of sorts linking the True Woman and the New Woman, Beecher herself falls in line with the New Woman. The New Woman was the prevalent ideology of womanhood through the first decades of the twentieth century and was clearly influential in the women’s rights movement of the twentieth century. Historian Ruth Bordin
defines the term as “always refer[ing] to women who exercised control over their own lives be it personal, social, or economic” (2). This assertion of control is clearly reflected in Beecher and Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home*.

**Gender Performance**

In the years after the Civil War, the portrayals of women in novels challenged preconceived notions of gender and showed audiences that some aspects of gender were a performance dictated by societal rules and expectations. These codes of conduct and expectations were propagated in the conduct literature of the time period. Many novels of the post-Civil War era include a subtext of these codes of conduct and societal expectations, especially for women. Analyzing these novels alongside conduct texts shows the pervasiveness of these behavior guides and brings to the forefront the act of gender creation through performance of these codes of conduct and societal expectations.

As Judith Butler has established gender is a performance of “a *stylized repetition of acts*” (*Gender Trouble* 140); there is nothing inherently or naturally gendered about the social performance of gender. In other words, the ways in which society perceives and accepts female and male gender is based on a social construct of what female and male behavior is or should be, and this behavior is not something naturally occurring, rather it is something taught from birth. Butler explains that gender is a socially constructed and reified performance:

```
    Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the
```
punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction
“compels our belief in its necessity and naturalness.” (Gender Trouble 140)
The performance of gender is so ingrained in society that we cannot discern them as “cultural
fictions,” so we believe them to be natural. Butler’s twentieth century ideas resonate with the
relationship between conduct books and novels in the nineteenth century. The rules of gender, or
“cultural fictions,” are laid out in conduct books and reflected in novels where characters explore
the boundaries of gender expectations and are punished for not following society’s expectations
regarding proper behavior and gender performance. While Butler focuses on contemporary (late
twentieth century) society, this idea holds true for nineteenth century society as well—possibly
even more so because gender expectations were much more rigid.

Conduct books focus on training girls and women on how to properly perform their
gender. Some books, such as Alex M. Gow’s Good Morals and Gentle Manners (1873), include
very specific ways to perform one’s gender:

The graceful gait—the manner of walking is a matter of more importance than
some might suppose…. A gentleman never puts on a pompous manner, and a lady
never struts. The style of walking should be easy and graceful. The toes should be
turned out slightly, the step should be firm, decided, and moderately long. (210-211)

This advice and instruction on how to walk like a lady is exactly the type of stylized act Butler
identifies in her definition of gender performance. Additionally, many books cover in varying
detail the various actions women should engage in on a daily or weekly basis, such as receiving
visitors on a designated calling day, making social calls, writing and responding to letters and
invitations, and proper attire for various occasions. Harvey Newcomb’s *How to be a Lady: a Book for Girls* (1854) defines in some detail what “being a lady” entails,

> Not to put on airs— not to put herself forward, and take the place of a woman before she is big enough to fill it— not to feel above labor, and despise those who perform it— not to look down with scorn upon everything that is common— not to treat with contempt those who cannot dress as well as herself, or who have not seen so much of *style and fashion*. Those who behave so are pseudo-ladies. A true lady would despise such meanness. To be a lady, one must behave always with propriety; and be civil, courteous, and kind, to all. (10)

Newcomb’s and Gow’s advice books along with many others all show in specific and general terms how to act like a lady, thereby highlighting the importance of properly performing gender in nineteenth century American society. In most conduct books the essence of being a lady is the performance of an idealized femininity and is shown in how a woman walks, what she wears, and how well she maintains pleasant conversation.

Many conduct books focused on the proper training of the mind, body, and spirit of young girls and boys. The standards propagated in these books for girls prepared them for the ideal of womanhood set forth in the books aimed at women; these conduct manuals ensured that generations of girls and women would be trained in domestic duties and continue to follow the Christian principles upon which all of these books were based. Many conduct book writers utilize letters as a way of disseminating advice; in these letters, usually addressed to a fictional girl, the advisors take a familiar, friendly tone and offer guidance on various common conduct topics such as self-control, appropriate behavior in different situations, manners, temperament, and obedience. Another common structure for these books is the use of anecdotes and stories that
show what happens to good girls (marriage and happiness) and bad girls (moral ruin and loss of status). Most conduct books for girls remained focused on domestic training, proper comportment, and caring for the sick and elderly—all things that are reiterated in conduct books for women. The advice given to girls, and women, showed them ways to behave or perform their gender.

Conduct books specifically outlining etiquette and manners, which were written for young adults and the rising middle-class, also focus primarily on gender performance. In detailing the proper manners and etiquette of leisure-class society, these books would be invaluable to the rising middle class who aspired to join the leisure-class. The American trope of the self-made man relies on this character learning the ways of the leisure-class, so that he can fully ascend the socio-economic ladder. Books that give specific directions and details as to the expectations of both genders in these social circles assist the self-made man and his female counterpart in learning how to perform their gender correctly.

*Self-Made Men and Women*

Historians generally agree that the middle class formed during the nineteenth-century in tandem with industrialization, which created more apparent distinctions between blue collar and white collar workers and the wealthiest group of Americans. Stuart Blumin traces the formation of the middle class in his seminal work, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Expression in the American City, 1760-1900*. Blumin observes that urban Americans “of middling economic and social position were formed and formed themselves into a relatively coherent and ascending middle class during the middle decades of the nineteenth century” (12). The middle class was not rigidly structured due to income, instead it was a class identity formed around social expectations.
concerning conduct, dress, language use, and employment status. Blumin describes how middle-class families formed a clear class identity:

middling families, then, reasonably perceived their homes and their domestic strategies and habits to be distinct from those of manual workers, as well as from those of the fashionables who did not even aspire to the domestic ideal… At least partly in response to the new ways in which middling women performed the role of wife, mother, household manager, and consumer, the American urban middle class “molded its distinct identity.” (190-91)

Blumin emphasizes the role of women in the formation of the middle class: it was another aspect of women’s work to adapt and maintain a middle class identity for the family. The role of women in class formation can be seen in a number of literary texts and is emphasized in a variety of conduct books. Blumin emphasizes the performance aspect involved in ascending the socioeconomic ladder in order to blend in with middle-class and leisure-class circles, one must learn how to act accordingly, and women must perform their roles as conspicuous consumers.

Women who have just entered society or newly married women were the target audience for manners and etiquette books, because they needed concrete advice on navigating society circles. Manners and etiquette books became more prominent in the years following the Civil War and again in the early decades of the twentieth century reflecting the rise of the myth of the self-made man and the rise of the middle-class. These manners and etiquette books, while still popular today, first became popular when there was ample opportunity for young men and women to make a more comfortable living for themselves due to rapid industrialization during the Reconstruction era. Because so many members of the rising middle-class were ignorant of
the manners of the leisure-class society these books strove to educate and assimilate the nouveaux riche into proper upper crust society.

Many of these conduct books expound ideas for self-improvement in order to help the audience cultivate their minds as well as their domestic skills. For example, Catharine Maria Sedgwick begins her book, *Means and Ends*, with a plea, “I earnestly beg, of you who read this book, your attention, for it depends on yourselves whether it do you any service. It has been written with a deep interest in your welfare and improvement, and I should not be sorry if it proved a total failure” (12). Sedgwick declares her purpose to provide materials and guidelines for the self-education of her audience, girls 10-16 years old. Sedgwick makes the case for self-education, “You have it in your own power to fit yourselves, by the cultivation of your minds and the refinement of your manners, for intercourse, on equal terms, with the best society in our land; and whatever may be your present condition, you should acquire the domestic knowledge that will make the humblest home comfortable” (14). Sedgwick acknowledges the means people have to not only improve their minds through education but also their societal station, thus professing the idea of self-fashioning or self-making

In addition to extolling the virtues of self-education, Lydia H. Sigourney also discusses various social graces, such as the art of conversation, in *Letters to Young Ladies*. She explains “In all countries where intelligence is prized, a talent for conversation ranks high among accomplishments. To clothe the thoughts in clear and elegant language, and to convey them

---

4 Although published before 1865, Sedgwick’s *Means and Ends* was a very popular advice text and was reprinted in 1842, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1854, 1860, and 1870. Due to this popularity it is a notable example of conduct books for self-improvement and self-education (Damon-Bach, et al 299).

5 First published in 1833 and reprinted more than twenty five times, *Letters to Young Ladies* was Sigourney’s most popular conduct book and merits inclusion in this discussion even though the original publication date is before 1865 (Donawerth *Rhetorical Theory* 142).
impressively to the mind of another, is no common attainment” (173) because Sigourney goes on to explain how a good conversation can also be educational:

Another mode of imparting pleasure in conversation, is to lead others to such subjects as are most congenial to their taste, or on which they possess the most extensive information. From this will arise a double benefit. They will be satisfied and you will reap the fruits of their knowledge. (176)

Sigourney yokes education with conversation and shows how important both are for a young lady in society. The idea of self-training and self-education is inextricably linked to the myth of the self-made man as one of the key elements of the archetypal story includes the boy educating himself so that he can then climb the social and business ladder. For women, this experience was slightly different—they could not hope to join the business world, but they sought self-education and training in order to climb the social ladder and make a favorable marriage match.

While books like Sigourney’s and Sedgwick’s focused on self-improvement and self-education in general, later in the century there were similar books that were specifically directed at working-girls. Jennie Fowler Willing’s *The Potential Woman* (1886), for example, “is aimed at a broader audience than many nineteenth-century conduct books, as the chapter on ‘Bread-Winning’ implies: This audience includes not only middle-class but also working women (although perhaps only those women who work before marriage)” (Donawerth 13). Even in the case of books aimed at working girls, the end game is always a marriage that will allow them to not work outside the home.

One of the most vocal supporters of working girls was Grace Hoadley Dodge who was the founder of “first Working Girls’ Society” which held a series of “Practical Talks” on various subjects (vii-viii *Bundle of Letters*). These talks were weekly meetings of the club during which
the members discussed a variety of subjects, and these talks formed the basis of the two conduct books. She dedicates *Thoughts for Busy Girls*, “to the many girls who are colaborers in factory, shop, office, home,” showing how varied her intended audience was (Dodge xi). She also gives credit to—she merely collected their discussions on practical subjects—“the girls who have given time for thought and study, and who hope that before long all girls may learn to value and love ‘practical talks’ as much as they do” (Dodge *Thoughts* xi). Dodge states the purpose of the club’s practical talks in *A Bundle of Letters*; “we found in our talks that we often neglected to think of preparing ourselves for the positions we each expect to fill, and never realized that it required any preparation to become the capable head of a family, or a strong, helpful woman” (12). Dodge’s Working Girls’ Society focused their discussions not only on self-improvement, but also on domestic training so that after marriage they could run a household.

Linking domestic training and self-improvement is seen in most conduct books regardless of type; however, in Dodge’s books for working girls some of the practical information is different from the other books. For example, in *Thoughts of Busy Girls*, she discusses issues specific to living in boarding houses, flats, and apartments with fellow working girls. The chapter on purity and modesty suggests the importance of maintaining standards in difficult boarding arrangements:

> The instinctive action of hiding any nude part if someone should unexpectedly enter our room; the blush that a personal remark, a bold look, word, or touch will bring to our cheeks, tells us that our integrity has been offended. It is hard in our crowded flats and apartments to be so very careful of these little points but I think it can be done, and we need to be very watchful if we want to preserve the sweetest trait in woman—true modesty. (Dodge *Thoughts* 12-13)
Only conduct books directed at working girls would include information specific as this; other books would include information on retaining ones modesty at all times, but this points out the different living situation of some working girls. Dodge’s books are examples of the change in tone and audience for conduct books at the turn of the century. While earlier conduct books focused on domestic duties and were for young girls and women who did not work outside the home, later in the century and into the early twentieth century, some conduct books also focused on working girls and teaching them the ways of the middle- and leisure-class so that they could attract suitable husbands and fashion themselves into middle-class or leisure-class women.

_Influence of Conduct Books_

Critics such as Sarah E. Newton have noted the relationship between conduct books and novels; Newton argues “[n]ovelists and conduct writers were to some degree in the same business—constructing a version of reality which dramatized the possibilities, limits, and consequences of female behavior. Conduct books supplied the typology upon which engaging fiction could be hung” (“Wise and Foolish”146). Newton’s observation that there are very direct and almost deliberate links between conduct books and early American fiction is a keen one—didactic novels certainly were more prevalent in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Later in the nineteenth century, many of the popular sentimental novels played a dual role and included conduct book language, and many conduct books included anecdotes and characters to illustrate the author’s points. While novels were no longer strictly didactic, the influence of conduct advice is still at work in how authors portray female characters engaging with societal expectations.
In Newton’s study of early American fiction she notes that many novels were written more as hybrids of conduct books and fiction and that these “texts suggest a trial initiation motif by which female characters are tested, judged, rewarded, or punished by conduct book standards of virtue and right behavior, and, most importantly, provide a unique insight into how fiction was used to serve cultural purposes” (“Wise and Foolish”140). Newton is proposing that most, if not all, of the fiction and non-fiction of this time period was helping to form the national character and culture. This was also the time period when more Americans of varying socio-economic classes were learning to read and when books and magazines were becoming more affordable and easier to produce.

Leavitt’s analysis of conduct books coincides with Newton’s: both critics agree that conduct books use various elements of the novel to appeal to their intended audience. Leavitt observes, “The close connection with novels gave domestic-advice manuals a familiar literary form. This format probably helped women readers to understand the emerging genre and to know what to expect” (12). Many conduct books cover the same material and look similar—they include similar illustrations at the beginning, similar titles, and similar tables of content. A number of conduct books are titled Letters to/for young ladies, young women, girls, such as Joseph McDowell Mathews’s *Letters to School Girls*, Charles H. Parkhurst’s *Talks to Young Women*, Lydia Sigourney’s *Letters to Mothers* and *Letters to Young Ladies*, and Arthur Percival Graves’s *Twenty-Five Letters to a Young Lady*. John S.C. Abbott has a collection of conduct books with similar titles: *The Mother at Home*, *The Child at Home*, and *The School-girl*; these three books contain similar information about conduct, education, and societal expectations, but for slightly different audiences. The conduct books listed above covered the same topics: education, reading, conversation, societal expectations for various occasions (letter writing,
attending parties, making social calls), marriage, manners, and housewifery as did volumes such as Horace Wilbert Bolton’s *Home and Social Life*, C.H. Kent’s *A Manual for Young Ladies, with Hints on Love, Courtship, Marriage, and the True Objects of Life*, and Julia McNair Wright’s *Practical Life: or, Ways and Means for Developing Character and Resources*. Some, mostly those written by women, addressed women’s rights and working women; these conduct books appeared later in the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century.

Jane Donawerth and Caroline Smith have both taken up the idea of conduct books influence on popular literature; Smith discusses how late twentieth-century “chick lit” responds to the domestic advice books and magazines of that time period, while Donawerth focuses on early American novels and the blurring line between didactic novel and conduct book. Smith points out that “these heroine-centered novels notably emerge from a larger tradition of women’s writing, [and] they expound on this tradition by commenting specifically upon the twentieth-century consumer culture mediums—from domestic-advice manuals to women’s magazines to romantic comedies—that bombard and affect their heroines” (673). While Smith discusses contemporary novels, the heroines she focuses on encounter similar pressure to be domestic goddesses which heroines in late nineteenth century novels encountered. Smith’s late twentieth century heroines have more options than the ones I am discussing; however, the pressure for women to be the perfect wife and mother and keep the perfect house has not abated even though women are now on more equal footing with men.

For the twentieth century women Smith focuses on domesticity is no longer the only option; however, the feelings that these heroines associate with domesticity (traditional marriage and child rearing) are still very real desires for these modern women. “These women, then, are not necessarily concerned with the acts (of cooking, of organizing) themselves but the sentiments
that accompany those acts. The feelings invoked by a carefully ordered household or an elaborately prepared meal are what these women desire” (Smith 682). Even though they all find fulfillment outside of this “norm” they still desire it because it is part of the collective conscious of society. Women have been inculcated with this pressure of having to be a domestic goddess and have a fulfilling career outside the home from such a young age that even the characters Smith discusses, who do not necessarily want the trappings of a middle-class existence—house, husband, children—still feel the need for some domesticity in their lives. The fictional women Smith examines echo the pressure and feelings of real women and believe that if they can control this aspect of their lives, everything else—career, men—will fall into place. Smith’s examples are troubling in that it seems as though not much has changed for female characters since the mid-nineteenth century despite the changes in American society over the last 170 years.

Although for all intents and purposes women and men are considered equal in contemporary American society—both can vote, own property, be employed—there is still an imbalance in power when it comes to ideas of domesticity, especially as portrayed in literature. Women are expected to want the ideal domestic life—husband, house in the suburbs, children—and those who do not want or do not have these things are pitied or looked down upon. Obviously, this desire for domestic bliss is not always the case, but this ideal of domesticity is rife in American society and literature even today. While contemporary novels are slowly moving beyond these gendered stereotypes, wildly popular young adult novels are reifying these gender roles for a new generation. Book series such as the Twilight saga and The Hunger Games trilogy are popular with young women, and both show heroines who choose the domestic roles of wife and mother over careers. While these books are for young adults, many of the conduct books of the nineteenth-century were also aimed at this demographic. Conduct books are no
longer as popular as they were in previous centuries, so the rules of social conduct are taught and maintained through the examples set by characters in popular books, movies, and television shows.

Newton argues the importance of conduct books in the study of American literature and culture “conduct books [are] a rich source of cultural data and a genre with significant influence on the formation of American literature as well as character” (“Wise and Foolish”140). Because these books can be seen as a time capsule capturing the ideal American woman and man, it is worthwhile to use them as a conduit to study literature. Cultural artifacts like conduct books help us build a frame of reference that authors of the nineteenth century would have had. While it is clear that these conduct and domestic advice books expound on idealized version—of what a woman, wife, mother should be and what her household should look like—and do not necessarily reflect reality, the novels of the time period parallel this striving for perfection and show how it is nearly impossible to attain or maintain. One example of the relation between literature and conduct texts is Henry James’s *Daisy Miller*; Schlesinger illustrates that Daisy Miller “became a stock example of what American girls should not be and do. Unintended by the author, the story had an effect on American canons of behavior” (45). By Daisy exemplifying what conduct is unacceptable, she reflects a common trope of conduct literature which was to use stories of good girls and bad girls to illustrate proper and improper comportment. This unintended example of conduct text infused into literature shows how integral cultural texts such as conduct books are to the study of literature.

Examining conduct books and the influence they have on novels will add to the ongoing conversation about nineteenth and twentieth century women’s fiction by furthering the conversation that Nina Baym started in *Women's Fiction*. Baym argues that sentimental novels
popular in the early to mid-nineteenth century provide insight into gender expectations and performance of that time period. By extending this idea into conduct books, which help set societal standards by which women were measured, and extending the idea into canonical texts by women writers, I am furthering Baym’s argument and moving it into the latter half of the nineteenth-century and the first decade of the twentieth. The novels written between 1865 and 1914 offer a large variety of female characters, some of whom struggle against societal expectations of gender performance while other female characters are able to perform their gender effortlessly. The novels written later in the nineteenth century tell the stories of working-girls, upwardly mobile middle-class girls, and leisure-class girls who are not only trying to make their own way in the world, but are also fighting against the gendered constraints put upon them by society. Conduct books enlarge the literary discussion of gender performance and how female characters submit to or subvert the idea of separate spheres and definitions of womanhood.
Chapter 2: Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Advice for Girls

In the past 100 years, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* has been adapted into five different movies, a television series twice, an opera, and a Broadway musical. This novel, though almost, 150 years old, resonates with modern audiences in a variety of ways, whether it is nostalgia for their childhood discovery of the novel or it is identifying with one of the March sisters. One way this story of four sisters resonates with audiences is in the various personalities of the March sisters, who can be seen as representative types of girls: Meg, the motherly, responsible one; Jo, the writer and tomboyish one; Beth, the prim and proper one; and Amy, the naïve, impetuous one. This quartet of main female characters can be found throughout American cultural works since the publication of *Little Women*. Contemporary versions of the quartet of female characters have changed slightly and can be found in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) with Carrie, the writer and impetuous one; Samantha, the seductive and powerful one; Charlotte, the motherly, prim and proper one; and Miranda, the tomboyish, sarcastic one. *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) is another example with Dorothy, the tomboyish, sarcastic one; Rose, the naïve, ditzy one; Blanche, the seductive and powerful one; and Sophia, the motherly one. A contemporary example for young adults is *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), which includes Carmen, the writer and impetuous one; Tibby, the tomboyish, sarcastic one; Bridget, the seductive, powerful one; and Lena, the naïve, prim and proper one. While some of the
characterizing features of the women have changed to keep up with contemporary society, at the core these quartets of women can be seen as different incarnations of the March sisters.

The contemporary examples of a trope that Alcott made popular show the lasting popularity and influence of her most famous work. The enduring popularity of *Little Women* illustrates how these nineteenth century ideals continue to shape and seep into our contemporary society. Sarah Elbert explains the enduring quality of *Little Women*:

> Yet Alcott’s works appeal to generations of female readers precisely because women always face an involuntary choice between domestic life and individual identity. This social choice remains a personal, painful part of growing up, much as Jo March felt it. Jo, like Margaret Fuller, and like Alcott herself, wanted both domesticity and individuality—her predicament was part of the “woman problem”—and her refusal to yield either part of herself lies at the heart of the woman’s rights struggle. In this sense, all Alcott’s writings are feminist polemics that insist on woman’s right to both home life and individuality. (xvi)

This universal struggle that many nineteenth century women faced is one that is explored not only in Alcott’s work but in all of the novels I discuss throughout this dissertation. The domestic identity versus individual identity is something that women continue to struggle with even in the twenty-first century. This struggle can be seen in *Little Women*, as well as in Alcott’s personal life. In the decades prior to writing *Little Women*, Alcott wanted to be active in the woman’s movement, but she was teaching in Boston and was unable to attend the 1848 Seneca Falls convention—the domestic and familial need won over her individual identity (Elbert 99-100).

The Woman’s Movement of the late nineteenth century led many women to question the ideals set forth in conduct books, and speaking out against these ideals was a way to gain control
and to explore an ideology of womanhood created by women. While Alcott was, at least in spirit, part of this Woman’s Movement, she sets the novel in the 1860s, well before the movement took shape, possibly to show the seeds of discontent from which the Woman’s Movement sprang. Frances Armstrong explains, “The ‘little women’ of the sixties, though, in their middle position, are full of unvoiced hope and anger. It is their vague aspiration and objectless rage that attract even those readers who are repelled by the surface meaning of the text” (454-55). The unvoiced hope and anger of the March sisters echoes in other works of the late-nineteenth century, such as *The House of Mirth*, *The Awakening*, and *The Story of Avis*: the women in all of these novels experience similar unvoiced hope and anger at being hemmed in by societal expectations. Even in the wake of the New Woman and Woman’s Movement of the 1880s, authors such as Wharton, Chopin, and Phelps saw that the ideals set forth by earlier conduct books still held sway over much of society. Any power that women gained from the Seneca Falls Convention and the subsequent movement did not necessarily translate into the power to fully opt out of domesticity. While *Little Women* is not necessarily a response to Seneca Falls and the Woman’s Movement, it speaks to the same values and views of womanhood promoted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others. Alcott, writing after the Civil War, was able to infuse *Little Women*, set during the Civil War, with the ideologies and tensions of the post war era.

Recent Alcott scholarship has focused on the intertextuality between her works, especially within the March family series, and has focused on cultural and historical contexts. Additionally, scholars have explored Alcott’s writing against gender and social conventions,
which re-engages discussions of earlier scholars such as Barbara Welter and Frances Cogan.\textsuperscript{6} These discussions of cultural and historical contexts and gender and social conventions expand other recent explorations of cultural texts, such as conduct manuals, of the nineteenth century by Jane Donawerth, Sarah E. Newton, and Sarah A. Leavitt.\textsuperscript{7} Combining the works of literary, cultural, and history scholars provides an interesting approach to Alcott’s work and sheds light on the influence of cultural texts as well as gender and social conventions on her works for children. Re-engaging Welter’s and Cogan’s texts in this discussion of Alcott provides a critical framework for more recent scholarship examining Alcott’s use of gender performance and societal expectations.

As a book for girls, Alcott’s *Little Women* equates the girlhood and adolescent years with the first stage in a life-long process of conforming to gender and social conventions and following advice about ideologies of womanhood. Because of this, it is important to look at Alcott’s work in light of its similarities to conduct literature on gender and social conventions. Julie Wilhelm examines Alcott’s use of comedy to highlight gender conventions and the March girls’ performances of femininity: in the “Domestic Experiences” chapter Meg “attempts to occupy the position of ideal homemaker… a ready-made identity she is supposed to have naturally slipped into upon getting married” (72). When Meg and John first marry, Meg promises that she will always have the house tidy and dinner ready when John comes home and tells him that bringing unexpected guests for dinner would be welcome. The one time John does bring an unexpected guest for dinner, the comedic scene of a kitchen disaster occurs. However, a few

\textsuperscript{6} Barbara Welter’s *Dimity Convictions* (1976) establishes and discusses the Cult of True Womanhood as developed by conduct books and sentimental novels of the nineteenth century. Frances Cogan’s *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood* (1989) responds to Welter and establishes the ideal of Real Womanhood by looking at conduct books and novels of the nineteenth century. These two ideals of womanhood are two sides of the same coin; they both establish prescribed notions of gender performance gleaned from conduct and domestic advice books and popular novels of the time period.

\textsuperscript{7} Donawerth’s, Newton’s, and Leavitt’s texts are discussed at length in Chapter 1.
chapters later, Meg is comfortable in her role as wife and mother and is able to perform her gender role with ease. The scene of Meg’s domestic disaster prefigures similar scenes in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* in which Avis attempts to do all the housework and fails. Wilhelm’s argument is that Alcott first portrays the sisters performing gender in a comedic way as they learn the proper conduct that they will be expected to follow as women; Alcott’s use of comedy highlights the unnaturalness of these gender performances throughout the novel. By highlighting the unnaturalness of gender performances in *Little Women*, Alcott shows that popular beliefs about the nature of women are not accurate. Although these gendered performances can be learned—as we see with Meg’s transformation—the idea propagated by most conduct books of the time period was that housekeeping was a natural act for women which is why women were relegated mostly to the domestic sphere.

In a similar vein, Sarah A. Wadsworth examines the connections between boy books and girl books in the late nineteenth century. Wadsworth shows how these authors exemplify the profession of writing for children and argues that “Alcott was both responding to and writing against [Adams’] Oliver Optic’s books. At the same time, Alcott’s books for girls reveal that she simultaneously resisted and revised traditional models of femininity while mediating her readers’ desire for conventional female plots” (18). Wadsworth, like Wilhelm, shows Alcott’s knowledge and use of gender performance and expectations while situating Alcott’s March family series in a specific type of children’s fiction. Much like the conduct books for children becoming separated by gender, the literature for children split by gender after 1850. Wadsworth

---

8 The idea that homemaking was a natural virtue of being born female was propagated in conduct books during the time period in which *Little Women* is set as well as during the time period Alcott wrote the novel.

9 William Taylor Adams wrote a series of books under the pseudonym Oliver Optic, beginning in 1851. These books were mainly adventure stories for boys and, much like Alcott’s novels of the March family, were written as a series of several books. One example is the Boat Club series, which included “six related but not continuous narratives in a series. The Starry Flag series, the Lake Shore series, Young American Abroad series, the Riverdale Stories, the Army and Navy Stories, and the Woodville Stories are his best known” (Gay 14).
notes the girls were likely to read boys books and girls books, but boys were not likely to read girls books. Wadsworth asserts that both Alcott and Adams effectively responded to the literary tastes and interests of these audiences, and both paid heed to the aspirations of their readers, as well as to the expectations society placed upon them. The books of both authors were created and shaped by the markets they addressed, and, in turn, shaped, defined, and fostered a sense of community among these respective groups of readers. (33)

Alcott was well aware of the societal expectations of gender she was writing with and against, and she skillfully negotiates supporting and subverting these expectations. Wadsworth and Wilhelm both look at points of subversion in *Little Women* as does Holly Blackford. Blackford argues that Amy is the subversive character in the novel, not Jo. Blackford explains, “Amy succeeds not by rebelling against the patriarchal system that requires women to assume social value, but by illusions and deliberate stagings” (21). In this way it seems Alcott’s Amy March and Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart have performance and artistic skills in common. Both characters are able to arrange their bodies in ways that attract the male gaze, and both characters do this knowing full well the effect they want to and will achieve—Amy and Lily seem to want the same things: a certain lifestyle and a certain amount of freedom.

While Alcott is engaged with the messages that conduct books disseminate about proper Christian and female behavior—and on the surface her characters choose to conform—her novel’s episodes such as the feminization of Laurie, Jo’s tomboy behavior, Jo’s choice of companionate marriage to an equal, and Marmee’s anger reveal Alcott’s personal rejection of the platitudes that informed most conduct books. In the postwar approval of tomboy behavior, Alcott found a means to address the frustrations she recognized as oppressive to women during the
antebellum period, and she used the diminutive form *girls* to refer to herself and her sisters well beyond adolescence, when the form “lady” would be expected, as a vehicle for cultural critique of traditional conduct book expectations of female behavior.

*Conduct Books for Children*

*Little Women* and any number of children’s books are conduct books, since they “embrace the good behavior and proper moral development of children as a significant aspect of their aim” (Newton 13). Similarly, many of the conduct books for children include anecdotes as a rhetorical means of showing good and bad behavior and its consequences; however, they are a separate genre. Sarah E. Newton explains:

> Societal ideals for boys—duty, perseverance, work, ambition, and success—and for girls—domesticity, modesty, nurturance, and industry—along with (for both) the values of self-control or self-discipline, piety, respect for parents, and obedience, persist as standard profiles for youngsters to the beginning of the twentieth century and even beyond. These role paradigms are often reinforced throughout the nineteenth century by reference to, or recapitulation of, the biographies of well-known Americans and Europeans (*Learning* 39).

Many conduct books used public figures to reinforce the gender and behavior paradigms; though fictional, Alcott references the well-known and widely read Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress* in *Little Women*. Throughout the first part of the novel, the March sisters refer to themselves as pilgrims and discuss parts of Bunyan’s work. Conduct books such as William Makepeace Thayer’s *The Poor Girl and the True Woman* (1859) used the lives of public figures as examples
for their readers: Thayer used the life of Mary Lyon to illustrate how to be a true woman. Similarly, John S.C. Abbott’s various conduct books, including *The Child at Home* (1871) and *The School-Girl* (1840), used anecdotes to reinforce societal expectations and rules of conduct.\(^\text{10}\)

Generally, these conduct books advised adolescent girls in the proper ways to behave and to run a household; some, such as Abbott’s *The School-Girl* include a brief mention of continuing a nominal education.

Interestingly, before 1830 conduct books for children were gender neutral; according to Newton, it is only in the mid to late nineteenth century that conduct books become gendered (*Learning* 29-30). Once the authors began writing to boys or to girls, they also began writing specifically for boys or for girls “of approximately eight to fifteen or sixteen years of age—the important formative years pre-puberty to working age” (Newton *Learning* 30). Newton examined Harvey Newcomb’s book for boys, *How to Be a Man*, and his book for girls, *How to Be a Lady*, and found “virtually identical chapters on… standard conduct topics” (31). This repetition shows the importance of these standard conduct topics, such as helpfulness, behavior outside the home, and piety, for both sexes. Separating conduct books by gender allowed conduct writers to double the number of books they produced and in some ways broadened their audiences. But the identical content suggests, as Newton explains, “that, under the strong influence of other social training, girls and boys reading such chapters will make very different personal truths of them” (31). Because boys and girls would be taught and trained differently, Newcomb (and Newton) surmises that they will have different interpretations of the similar advice. While containing many identical chapters, it is the different chapters that show how boys

\(^{10}\) Other conduct books for adolescent girls are *The Girls’ Scrap Book* (1832), F.E. Clark’s *Looking Out on Life* (1892), Augusta Larmed’s *Talks with Girls* (1874), J.R. Miller’s *Girls: Faults and Ideals* (1892), Harvey Newcomb’s *How to Be a Lady* (1852), Margaret Elizabeth Sangster’s *Hours with Girls* (1881), and Louis Cornelia Tuthill’s *I Will Be a Lady: A Book for Girls* (1845) and Tuthill’s *The Young Lady’s Home* (1847).
and girls could have different take away messages from these books. For example, in *How to Be a Lady* there is a chapter entitled “Knowledge of Household Affairs”; instead of this chapter in *How to Be a Man*, there is “On Useful Labor.” So in the context of the books as a whole, standard advice on piety, behavior, reading, and writing is different when the different chapter is taken into account—i.e., girls get the same advice, but in the larger context of the household, while boys get the advice in the context of labor and the public sphere.

Lydia Maria Child’s *The Girl’s Own Book* (1833) can be grouped in the early volumes of conduct books that were gendered; in the preface, Child states that:

> every girl should know how to be *useful*; amid the universal dissemination of knowledge, *every mind should seek to improve itself to the utmost*; and in this land of equality, as much time should be devoted to *elegant accomplishments*, *refined taste*, and *gracefulness of manner*, as can possibly be spared from holier and more important duties. (iii.iv)

These qualities that girls should acquire and refine are representative of what a majority of conduct books for girls and women profess. Child includes descriptions of games for girls to play, such as Blind Man’s Bluff and Buz,11 and active exercises, such as calisthenics, before moving on to domestic topics such as creating a variety of baskets and needlework. By including some active games and exercises, Child’s book shows that the advice writers understood the importance of physical exercise; however, her book places more importance on domestic arts and her preface shows that she upheld the idea of the domestic sphere and the ideas of True Womanhood, which was the reigning ideal of this time period.

---

11 Child describes Blind Man’s Bluff as entailing “one of the company [to be] blinded and runs round to catch the others, who all try to keep out of his grasp…. One fairly caught and known, must take the blind man’s place” (57). Buz is a seated game in which the players count in turn but replace seven and multiples of seven with the word Buz until someone misses one and it begins again (Child 39).
While Child’s 1830 conduct book included discussion of physical activities for young girls, the major focus is on learning domestic duties. In contrast, conduct books later in the century, such as Augusta Larned’s *Talks With Girls* (1874) address the issue of romping by encouraging it. Larned explains:

> It is good for a girl to love exercise and fresh air, and sometimes, if she cannot find girls for companions, she naturally takes up with the boys. It is a more hopeful sight to see a girl in an old gown and shabby hat going off on a fishing or berrying excursion,… than to see her sitting in a shady parlor dressed in her best, and practicing the piano hour after hour. (25)

Larned is more encouraging of girls pursuing outdoor activities rather than spending hours indoors perfecting domestic arts; this is much more extreme than Child’s book which acknowledges that exercise and outdoor activities are healthful, but does not suggest those pursuits replace practicing and refining domestic arts. Larned’s views are representative of domestic advisors who encouraged the tomboy behavior that Alcott and her contemporaries wrote about. Larned’s 1874 book reflects Frances Cogan’s ideal of Real Womanhood and prefigures the emerging attitude of the New Woman, which became popular in the 1880s as a response to the early nineteenth century ideal of True Womanhood. Larned’s book encouraged physical activity for girls and young women for their overall health and well-being; this is a departure from the earlier conduct books like Child’s *The Girl’s Own Book*, which suggested physical activity for girls, but did not tie it to their overall health and well-being nor was it encouraged to the extent that it is in Larned’s book. While these differences between Child and Larned can be explained to some extent by the passage of time—the volumes were published 50
years apart—the shift in focus on physical activity also shows the pre- and post-war attitudes which Alcott’s *Little Women* are stuck between.

Louisa May Alcott’s family was a staunch believer in letting the children (Louisa and her sisters) run and explore outdoors rather than being kept inside all the time. Alcott’s father, Bronson, and his cousin William Andrus Alcott both wrote advice pieces. Bronson’s dealt more with educational practices, but William wrote a number of advice books, including *The Young Woman’s Guide* (1847), *The Young Housekeeper* (1851), and *The Young Mother* (1838). All of these expound the ideas of Real Womanhood that Frances Cogan explains and give credence to her theory because of the more realistic nature of the role of women given in these texts.\(^{12}\)

Because of her family history, it is evident that Alcott was exposed to not only conduct literature but also to alternative living situations such as the Fruitlands experiment.\(^{13}\) These experiences seem to have shaped her view of traditional societal expectations and codes of conduct.

This new code of conduct is explored in *Little Women*, and it dovetails with Bronson Alcott’s own thoughts on children’s behavior. At Fruitlands, traditional gender roles were eschewed in favor of the members doing what they wished in the work of the farm. Bronson Alcott believed

that anyone in whom the head predominated was a man and anyone led by the heart a woman at once imposed a stereotype and offered an alternative, since it could be read in two ways: that because Louisa was female she was intellectually

---

\(^{12}\) William Andrus Alcott’s *The Young Woman’s Guide*, while similar to other conduct texts of the time period, also includes a chapter on exercise and advises young women to do various exercises, i.e. walking, gardening, and horseback riding. Alcott asserts, “that of all classes of people in the world—parents and teachers alone excepted—young women are the most imperiously called upon to attend to this subject [exercise]” (208). These ideas and advice about exercise fall in line with Louisa May Alcott’s portrayal of the March sisters activities in *Little Women*.

\(^{13}\) Fruitlands was a utopian experiment that Bronson Alcott started in the 1840s. Everyone lived and worked the farm together, followed a strict vegetarian diet, and wore similar clothing. The experiment lasted only seven months. Further discussion of the experiment can be found in Richard Francis’s *Fruitlands: The Alcott Family and their Search for Utopia* (2010), and Louisa May Alcott wrote a fictionalized version of the experiment in “Transcendental Wild Oats” (1873).
inferior, or that because she valued the intellect she was not really female.

(Armstrong 461)

As a young girl, Alcott struggled with reconciling her father’s ideas regarding gender with her own experiences since she was still regarded as a female regardless of her behavior or feelings otherwise—she famously wrote that she was born “with a boy’s spirit under [her] bib and tucker” since, according to her father’s notions, she was led by her head not her heart (Myerson and Shealy 79). In Little Women, Jo and Laurie parallel this gender confusion; both choose a more fluid performance of gender roles over rigid social expectations throughout most of Book 1.

True Women, Real Women, and Tomboys

Alcott’s work encompasses the ideals of womanhood set forth in conduct books in the mid-nineteenth century. However, as Nina Baym argues, “The ‘cult of domesticity’ that pervades this fiction is not equivalent to a later generation’s idea of such a cult” (27); it is the definition of True Womanhood that is of interest in this analysis, because the idea of separate spheres is not historically accurate. Baym goes on to explain that women’s fiction assumes that men as well as women find greatest happiness and fulfillment in domestic relations, by which are meant not simply spouse and parent, but the whole network of human attachments based on love, support, and mutual responsibility. Domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society. The domestic ideal meant not that woman was to be
sequestered from the world in her place at home but that everybody was to be placed in the home, and hence home and the world would become one. (27)

This definition of the domestic sphere that Baym describes aligns with Alcott’s vision of domestic life in *Little Women*: Alcott shows marriages in which the man and woman find “happiness and fulfillment” and centers her novel around the domestic sphere of the home, where everyone has a place. While everyone has a place in this more historically accurate definition of the domestic sphere, there are still societal expectations inherent in this sphere for both men and women. These societal expectations gain traction through conduct books for all ages and audiences.

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* portrays the lives of the March sisters all of whom balance the ideal of True Womanhood that so many conduct books espoused and what Frances Cogan calls the ideal of Real Womanhood which can be found in late nineteenth century advice books for girls. While the ideal of True Womanhood has been debated in recent years, many conduct books espoused virtues that Barbara Welter identified as the main tenants of True Womanhood—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.¹⁴ In contrast, Cogan uses conduct books from later in the century to show a concurrent ideal, which she calls Real Womanhood; the valued virtues of which are intelligence, physical fitness, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, judicious marriage, and balance between self and family. While Cogan’s book detailing her argument for Real Womanhood, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, does not take into account how the intended audience for the

---

¹⁴ Welter’s ideas about True Womanhood along with the idea of separate spheres have been debated in contemporary scholarship, most notably in *No More Separate Spheres* edited by Cathy N. Davidson (2002). However, my use of the traits Welter identifies reflect the ideal set out in conduct books; this ideal provides subtext for the novel, because there is some unarticulated ideal the March girls are measuring themselves against. I believe this unarticulated ideal can be found in conduct books since the elder Alcotts (Bronson and William) wrote their own conduct books and were well acquainted with other conduct book authors, and the ideal traits suggested throughout *Little Women* correspond to those established in conduct books.
conduct books affects their content, she offers an explanation of the changing nature of advice books in the wake of the Civil War.

What Cogan calls Real Womanhood Michelle Abate calls tomboy behavior. In Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History Abate explains how tomboy behavior became popular:

The invaluable work that adolescent girls and young women performed during the Civil War had a profound effect on the popularity of tomboys. Whereas this code of conduct had been a relatively small societal practice during the antebellum era, it morphed into a widespread cultural phenomenon. During the 1860s and 1870s, Americans witnessed the benefits of creating physically strong, intellectually capable and emotionally resilient young women. More than simply helping to ensure white racial supremacy, tomboys could ensure national unity.

The timing of this change in expectations of behavior is important because of the devastation caused by the Civil War. Since there were such great losses of human life during the war, the role of women in society changed—more women had to be able to do more things that men had done in the past. Since Little Women is set during the Civil War, the new code of conduct Abate and Cogan discuss would not yet have been accepted; however, given Alcott’s experiences at the Fruitlands with looser ideas of gender her novel prefigures the tomboy and real womanhood codes of conduct that come out of the Civil War.

Alcott’s Little Women explores the tension inherent in encouraging girls to be tomboys while expecting them to also become proper ladies. After the Civil War a new code of conduct for girls emerged while the code of conduct for women remained mainly the same. While girls were encouraged to run about outside to ensure a healthy vigor, the sudden switch to behaving
like a proper lady once a girl reached late adolescence could cause tension. This tension is what Alcott explores in *Little Women* and alludes to in other works such as *Aunt Jo’s Scrap-bag* (1892). One of the stories in *Aunt Jo’s Scrap-bag*, “The Children’s Joke,” explores the tension between what behavior society, in the form of parents, expects from children to make them into good people and the reality of the confining and claustrophobic nature of those imposed conduct rules. The children and parents decide, with prodding from maiden Aunt Betsy who lives with them, to switch roles for one day so the parents can see how difficult the children’s days are and vice versa. Through this “experiment” the parents learn how stifling all of the rules they impose on their children are.

While some behaviors associated with Real Womanhood were not tolerated in adults, literary depictions of adolescent girls became almost synonymous with these tomboyish attributes. In addition to Jo March, other popular tomboys were “Kay Carr from *What Katy Did* and Gypsy Breynton from [Elizabeth Stuart] Phelps’s series by the same name” (Abate 29); even Phelps’s Avis Dobell grew up with tomboy tendencies—she spends much of her childhood rebelling against her Aunt Chloe’s attempts to make her a lady and preferring to romp and wander outside. Abate goes on to assert that “as a result of this widespread literary depiction of tomboys as adolescents, these books were as much about this new stage of human development as they were about this new code of female conduct” (29). Abate clearly links acceptable tomboy behavior with age and stages of human development—once girls reached late adolescence they needed to adjust to the more traditional gender roles, a process called “tomboy taming.” This taming can be seen as one of the main areas of tension in Book 1 of *Little Women*. Jo has an especially hard time changing her ways, and throughout the first half of the novel she considers herself more of a boy than a girl.
So while it was seen as healthy and good for girls to be physically fit and active outside and learn to be more self-reliant, once they reached a certain age they had to curtail those activities in favor of learning the domestic skills necessary to make an appropriate marriage match and run a household. These seeming opposing ideals of True Womanhood and Real Womanhood are more easily seen as two sides of the same coin—in order to be a True Woman you must be a Real Woman and vice versa. The domestic work involved in True Womanhood requires the physical fitness, judicious marriage, and economic self-reliance of Real Womanhood—as a wife and mother a woman had to be able to make the family’s income cover all the household expenses, and a judicious marriage would ensure a steady income and a helpmeet in a husband.

While Real and True Womanhood can be seen as two sides of the same coin, there are some real differences, especially when tomboy behavior is taken into account. Abate and Cogan argue that tomboys and Real Womanhood become alternatives to the sickly young lady. Abate explains:

During an era in which the health of middle- and upper-class young white women had become imperiled from equating femininity with frailty, tomboyish emerged as an antidote. Calling for sensible clothing, physical exercise and a wholesome diet, this code of conduct was designed to improve the strength and stamina of the nation’s future wives and mothers and, by extension, the offspring that they produced…. In living this lifestyle, tomboys disrupted the rigid dichotomy separating “good” and “bad” female conduct that Lynne Vallone and other critics have identified as a defining feature of Anglo-American girlhood.
From their inception, tomboys demonstrated how unruly female behavior that was formerly seen as socially ‘bad’ could be racially good. (Abate xii)

Abate’s exploration of tomboys is limited to adolescence and childhood because once these tomboys enter adulthood they are more likely to follow traditional gender conventions, which while problematic may also reflect that once these adolescent girls have grown up into women it is no longer proper to refer to them as tomboys—much as it is not appropriate to call them girls. Abate connects this new tomboy behavior to the newly recognized, in the nineteenth century, developmental period of adolescence, which suggests that it is a necessary part of growing up and maturing into a proper woman as is the process of becoming more domestic and ladylike, which Abate calls tomboy taming.

The tension between the ideal of the True Woman and the ideal of the Real Woman/tomboy is apparent in the Alcott’s works and especially in *Little Women*—some of this tension was because of pressure from her publishers and her readers to have her characters end up married by the end of the novel. In a letter to her uncle, Samuel Joseph May, Alcott wrote “I don’t like sequels, & dont think No 2 will be as popular as No 1, but publishers are very *perverse* [sic] & wont let authors have thier way so my little women must grow up & be married off in a very stupid style” (Myerson, Shealy, and Stern 121-22). This is a clear reflection of the societal expectations: women were supposed to get married, which is reflected in so many novels of the time period that end with the heroine married or that focus on the search for a husband. Alcott clearly did not agree with this, but in the end married Jo to Professor Bhaer, thus Alcott capitulated to societal demand.

Even though Alcott married off her little women at the end of the novel, the characters challenge notions of gender throughout the first part of the book. Specifically, Jo and Laurie are
often described in opposite gender terms—Jo often referring to herself and being described by others as masculine, while Laurie is often feminized. Laurie is first feminized by the boys at school who call him Dora instead of Theodore, forcing him to choose his last name, Laurence, to be his preferred name; he then refers to himself as Laurie, thus feminizing him again. Only Jo’s nickname for him, Teddy, is masculine—although diminutive. For her part, Jo is masculinized by herself, her family, and Laurie. She calls herself the man of the house while Mr. March is off at war; she is often referred to as a “fellow” by Laurie, and even Meg tries to get her to stop her boyish ways and to act like a proper little woman. And, of course, there is the famous hair-cutting scene where she goes to the barber and sells her hair: while she was vain about her hair and its beauty, she likes it short after she gets it cut off. Jo’s and Laurie’s gender bending is part of the tomboy behavior that Michelle Abate discusses: she explains that most tomboys had a feminized boy sidekick—a sissy boy—and Laurie most definitely fits this description, as does his grandfather, who “watches over [the March girls] like a motherly old hen” (137) when Marmee leaves to tend to Mr. March after he’s been injured in the war. Alcott feminizes most of the men in the novel regardless of their age, and the only other male figures in the novel are Mr. March and Mr. Brooke, both of whom only appear sporadically and are not fully developed characters.

Although Laurie can be considered Jo’s sissy boy sidekick, Abate goes on to explain that the sissy boy grows up to be a fine adult man because he learns masculine qualities from the tomboy. The tomboy, however, has to be tamed:

this process sought to eradicate—ideally by choice, but if necessary by force—a gender-bending girl’s iconoclastic ways and have her adopt more feminine behaviors. This process was imposed at a particular point in the
tomboyish girl’s development: with the onset of puberty and entrances into the newly created stage of adolescence. As the time when young girls were seen as exceedingly impressionable and thus in need of receiving firm instruction in traditional female roles, adolescence was also the period when tomboyish girls needed to shed their gender-bending ways and adopt more feminine behaviors.

(Abate 31)

While Abate argues that tomboys were tamed during adolescence, Jo March’s tomboy ways are never fully tamed; however, by the end she is mostly behaving as a proper woman—she marries, becomes stepmother of sorts to Bhaer’s orphaned nephews, has two boys of her own, and opens a school. These are all well within the realm of acceptable and expected behavior for women. However, Alcott includes a couple of twists; Jo is financially independent because of her inheritance from Aunt March, and Professor Bhaer is more or less her equal.

The process of tomboy taming involves learning how to properly perform gender. The tomboy learns the expectations of her gender and learns to change her ways accordingly. In Little Women the March sisters learn gender performance as part of growing up. While Marmee shows them the amount of work required to run a household in the “Experiments” chapter, that is only part of the expectations for girls and women. In addition to housekeeping girls were expected to learn proper comportment and behavior and were expected to stop behaving like tomboys at a certain age. As each of the March girls grows up, she learns how to behave in public and perform the stylized acts of a proper woman—properly dressed, demure behavior, walking not running, etc. Jo learns to perform her gender while subverting gender expectations and attitudes about work and marriage.
**Subversion of Expectations**

Much like other novels of the nineteenth century, *Little Women* deals with marriage and domesticity. The March sisters are expected to marry once they are old enough, and they are expected to learn and assist with the domestic duties of the household. While Alcott did not want to marry off all of the March girls, she capitulated to the desires of her publisher and her readers—many of whom wrote her letters demanding a marriage between Jo and Laurie. Because Alcott was writing for a young audience, she had to conform in some ways to the conventions of the genre of sentimental and didactic literature; this, however, did not stop her from making the ending of *Little Women* unexpected. Although she was forced to marry off the March sisters, and Jo in particular, she did so in her own way—with the funny match of Jo and Professor Bhaer. Many critics see this marriage as Jo marrying her father and superseding her mother—Jo’s sons call her Marmar, which is very close to Marmee—and read the ending as Freudian.\(^{15}\) Other critics such as Elbert, Hellman, and Dalke, see the marriage of Jo and Professor Bhaer as an equal one—Jo provides the place and funds for their school: she is not dependent on him, and they work together at the school they start.

The ending Alcott gives Jo shows just how subtle her subversion is. On the surface Jo gets the expected and acceptable domestic ending, but upon further investigation, she is in control of the marriage, where they will live, and what they will do. Caroline Hellman affirms Alcott’s subversion:

> Alcott proceeds to imbue *Little Women* and subsequent domestic iterations with subversive characters, ideas, and variations on traditional domestic patterns. This subtle contravention did not mark her as a radical and certainly did not jeopardize

---

\(^{15}\) Further discussion of the psychoanalytical readings of *Little Women* can be found in Ann B. Murphy “The Borders of Ethical, Erotic, and Artistic Possibilities in *Little Women*” *Signs* 15.3 (Spring 1990): 562-85.
her continued market success, yet it did suggest to her readers viable, alternative forms of domesticity. (40)

Jo’s marriage is not the only “alternative form of domesticity” that Alcott offers her readers; Amy and Laurie both stay home and raise their children together as equals. Meg and John have the most traditional marriage.

In addition to highlighting the domestic work of women, Alcott includes portrayals of marriages that show more equal distribution of responsibilities. Anne Dalke maintains:

The novel offers instead a family unit in which husband and wife share the economic and, more significantly, the emotional responsibilities of group existence. John, Friedrich and Laurie all learn to participate in the pattern established by Father March…. Meg is house-bound while John goes out to work. Laurie and Amy have a more equitable arrangement: both stay at home. But it is Jo’s marriage which is most explicitly made over on the matriarchal pattern. She chooses the life work for herself and her partner, and provides the setting for their new school. She and her professor enlarge the family beyond the ties of blood, putting woman’s traditional strengths to work in an arena wider than that of the immediate household. (577)

The portrayal of these various marriages shows the range of relationships adolescent girls could look for. This supports Cogan’s idea about Real Womanhood including judicious marriage; Alcott’s March sisters choose their husbands carefully, and they choose husbands who complement their temperaments. Showing marriages as equal partnerships was a subversive move on Alcott’s part.
The subversive nature of Alcott’s writing becomes clear when her other work is considered. Not only was she an avid supporter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s work for women, but Alcott also wrote a number of stories and essays that spoke to the opposite of her ending of *Little Women*. In her essay “Happy Women” (1868) she argues for spinsterhood:

My sisters, don't be afraid of the words, ‘old maid,’ for it is in your power to make this a term of honor, not reproach….Never was there so splendid an opportunity for women to enjoy their liberty and prove that they deserve it by using it wisely. If love comes as it should come, accept it in God's name and be worthy of His best blessing. If it never comes, then in God's name reject the shadow of it, for that can never satisfy a hungry heart. Do not be ashamed to own the truth—do not be daunted by the fear of ridicule and loneliness, nor saddened by the loss of a woman's tenderest ties. Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it faithfully for the good of others you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success. (205-206)

This essay is drastically different from *Little Women*; instead of showing marriage as the endgame for women, she embraces and calls for other women to accept the possibility of remaining unmarried and being happy—as the title suggests. The drastic difference between this essay and the ending of *Little Women* suggests that Alcott’s true feelings were not in line with the publisher’s and audience’s demand for the March girls’ marriages—her feelings about both “Happy Women” and *Little Women* can be found in her journals. Alcott recorded the instance of writing “Happy Women” in her journal:
It was about old maids. ‘Happy Women’ was the title, and I put in my list all the busy, useful, independent spinsters I know, for liberty is a better husband than love to many of us. This was a nice little episode in my trials of an authoress, so I record it. (Myerson and Shealy 165)

This entry contrasts starkly with her own accounts of writing “Good Wives” after the success of “Little Women”—the demands of her publisher and the girls reading “Little Women” were at odds with what she thought made happy women. Alcott’s joy at writing “Happy Women” also contrasts starkly with her feeling of dread while writing Little Women. It is evident from her journals that she did not approve of the letters she received from readers solely interested in whom the March girls were going to marry, “Girls write to ask who the little women marry, as if that was the only end and aim of a woman’s life” (Myerson and Shealy 167). Bolstered by essays such as “Happy Women” and Alcott’s personal writings, many Alcott scholars and feminist critics argue Little Women is subversive when looked at closely and in concert with Alcott’s more personal and free writings.

One such critic, Ann B. Murphy finds the subversion of the status quo of separate spheres and expected conduct in the depictions of female anger throughout the novel:

To account for its enduring power, Little Women must instead be seen as a multifaceted novel, a children’s book regarded (or at least defined) as ‘moral pap’ by its author. It preaches domestic containment and Bunyanesque self-denial while it explores the infinity of inward female space and suggests unending rage against the cultural limitations imposed on female development. (565)

Jo seems to be the most rage-filled character, as she is prone to give in to her temper; however, all the March sisters and Marmee show some rage or anger in the novel. Amy is mad at Jo for
not allowing her to accompany Jo and Laurie on an outing and burns Jo’s stories; Jo, in retaliation, does not make sure Amy knows about the thin ice on the river when they go skating. The resulting near death experience for both Amy and Jo reconciles the sisters. This reconciliation gives Marmee a reason to speak to Jo about her own struggles of keeping her anger under control:

“I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so.” (Alcott 68)

Although she has learned to control it, Marmee is still angry on a daily basis—she does not specify if she is angry at the actions of specific people, like Jo and Amy are, or if she is angry at something more general, possibly the plight of women, or angry about the absence of her husband. Given Alcott’s views on the woman question and interest in the Woman’s Movement, it is easy to read Marmee’s seething anger towards the plight of women in society.

While Alcott subverts the marriage expectation by marrying Jo to an equal of sorts, she does not fully subvert all societal expectations for women as Marmee’s discussion of suppressing her anger shows. By the end of the novel, Jo’s tomboy behavior is mostly tamed—she takes on the domestic duties that Beth was responsible for. Throughout the novel Jo (and the other March sisters) learn the domestic skills necessary to run a household; the slight subversion that Alcott includes is in the chapter “Experiments” when Marmee lets the girls experiment with having no domestic work or responsibilities to teach them how uncomfortable life is without domestic harmony and personal responsibility. By the end of the “Experiments” chapter, the girls have learned that their daily housework is what makes their lives comfortable, and they learn just how
much work it is to run a household. This role reversal is similar to the technique Alcott employs in “The Children’s Joke”—the children in the story reverse roles with their parents to prove a point about the parents’ rules stifling the children. While on the surface Marmee’s experiment does not seem subversive, calling attention to the real work involved in the domestic sphere was outside of the norm and is therefore subversive. Much like Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alcott seems to want to elevate the work of women to that of men by showing just how much work running a household is.

Jo is very aware of the expectations placed upon her and her sisters; however, she still plans to contribute to the household income, and she decides her husband’s profession along with her own. Jo prepares Bhaer for an equal marriage when she tells him:

“I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I’m out of my sphere now,” she tells her fiancé, “for woman’s special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I’m to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that.” (Alcott 438)

While Jo will dry tears and bear burdens, she will also contribute to the household earning thereby conforming to an extent to societal expectations. However, because of Jo’s inheritance from Aunt March, she and Bhaer are able to open a school, which simultaneously puts Jo in the domestic sphere and the public sphere.

Throughout both books of Little Women (“Little Women” and “Good Wives”), Alcott provides alternatives to traditional domesticity. At first glance the March family seems to be upholding the traditions of separate spheres; however, on closer inspection it is clear that this is a matriarchal household where the father is mostly absent. Mr. March spends most of Book 1 on the warfront and garners only passing mention when the girls are in need to cheering up or
bucking up. In Book 1, “Little Women,” Mr. March (or Papa) is mentioned a total of 20 times, while Mrs. March (or Marmee) is mentioned 107 times; additionally, Mr. March does not appear until the end of the Book 1 when Beth is deathly ill—only then is he mentioned on successive pages. Mrs. March is mentioned on successive pages throughout Book 1, which shows the matriarchal nature of the March family. The subversion of patriarchy in this novel shows readers an alternative form of domesticity. This alternative is one in which women are on more equal footing with men—as is seen in the Book 2 “Good Wives” when the March girls marry their respective husbands.

Alcott seemed reluctant to write a story for girls that reified societal expectations and codes of conduct; she wrote in her journal, “Mr. N [Thomas Niles Jr.] wants a girls’ story, and I begin ‘Little Women’…. I plod away, though I don’t enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters” (Myerson and Shealy 165-66). Nevertheless, she was able to write a book for the masses as well as offer an alternative for those who read closely. Even though she marries off three of the March sisters in Little Women, she shows each sister choosing a helpmate for reasons other than infatuation and romance. More importantly, in Jo she shows a determination not to be kept solely in the domestic sphere. After Beth’s death, Jo takes on Beth’s domestic traits, but she does not lose her sense of purpose as a writer and goes on to live on her own and publish stories. While it is easy to read Little Women as a didactic example of Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress and as upholding the domestic sphere for women, upon further inspection the novel reveals its subversive nature and Alcott’s true intention—to show girls that there is more to life than marriage.

---

16 The 2004 Norton edition of Little Women was used in these mention and appearance counts.
Conclusion

Reading *Little Women* in light of the changing codes of conduct espoused by advice books of the nineteenth century provides a new lens to uncover Alcott’s subversion of gender roles and societal expectations. The March sisters provide literary examples of tomboy behavior and the ideal of Real Womanhood, both of these were ideas that advice writers explored after the Civil War as a means to strengthen the nation by strengthening the health and vigor of American girls. Alcott’s most famous work is still popular and an influential part of American society because it simultaneously reinscribes the domestic ideal for women and subverts it with Jo’s narrative arc. Disappointingly, the social expectations that the women and girls in these contemporary examples face are not all that different from those facing the March sisters—female narratives continue to revolve around marriage and motherhood.

While Alcott’s novel subverts and reinscribes ideals for womanhood, in her personal life Alcott subverted expectations by consistently referring to herself and her sisters as girls long after they aged out of that category. As Elbert points out, this was “a verbal tactic that excused their work as nonthreatening girlish fancies” (110). Since she was a “girl” Alcott could write things that did not necessarily fit with the prescribed code of conduct. Much like how Edna Pontellier and Avis Dobell will be shown to flaunt the rules of society because they were married, Alcott’s status as “girl”—and the March sisters, who are consistently referred to as girls—meant she could flaunt some of the rules of society. Alcott’s linguistic choices reflect the subversion in *Little Women* and possibly even in her own life. By referring to herself as a girl, Alcott was categorizing herself as part of the female population who was still learning proper behavior and codes of conduct, and therefore could more easily subvert societal expectations. Conduct books for girls focused on training them to behave certain ways to be considered
women. The purpose of these books was to ensure that girls would be able to run a household
and behave like proper ladies in public, so by consistently referring to herself, her sisters, and her
most well-known characters as girls, Alcott gives them a way to opt out of domesticity to a
certain extent. She, herself, opted out of domesticity by never marrying or having children. The
March sisters do not opt out, but they make girlish mistakes throughout their domestic training in
Book 1 of *Little Women*. Alcott’s exploitation of the term girl shows her subversiveness and
reveals her knowledge of conduct books and the expectations the books set forth.

This discussion of Alcott’s most famous novel opens the larger discussion of this
dissertation by exploring how codes of conduct for girls changed in the years after the Civil War
and how Alcott’s interest in the Woman’s Movement had to a subversive text which upholds a
more realistic ideology of womanhood. In the next chapter, the realistic ideology of womanhood
that Alcott and conduct book writers after the Civil War were trying to establish is discussed
further and in terms of the realities of working girls. In Chapter 3 the term girl, which Alcott so
adeptly used as her descriptor of choice, takes on a different and in some cases pejorative
connotation.
Chapter 3: Bands of Women: the Women’s Club Movement and Female Friendship

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” —Margaret Mead

As working women become part of the make-up of American society post-Civil War, the literature of the day began to reflect not only the working-class, but the working woman or, more popularly, the working girl. The stories varied from portrayals of the abject poverty and dangerous working conditions this socio-economic class faced to portrayals of a working-class character reaching the heights of American society and becoming self-made. Some of these tales more realistically reflect the situation and conditions of the working-class at the end of the nineteenth-century. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps writes about the struggles of the working girl with sympathy and grace in *The Silent Partner*, which stands out from most working-girls novels because it focuses on the relationship between a middle-class woman, Perley Kelso, and a mill worker, Sip Garth. Phelps explores how the chance meeting and subsequent friendship of Perley and Sip changes both women and leads Perley to help the mill workers in very concrete ways: she holds weekly teas at her lavish home open to all mill workers, exposes them to culture, and in general treats all the workers as her equals much to the chagrin of the rest of the middle-class set in Five Falls, Massachusetts. In many ways, Phelps’s novel prefigures the proliferation of

---

17 There is no definitive source for this quote. It was first attributed to Mead in the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s periodical in 1964 and later in Frank G. Sommers and Tana Dineen’s *Curing Nuclear Madness* (158).
women’s clubs in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the decades after *The Silent Partner* was published women’s clubs and working girls’ societies proliferated and were sites of civic and ideological changes. One club woman, Grace H. Dodge, who helped form the first working girls society, can be seen as a real life corollary to Perley Kelso. Much like Perley, Dodge wished to help the working class and used her class standing and influence to help introduce the working girls to the comforts of a middle-class lifestyle. Examining Dodge’s work alongside of Phelps’s novel highlights the ways in which novels and advice literature influence each other and help institute change in society.

In this chapter, I will focus on the ideologies created by women at the end of the nineteenth century; while many people during this time period and even now refer to this era as the era of the New Woman, not all women subscribed to this notion of womanhood. Working women especially had conflicting views of the ideology of the New Woman. Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* models behavior between working-class and middle-class women and shows the importance of women working together and claiming the definition of womanhood as their own; twenty-five years after publication of *The Silent Partner*, Grace H. Dodge and The Working Girls’ Society of New York show the reality of Phelps’s novel. The changes in culture at the end of the nineteenth-century along with the predominance of women’s magazines and the popularity of women’s clubs empowered women from various backgrounds to collectively define womanhood for themselves and help each other to varying degrees. By examining club texts

---

18 According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term New Woman first appeared in *The Westminster Review* in October 1865, “The New Woman, as we read of her in recent novels, possesses not only the velvet, but the claws of the tiger. She is no longer the Angel, but the Devil in the House.” The *OED* defines the New Woman as “a woman who is considered different from previous generations; esp. one who challenges or rejects the traditional roles of wife, mother, or homemaker, and advocates independence for women and equality with men.” A full discussion of the rise of the New Woman and definition of the term is provided in Chapter 1.
such as *Thoughts for Busy Girls* and *A Bundle of Letters* alongside of fiction such as *The Silent Partner*, the struggles of the working girls’ attempts to redefine womanhood and overcome class divisions become evident. The cross-class encounters enabled by Working Girls’ clubs and women’s clubs led to better understanding of each other and led to women gaining more autonomy and freedom by working together which offer a real-life parallel to the issues in Phelps’s novel.

**Overview of Criticism**

Much like *The Story of Avis*, Phelps’s *The Silent Partner* is the subject of a limited number of studies; however, prominent critics Judith Fetterley, Amy Schrager Lang, and Jill Bergman provide sustained literary analyses of the novel. Most recently, William Watson draws connections between the Massachusetts Labor Board Statistics and *The Silent Partner* and offers an historicizing look at the novel and the forces that shaped it in “‘The Facts Which Go to Form This Fiction’: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s ‘The Silent Partner’ and ‘The Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics Reports’” (2002). Jill Bergman’s “‘A Silent Partner Long Enough’: Phelps Rewrites Gaskell’s *North and South*” (2005) argues that Phelps’s novel picks up where Gaskell’s ends with a woman confronting the separate spheres ideology and moves beyond Gaskell’s novel by challenging societal notions of expectations and roles for women. Fetterley’s “‘Checkmate’: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ *The Silent Partner*” (1986) looks at the relationship between linguistic power and status in the novel, while Amy Schrager Lang’s “The Syntax of Class in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner*” (1994) focuses on construction of class and gender in the novel. While these articles focus on labor and power in the exploration of the class and gender issues of the novel, none provides an in-depth look at the relationship between Sip and Perley
and how their friendship reflects and prefigures the cultural work that women’s clubs were doing in forming relationships with working women. This unlikely friendship changes both of them profoundly and changes the course of their lives. Perley breaks her engagement and begins doing social work to help workers while Sip ends the novel as a street evangelist after refusing a marriage proposal and refusing to continue being exploited in the mills.

The Women’s Club Movement

In the mid-nineteenth century women began banding together and forming groups and clubs to expand their influence outside of the domestic sphere. Many of these clubs were social activity clubs of leisure-class women with an aim to help the more unfortunate and fix society’s ills; these clubs were also integral in the women’s rights movement beginning in the 1850s and became more popular as the century ended. Jane Cunningham Croly, better known as Jennie June, wrote a definitive history of the women’s club movement in 1898. She catalogues the beginnings and activities of representative women’s clubs, including her own Sorosis, The New England Women’s Club, and the Civic Club of Philadelphia. She also discusses the formation of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), which sprung from the 21st anniversary celebration of Sorosis; while she is not an impartial historian, she offers a basic history of a number of large and influential women’s clubs.

However, when she discusses the Working Girls’ Societies, her partiality is uncovered. As with the other clubs, she outlines the formation and basic activities of The 38th Street Club of Working Girls, which was the first working girls’ society she mentions, and how it lead to other similar clubs and groups. Croly argues,

In the formation of the General Federation in New York City, a sincere effort
was made to affiliate the working girls’ clubs in their associative capacity with the
general body. The refusal came from the executive of the clubs; perhaps it was
thought that patronage was intended. In any case, the equal basis, the equal right
of representation, and the desire for obliteration of the lines of separation which
had existed between different kinds of work in the world was not understood. (83)

In her discussion of the initial refusal of the Working Girls’ Clubs to not join the GFWC—years
later the Working Girls’ Clubs did indeed join—Croly’s class bias and privilege is clear. Much
like Grace H. Dodge was initially, Croly is unaware of the class privilege she enjoys and does
not understand why offering the Working Girls’ Clubs an affiliation in “their associative
capacity” to the GFWC would be turned down by the executive members of the Working Girls’
Clubs. Croly’s own club, Sorosis, was formed after she was unable to join the Press Club of New
York because she was a woman. The differences in purpose between Sorosis and many Working
Girls’ Clubs could not be more pronounced. Many Working Girls’ Clubs focused on “the
principles of cooperation, self-government, and self-reliance” while women’s clubs like Sorosis
focused on education reform and intellectual lectures (Reitano 118). The Working Girls’ Clubs
brought women of different backgrounds and from different jobs together to work towards a
common goal of community building and improving their lives. Many women’s clubs, on the
other hand, were more selective in membership and worked to do civic good such as establishing
free kindergarten programs and helping build and stock libraries.

Both women’s clubs and Working Girls’ Societies were popular and experienced
immense growth during the last decades of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth
century. Croly established Sorosis in 1868 and by 1890 the first convention was held and the
General Federation of Women’s Clubs formed, which governed the 63 clubs in attendance. In
addition to Sorosis, clubs such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the New England Women’s Club were influential in their communities, and in the case of the WCTU, the nation, in regards to education reform, child labor laws, and suffrage (Croly 30-70). The various clubs activities were reported at the national conventions and then published in the journal Far and Near. Two of these reports, one concerning the Middle-West (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, and Ohio) and one concerning New England and Middle-Eastern states, show the enormous influence these clubs had. Mrs. John Dickinson Sherman reported that in 1906 the Middle-West region had more than 1300 clubs with a membership of over 35,000. A club in Illinois established a traveling library offering 10,000 books which eventually became part of the state library system while “Ohio crowned five years’ hard work with the success of securing legislation for four normal schools in 1902 and appropriation for two” (Sherman 229; 231-232).

A 1906 report by May Alden Ward concerning “The Influence of Women’s Clubs in New England and in the Middle-Eastern States” catalogues the community improvements that various women’s clubs had achieved in the previous decade; this report is representative of women’s club work at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. Ward’s report covers the improvements women’s clubs have made in the home, the school, the community, and the state. In the home and the school the club women support Catharine Beecher’s ideas about the importance of domestic economy and education including domestic science. In addition to improving their own homes and educational reforms in schools, such as establishing kindergarten, women’s clubs helped clean up communities by creating and

---

19 Catharine Beecher was influential in establishing domestic science as a subject worth studying in school. For a more in-depth discussion of Beecher’s influence see Kathryn Kish Sklar Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity (1973), Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women’s Rights and Woman’s Sphere (1988), and Sarah A. Leavitt From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History on Domestic Advice (2002).
maintaining playgrounds, installing water fountains, promoting better sewage systems, and promoting street cleaning and paving (Ward 207-14). Finally, the most important work of women’s clubs that Ward discusses is that of the state: women’s clubs exerted their influence over matters of the state concerning working conditions for women and children. By the time of Ward’s report, women’s clubs meetings were “reported in the daily press with a fullness which is rarely obtained by any except political interests and this widens the influence of the clubs to the entire community” (217). This practice shows the influence of women’s clubs as well as the importance of the work of many women’s clubs. These reports, while written by the club women themselves, clearly show the activities and influence the clubs had across the nation.

It is clear from these reports that women’s clubs provided a forum for women to gather to discuss the issues of the day, define womanhood for themselves, and promote self-education through club programs. S. J. Kleinberg clarifies:

The late nineteenth-century club women’s movement rested upon the twin pillars of female literacy and activism. Female organizational activities encompassed women of all classes, races, and ethnic groups, empowered by a growing belief in the legitimacy of gender-based concerns and women’s special contributions to solving the problems in their era. (162)

The clubs gave women of varying backgrounds a shared space in which to meet and discuss the various issues of the day as well as help and learn from each other. In her seminal work, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States, Alice Kessler-Harris discusses the history of working girls clubs and specifies, “In the twelve-year period in which they

---

20 Working Girls’ Clubs are just one type of club popular during the Women’s Club Movement. For more detailed discussion of the women’s club movement and types of clubs see Karen J. Blair The Club Woman as Feminist (1980), Jane Cunningham Croly The History of the Women’s Club Movement in America (1898), and Mildred White Wells Unity in Diversity: The History of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (1953).
thrive, the clubs attracted thousands of members. In their prime, they fostered genteel values, modest dress, and behavior designed to encourage women to aspire to home roles” (94). The main focus of these working girls clubs was self-education in the domestic sphere—making sure the girls would be able to run a household after they were married. In other words, these clubs upheld the status quo and gendered societal expectations by emphasizing domestic skills and preparing these girls for marriage matches. These clubs were eschewing the same values that middle-class society, of which the patrons of these clubs were members, followed.

Many of these clubs focused on self-improvement and education, so that the working girls would be better able to make advantageous marriage matches and be able to stop working outside the home. Kessler-Harris goes on to explain that working girl societies “would provide a place where the lessons of thrift and self-reliance through cooperative endeavor could be absorbed, where girls might learn useful household skills, and where good taste and morality could be discussed and absorbed” (93). Many working girls clubs were made up of a homogenous, working-class group of girls in their late teens and early twenties, who were unmarried, white, of German, English, or Irish descent, and working to supplement the family income (Murolo 12); these girls may have had more free time and opportunity for self-improvement and movement between socioeconomic classes than the working poor did.21 Since many working girls were daughters of immigrant parents, or immigrants themselves, these clubs became a crucial part of their assimilation. Kate Clifford Larson explains, “By teaching American customs and ways of living, they believed immigrants would soon find financial security and improve their quality of life” (202). The patrons of these clubs believed they were

---

21 It is important to note the difference between the working-class and the working-poor. Rebecca Harding Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) provides a harrowing depiction of the working-poor and the horrendous working and living conditions they had no choice but to survive. The working-class would be considered more financially stable than the working-poor and with an eye to have their children move up to the middle-class. Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* (1873) shows a working-class/on the cusp of middle-class working girl.
helping these girls in a number of ways. By helping these girls assimilate to middle-class American culture, these clubs helped to stabilize an American middle-class identity that both perpetuates and reflects the lifestyle conduct books advise and the lifestyle that novels of the time period depict.

The women’s club movement helped women have a voice in the public sphere—a stronger voice than before the women’s movement of the 1880s—and a conversation among women with whom they might otherwise not know. Anne Ruggles Gere argues,

The mixture of rhetorical stances—ranging from condescending to supportive to flattering—in these columns mirrors the complicated and conflicted attitudes with which working women struggled as they constructed their own ideology of womanhood. The middle-class patrons who often helped to found clubs assumed that working women shared their appreciation for womanhood based on middle-class values. Working women themselves frequently had in mind a different womanhood, one that prized the independence of wage work. (157)

The working women who were part of clubs and contributors to club newsletters and readers of women’s magazines were at once working with the middle-class women to further women’s rights and worker’s rights and trying to differentiate their experiences and desires as working women from those of middle-class women. A number of women’s clubs were sponsored by middle-class women for the benefit of working-class women. The combination of these women’s expectations and desires for the clubs sometimes led to disagreement. The middle-class sponsors were more likely to treat the working-class women as social experiments or specimens for observations, rather than as their equals.
Advice and Women’s Clubs

While many working women relished the self-reliance and economic freedom of the New Woman, they realized that the ideology was still based on middle-class values, which not all working women could relate to or participate in. Writing and participating in women’s clubs were ways in which women from all classes and backgrounds could participate in the ongoing dialogue about womanhood. In *Intimate Practices: Literacy and Cultural Work in U.S. Women’s Clubs, 1880-1920*, Gere explains this ongoing dialogue:

Recognizing that womanhood is a changing, historically situated entity rather than a set of fixed and naturally occurring traits opens the way to exploring how institutions, ideas, and daily practices at the turn of the century created “truths” about womanhood. Women who functioned in the public culture—spaces where power is elaborated and made authoritative—of clubs produced and consumed many texts on the subject of womanhood, showing how concrete individuals interacted with these “truths,” accepting, resisting, and modifying them to fashion new ideologies of womanhood. (139)

These new ideologies of womanhood were discussed in women’s clubs around the country and disseminated through the publications of those clubs, such as *Far and Near* and *The Club Woman*. These publications can be seen as an extension of the conduct and advice manuals that were written and published earlier in the nineteenth-century.

In addition to women’s clubs having newsletters, some groups of workers had newsletters; the Lowell Mill workers, who were mostly women, published the monthly *Lowell Offering*, which provided the workers with an outlet to publish their own poetry and original
stories as well as advice and local news. Grace Hoadley Dodge’s two books, *Thoughts for Busy Girls* and *A Bundle of Letters*, are published versions of the weekly “practical talks” her working girls’ club held. These club publications provided clubwomen a larger audience than their own club’s members and allowed the various clubs to communicate with each other. These publications also allowed club women to hear about and catalogue the achievements and activities of clubs across the country.

The two publications that came out of Dodge’s “Practical Talks” and Working Girls’ Society offer practical advice, much like the various conduct books of the time period did. *A Bundle of Letters* (1887) includes letters/chapters such as “Reason Why—Health,” “Shopping—Dress,” “Men Friends—Prospective Husbands and Wives,” “Home Life,” “Housekeeping Suggestions,” “Marketing and Food,” “Working and Saving,” and “Womanhood—Purity.” In the opening chapter, Dodge explains that as a group “we found in our talks that we often neglected to think of preparing ourselves for the positions we each expect to fill, and never realized that it required any preparation to become the capable head of a family, or a strong, helpful woman” (12), much like Beecher and many women’s clubs, Dodge and the Working Girls’ Society members find themselves ill-prepared for their predetermined roles of wife and mother and discover that they require training and advice in matters of homemaking. Like most women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these working women were focused on landing a suitable husband rather than striving for their own independence; the focus on homemaking and “proper” comportment in these club meetings and publications is deliberate.

---

22 The *Lowell Offering* was published from 1840-1845, so it is outside of the time frame of this discussion; however its importance as a periodical by and for women makes it noteworthy.

23 Dodge’s books and women’s club publications are not the only ones aimed at teaching young women how to be wives and mothers. In addition to the conduct books discussed in previous chapters volumes such as William Buell Sprague’s *Letters on Practical Subjects to a Daughter* (1854), Abba Gold Woolson’s *Woman in American Society* (1873), C.H. Kent’s *A Manual for Young Ladies with Hints on Love, Courtship, Marriage, and True Objects of Life* (1881), and Julia McNair Wright’s *Practical Life: or, ways and means for developing character and resources* (1881) are a few examples of this type of advice manual.
because most of these women wanted a comfortable middle-class life with a house and husband. Much of the content of the first chapter, “Reason Why—Health” is similar to the advice Beecher gives about proper diet, bathing, and sleep: eat nutritious meals, drink coffee and tea in moderation, bathe daily, and ventilate the sleeping room (Dodge 13-16). Dodge’s advice regarding suitable marriage matches echoes that of Louisa May Alcott’s marriage choices for the March sisters in *Little Women*:

> Respect and perfect confidence are at the root of all true love. This man we are thinking of giving ourselves to, do we respect him, or do we ourselves wish to pass over certain serious faults in him, such as a love for drink or gambling, a selfish nature, a fondness for loafing, a disregard for church, one who is constantly changing his work, etc? After a while we cannot pass over these faults,… for when the home life begins, the habits will be apt to get stronger, and sore sorrow and suffering will follow. Yes, it is most important to select the companion of life only after earnest thought and prayer. (37-38).

This not only echoes Marmee’s sentiments about her daughters’ marriage matches, but also falls in line with conduct advisors who supported women choosing a judicious marriage over a marriage based on wealth or emotions. The type of marriage Dodge is proposing also falls in line with what Frances Cogan describes as the ideal of Real Womanhood, which is discussed at length in the previous chapter; this advice for working girls of what to look for in a suitable husband is important since one of the reasons to get married is to be able to stop working outside the home. By being judicious about their marriage matches, working girls can more easily obtain the middle-class lifestyle that they may aspire to and the lifestyle that women’s club patrons such as Dodge model and encourage them to perform.
Five years after *A Bundle of Letters* in 1892 Dodge edited *Thoughts of Busy Girls*, which was another collection from the “Practical Talks” of her Working Girls’ Club, but instead of Dodge writing the content in letter form, the club members themselves wrote their own advice. Dodge merely collected and published it. Each chapter includes a short response to the chapter’s topic from a number of the club members: for example, the first chapter, “What Constitutes an Ideal Womanhood and How to Attain To It” contains responses from four club members and then ends with a “summary of the qualifications of an ideal woman [and] thoughts upon a useful life,” which seems to be written by Dodge herself. The chapter on “Married and Single Life” is noteworthy because one of the club members, M.S., responds in a somewhat revolutionary way:

> For one thing, a single woman preserves more independence of action and more self-reliance of character…. A single woman, who earns her own living, let it be ever so scanty, has the comfort of expending the amount she earns as she thinks best….We are not tied down and our world hemmed in by Papa, Willie, Johnnie, Katie, and Baby…. We single women can go anywhere we choose, provided we have our pocketbooks and night key and (as of course we all do) behave ourselves properly. (Dodge 22-24)

M.S. is a proponent of unmarried life, thus providing a more modern view, which the club patrons, like Dodge, would not have included in earlier volumes and would not necessarily openly express their support of. While authors such as Alcott and Beecher and women of means such as Dodge lived the life of a single woman much like M.S. does, the prevailing ideology of the time period still called for women to choose marriage over independence. However, Phelps’s *Silent Partner* includes two women, Perley and Sip, who refuse to marry, so there was the possibility of giving women characters a different ending than marriage, death, or madness. This
one response in *Thoughts of Busy Girls* is the only one to step outside the normal expectations of advice to women. The rest of the volume reiterates and restates advice that can be found in dozens of other publications—advice which reifies the codes of conduct and performance of middle-class values that these women’s clubs upheld.

**Class Issues**

The class issues between middle class and working class women can be seen various works by women, especially noteworthy are the perceptions and pre-conceived notions middle-class women have of the working-class. Laura Hapke argues that “novels by prominent women writers of the 1900s studied the relationship between different female social classes through scenes in which ladies break the class barrier to comfort—and occasionally, to be comforted by—‘their less fortunate sisters’” (46). Examining cross-class friendships through scenes of comfort uses a recognizable feminine trait to show common bonds of womanhood and can be found in *The Silent Partner*. During Sip and Perley’s first conversation, when Sip finds Perley leaving blankets on her doorstep, Sip invites her in for tea—a common courtesy and a comfort ritual—which allows Perley to feel comfortable in the working woman’s tenement: the utilization of a commonality gives Phelps an opportunity to show that some social rituals transcend class boundaries. Similarly, when Dodge formed the New York Working Girls’ Society, she planned to rent comfortable, well-appointed rooms in which to hold their weekly meetings and Practical Talks. Dodge, like Perley and many other women of their social status, believed that providing middle-class comforts such as nice parlors for meetings and social events such as teas would help “save” the working girls from the evil lurking on the city streets.
These upper-class writers and women wished to help the working-class learn how to perform a middle-class identity. Much like gender performance, this type of class performance that might allow some working women “pass” for middle-class and then be able to make an advantageous marriage match. However, this assumes that working women want to make advantageous marriage matches and give up the freedom working wages gives them for a middle-class lifestyle.\(^{24}\) This type of class performance is a parallel of the gender performance also necessary for women to perfect in order to live up to the ideals laid out in conduct books. Both class and gender performance highlight the learned behaviors that mark someone as middle-class and female and both show that these are not inherent traits.

Unlike their women’s club counterparts, members of the Working Girls’ clubs had to negotiate both the domestic sphere and the public sphere and negotiate opposing ideals—that of the true woman and the new woman. Joanne Reitano explains:

> It is not surprising to find Grace Dodge and her allies promoting the stereotype of “true womanhood” on which they had been raised and in which they believed. Yet, by the same token, the literature suggests that the working women were not unwilling subjects. In fact, they seemed eager to prove that middle-class concepts of propriety applied to them too. Assuming that sooner or later they would be homemakers, they accepted that responsibility and intended to prepare for it…. Nineteenth century to the core, they upheld a picture of woman as virtuous, pious, cheerful, frugal, modest, selfless, and neat. (Reitano 129)

The working women of the nineteenth century held fast to the ideals of the true woman, even while living ostensibly as new women. The tension between living as a new woman while trying

\(^{24}\) This is similar to the gender performance Lily Bart had to maintain in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* so that she could (ideally) make a good marriage match, which I discuss in the next chapter.
to live up to the ideals of the true woman was a driving force in the formation of Working Girls Clubs. These clubs were formed to unite the workers and help them learn domestic skills and not work towards better wages or working conditions. While some of these clubs did join in the labor reform movement in the early twentieth century, the clubs were created to help the working women maintain the ideals of true womanhood.

Texts such as *Thoughts for Busy Girls* and *A Bundle of Letters* make the struggles of the working girls’ attempts to redefine womanhood within the current ideal clear. Reitano explains, “the Working Girls’ Clubs were encouraging a new vision of woman as a more self-reliant female, as one who could begin to control rather than merely be controlled by her traditional roles. Yet the clubs were not rejecting those roles” (Reitano 131). These women were being defined by and encouraged to maintain True Womanhood; however, they had different experiences from earlier generations and were on the verge of gaining more autonomy and freedom.

In addition to wanting the working women to perform a middle-class identity, many middle-class women, “describe[d] them as ‘girls’ rather than ‘women’ to signal the temporary and asexual nature of their status as workers” (Gere 148). This asexual and diminutive term can be seen as a way to combat the stereotype of the fallen woman that many held and that is seen in works such as Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and to a lesser extent in Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*. The calculated use of the term girl by middle-class women is to distance themselves from the working women: girls work and need to learn the ways to behave in society while women may or may not work outside the home, and know how to behave properly. So by referring to the working women as “girls” the middle-class women involved in these women’s clubs were aligning these women, some of whom may have been of similar ages as the middle-
class women, with middle-class girls who are learning the proper codes of conduct to lead a
successful middle-class life. Priscilla Murolo points out that the term working girls:

entered common usage in the 1870s and referred not to all female wage
earners but to factory and department store workers in particular. The term also
carried connotations as to a woman’s age, marital status, residence, race, and
ethnicity, for women employed in factories and department stores were… a
mostly homogeneous group. (12)

Murolo suggests the term “girls” was part of the public lexicon and not solely a term used by
middle-class women; regardless of who used the term, many of these “girls” were of an age
where they would be called women in any other situation. This is similar to Louisa May Alcott’s
insistence on referring to herself and her sisters as girls, as discussed in Chapter 2. However,
Alcott was in the power position in her case and had the linguistic power to choose the term
“girls,” whereas these working women are all lumped together regardless of age or experience as
“girls” simply because they are unmarried and working. Again, the presumption is that these
“girls” will become “women” once they marry a suitable man and begin to perform a middle-
class lifestyle.

In much the same way as Alcott, a group of “working girls” conscientiously chose to
name the group they had formed the Working Girls’ Society—Abbie Graham recounts the night
Dodge’s Working Girls’ Society of New York was officially formed:

The more significant decision was the choice of a name. Should they call
themselves working girls? They were aware that people looked down upon those
who worked and with condescension classed them as “the working girls.” Leisure
was more respected than work; “women of leisure” stood far higher in the social
scale. This group of thirteen girls in a noisy tenement room on an evening in February, 1884, faced the ignominious connotation of this thing to which they daily gave their lives—work…. the voice of a girl summed up their courageous conclusion, “Our organization is truly the child of the daughters of labor. Our fathers and mothers work; before them, their fathers and mothers worked; and we, too, work. Let us call ourselves the ‘Working Girls’ Society’ and show New York that we are not ashamed of work” (84-85).

These thirteen women, workers in a silk factory, chose to reclaim the term “working girls” and use it to their advantage. Knowing full well how the leisure-class viewed them, these proud working girls decided to change the connotations of “work” and “girls” from derogatory to something to inspire collective action. By embracing the term working girls, these women followed in Louisa May Alcott’s subversive footsteps by defining their own selfhood.

In contrast to many middle-class and leisure-class women, who wanted to help the working women by showing them how to perform the middle-class lifestyle but not by actually helping change their working conditions, Perley in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ The Silent Partner exposes the factory workers to cultural things, but she also fights—or at least attempts to fight—for better working conditions for the workers. The Silent Partner is on one level a novel about the exploitation of labor and on another level about an unlikely friendship between two women from vastly different backgrounds. After her father’s death, Perley Kelso inherits his share of the mills and becomes a “silent partner” since the other partners, who are all men, refuse to acknowledge Perley’s voice and power. During the course of the novel, the workers threaten to strike after the mill owners cut their pay to lower production costs. Perley is sent out to talk to the crowds of workers on the verge of riot after the mill manager, Stephen Garrick, fails to quiet
the crowd; this is Perley’s opportunity to side with the workers and claim her power, but instead she reasons with the workers and gets them to acquiesce to the lower pay by speaking to them nicely. She shows that her concern for the workers does not extend beyond exposing them to culture. At this point in the novel, Perley does not want to help the workers out of abject poverty by supporting their getting better wages. The other strain of the novel, the friendship between Perley and Sip Garth, a mill worker with a disabled sister, is more successful in showing how Perley changes. Perley and Sip meet while Perley is waiting in her carriage for her friends, and Perley is immediately fascinated with the working girl. As she ventures into the mill housing, Perley finds among the poverty and poor living conditions Sip and her deaf sister, Catty, and, eventually, Perley and Sip become friends. At first Perley treats Sip and Catty as charity cases by bringing them food and blankets, which Sip refuses on principle. As Sip and Perley’s friendship strengthens, Perley realizes the folly in offering charity to mill workers; instead Perley hosts cultural evenings at her house for the mill workers.

*Silent Partner and Working Girls’ Clubs*

Perley can be seen as a bridge between the early more hands-off middle-class patrons and the later more hands-on patrons of working girls clubs: she is more immediately involved with helping the mill workers, but she is aiding them by exposing them to her cultural tastes and providing some services for them, mainly supplementing their meager earnings by providing food spreads at these cultural evenings. In the later years of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century, middle-class patrons of working girls clubs were more involved with the clubs; however, they were approaching these clubs with more parity—encouraging the working women to help each other as well as helping the women themselves. It is not hard to see
reflections of the fictional Perley Kelso in women like Grace H. Dodge. Much like Perley, Dodge encountered resistance from the silk factory workers because of her social standing. It takes Sip awhile to trust Perley’s intentions; the silk workers do not trust Dodge’s intentions—the silk workers, like their fictional counterpart Sip, assume Dodge (and Perley, in Sip’s case) only means to provide charity and condescension.

The majority of Working Girls clubs also had a middle-class sponsor or patron, who would often pay in advance for the meeting space and plan activities for the club. Dodge, like many other patrons of these clubs, was at first more controlling of the organization; however, in 1884 the dynamics of the club changed—the working girls wanted “a more democratic mode of service” and wanted to “promote their organization on the basis of cooperation, self-government, and self-support” (Murolo 2). The shift in dynamics is reflected in the two conduct books that Dodge edited and published. In the introduction of A Bundle of Letters to Busy Girls, Dodge states, “it was found that lectures were not appreciated and rarely understood; but simple talks or discussions made deep impressions, and were sources of profit to many young women” (viii). Dodge’s slight condescending tone towards the working girls’ intelligence is apparent in this introduction—this tone was not uncommon when these clubs were first formed in the 1870s and 1880s, because many middle-class patrons were not familiar with working-class girls and assumed they were of lesser intelligence because of their class standing and lack of formal education. Phelps’s fictional Perley’s first interactions with the mill workers is also as objects for her pity and charity.

After the clubs had been established and began flourishing, the patrons and club members changed the balance of power and their goals. This change in agenda is evident in the second advice book published by Dodge. First, she is listed as the editor of the book instead of the
author; second, the title, *Thoughts of Busy Girls*, shifts the ownership to the working girls; and, third, the title page states it is “written by a group of girls who have little time for study, and yet who find much time for thinking.” It is clear from these three things that Dodge has changed her agenda and attitude towards the girls, which shows how beneficial for all involved these clubs were—working girls benefitted by having a place to go to talk about a number of things, including inequalities in pay and treatment, and the middle-class patrons benefitted by expanding their worldview and gaining a better understanding of the various striations of American society.

When describing the Practical Talks in the introduction to *Thoughts of Busy Girls*, Dodge explains the adoption of an organizational scheme with greater participation from members:

> At first only the leader presented the subject, the rest contenting themselves with discussing the views brought out by her; then on certain evenings those present gave their opinions in short, condensed sentences. Some two years ago the plan was adopted of having different members assigned to a subject, and that these should open the evening by papers or speech, the rest preparing themselves to criticize. (vii-viii)

The changes to how the practical talks were organized clearly show the working girls taking on more duties and the club becoming more democratic in nature. This change in the relationship between Dodge and the girls in the club highlights the solidarity and friendships that were formed in these clubs between women of varying socioeconomic status, which Phelps explores in *The Silent Partner*.

Much like the working girls clubs and other women’s clubs that hosted lectures and other cultural events, Perley hosts cultural evenings for the mill workers to help their minds and spirits. The other society ladies in town are aghast that she would so proactively help the downtrodden
mill workers, instead of just throwing money or goods at the “problem.” When they attend one such Friday evening gathering, Mrs. Silver, one of the society ladies, explains her concern:

I have been struck this evening by the thought, what a loss to Society! Why, Miss Kenna, I am told that this very house has been more like a hospital or set of public soup-rooms for six months past, than it has like the retiring and secluded home of a young lady…They [mill workers] are made welcome to it at all hours and under all circumstances. (Phelps 236)

Mrs. Silver is shocked and appalled that Perley would let mill workers in her house and at her tea table; her views coincide with and are reminiscent of how many leisure class women initially thought of working girls—these attitudes are reminiscent of those of the working girls clubs’ leisure class patrons when those clubs were first forming.

Judith Fetterley points out the revolutionary idea behind Perley’s social evenings with the mill workers, “Perley’s evenings demonstrate that people become recognizable as society when they enter into structures recognized as social…. Perley’s evenings allow the hands to see themselves differently and to think better of themselves; from these evenings they gain the experience of psychological mobility” (25). By experiencing life as part of a society, the mill workers are gaining a sense of self and worth that they otherwise would not have had because of Perley’s insistence that they join her, as equals, for an evening of music and socializing. Perley gives them the opportunity to perform a typically middle-class role. However, this performance the mill workers (and working girls in the women’s clubs) is problematic as Amy Schrager Lang explains:

The working-class characters are clearly admitted into the parlor on the
condition that they mimic the dress and manners of their social betters. “Society” does not accommodate them; they conform to its requirements, thus enabling the successful encounter between rich and poor…. The norms of dress and behavior to which the workers at the soiree conform, like the act that is applauded there by millions and mills alike, belongs to a class whose universality goes unquestioned in the novel. (278-79)

In the novel as in real life middle-class codes of conduct and expectations are followed as the norm without considering whether these expectations are helping or hurting the workers living and working conditions. Sip and the other mill workers find Perley’s cultural evenings a nice respite from the workday drudgery, but what Phelps does not explore or even consider is how the workers feel about putting on the middle-class performance for one night each week and then going back to the same shoddy mill housing. Are their lives better for having Perley in it? Maybe not, since the chapter directly after the soiree is the strike chapter.

After getting to know Perley and recognizing her when she comes out of the mill office to diffuse the near riotous crowd of workers on the verge of a strike over the lowering of their wages, the crowd listens to Perley respectfully and disperses without striking. It is hard to imagine this seemingly easy diffusion of the tension occurring had Perley not been actively engaging with the workers just the chapter before. Fetterley and Lang both read Perley’s behavior here as hypocritical in the context of her earlier interest in helping the workers and as showing the limited power of women in the public sphere since the other partners of the mill do not take any of her suggestions for improving working and living conditions at the expense of the mills profits seriously. However, Watson reads the strike chapter in conjunction with the
Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics Reports, which Phelps acknowledges as having some influence on her writing, and comes to a different conclusion. Watson argues:

Rather than being a sign of muddled political vision, Perley’s fictive strikebreaking and riot control actually exemplify the political vision of the emerging middle class. Silent Partner does the cultural work of representing and comprehending class difference, an issue of tremendous import given the feverish rate of industrial expansion in Phelps’s Massachusetts. Specifically, Perley’s management, from above, of contumacious workers may be seen as a direct response to bourgeois fears, voiced notably in the MBSL Reports, that had working-class leaders arisen during the strike-torn summer of 1870, working-class revolt and riot would have followed. (10-11)

Watson’s argument shows that The Silent Partner is deeply couched in the normative middle-class attitudes toward the working class during the late nineteenth-century. Perley is representing the interests, fears, and desires of the middle-class throughout the novel. She realizes that while she may not have the same power the other partners at the mill have—since they refuse to give her that power—she can affect change in the private lives of the mill workers by exposing them to culture and treating them as her equals. Perley shows her disapproval of the mill partners’ attitudes by breaking off her engagement to one of them and, along with Sip, remaining unmarried so that she can focus on helping the workers—although she only offers assistance in the form of middle class cultural assimilation. Similarly, the Working Girls’ Societies gathered and honed their class and gender performances through Dodge’s “Practical Talks” instead of organizing to fight for better working conditions and wages.
The friendship that forms between Perley and Sip can be seen as prefiguring the relationships that would be built between middle-class patrons and working girls during the formation and explosion of Working Girls and other women’s clubs in the last decades of the nineteenth-century. By examining a real life example alongside Phelps’s novel, it becomes clear that Grace H. Dodge can be viewed as Perley—well-intentioned, but unfamiliar with how exactly to help or approach the working girls—and the working girls as Sip—appreciative of Dodge/Perley’s willingness to help, but wary of being an experiment or charity case. At the beginning of the novel both Perley and Sip are wary of each other, but by the end they have built a friendship on mutual respect and common interest in changing the living and working conditions for the mill workers; again, this can be seen in the changes Dodge shows through the publication of the two advice books, *A Bundle of Letters* and *Thoughts of Busy Girls*.

Much like Perley, Dodge had a tremulous beginning with the silk factory workers because these working women saw Dodge as being so far removed from their situation that she could not possibly understand their everyday lives. Abbie Graham, Dodge’s original biographer, observes that the working women’s resentment was directed at “a system of society that made them work long hours and gave them in return for their work not enough money to live” and in the early meetings between the working women and Dodge, Dodge was representative of this system because of her class standing (68). Graham also shows that Dodge earned the working women’s respect and trust by showing interest in “the everyday details of their lives [and by] try[ing] to see life from their point of view” (70). Again, this is strikingly similar to Perley and Sip’s burgeoning friendship in *The Silent Partner*; it is only by showing interest in Sip’s life and her point of view that Perley is able to slowly gain her trust and respect.
The importance of these texts, especially *The Silent Partner*, is that they show women working together for their own betterment and that of others. Finally, at the end of the century, women are exerting power over their circumstances—this power is clearly shown through the acts of the women’s club movement. In the 1906 report Ward lists a number of things in both private and public spheres that have been improved by the collective actions of women’s clubs. By 1906 women’s clubs were an accepted part of the social fabric of the United States and these clubs were able to influence and effect change in matters of education, health, and safety. Through the organization of women’s clubs, working class women finally were able to create an ideology of womanhood that was reflective of their desires and expectations and to not have an ideology of middle class aspirations for womanhood forced upon them.
Chapter 4: Edith Wharton and the Changing of Social Customs

“If you were a time-traveller, you could use her books as an unerring etiquette manual, and you would not go wrong.”—Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (2007)

Edith Wharton is known for her society novels which portray New York and New England leisure-class society at the end of the nineteenth- and beginning of the twentieth century. Many of Wharton’s novels detail the changes happening in American society during this time period: the rising middle-class in the form of self-made men climb the social ladder and clash with the established leisure-class, the nouveau riche, and the rising, less cultured middle-class. While Wharton provides a cursory exploration of this friction between classes and social groups in *The House of Mirth* (1905), this friction forms the basis of *The Custom of the Country* (1913), where she fully immerses the audience in the changing demographics of New York leisure-class society. Although the two novels were published less than ten years apart, the New York society that populates each is markedly different. Members of leisure-class society in *The House of Mirth* are reticent to include newcomers, although a few nouveau riche, such as the Welly-Brys and Sim Rosedale, are accepted in the end. *The Custom of the Country*, however, picks up with the nouveau riche practically taking over leisure-class society.

Wharton herself was a prominent member of the society she writes about, and, as Dianne Chambers observes, she “valued the conservative traditions by which she was raised and, later in
life, explicitly lamented the passing of Old New York. But she also refused to accept the limitations imposed by that rigid world on her gender” (26-27). Wharton’s views can be seen in her portrayal of Lily Bart: Lily finds value in the leisure-class societal traditions, but does not want to be caged in by the limitations implied by her gender. Wharton has the leisure-class society enforce the traditions of Old New York, and she uses those traditions of social conduct to expose the friction between the old guard and the rising middle-class. The difference in conduct between the Trenor-Dorset set, the established leisure-class, and the Welly-Brys, the ascending middle-class, is astonishing to Lily: she finds the Welly-Brys to be loud and raucous as opposed to the more subdued Trenors. In her portrayal of Undine Spragg, Wharton shows how the spirit of self-made madness lauded by many is really a ruthless, unfeeling way to live—Undine is willing to do whatever it takes to ensconce herself in the leisure-class and live as fabulously as the people she reads about in the society columns. She does not realize the repercussions to many of her actions until it is too late—her affair with Van Degen is a good example. Undine culls as much information as she can from observing members of the leisure class, reading advice and gossip columns, and using her friends, so that she can gain access to the right set of people.

Wharton’s two society novels examine what she perceives as a decline of social customs and conduct and a rise of ruthless greed for status and status symbols in American society. Wharton’s characterization of Undine Spragg in Custom of the Country signals this change in the social structure and social customs of leisure-class society: Undine represents the ruthless greed of the rising self-made men and women of the middle-class. She learns and perfects the performance of a leisure-class lady, which contrasts with Wharton’s more well-known heroine, Lily Bart, who fully inhabits the role of proper lady for much of The House of Mirth the pressure of this performance causes her downward spiral toward the novel’s close. Looking at these two
novels alongside each other is useful because Undine and Lily represent the new and the old in New York leisure-class society and show that the “punishment” for breaking some social rules is more severe than others—Lily is forced out of her social circles after turning down multiple marriage offers and her rumored affair with George Trenor, but Undine is able to retain, to some extent, her social standing even after her messy divorces with Marvell and de Chelles. The differences between Undine and Lily illuminate the changes in social attitudes and the rise in female agency during the beginning decades of the twentieth century.

Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* shows the changing make-up of leisure-class society and shows how Undine Spragg utilizes the marriage market to her advantage with agency that Lily Bart does not have. As a member of the leisure-class from birth, Lily has no agency because she was raised to be an ornament to society; the only expectation of her was to marry well and return the family its former riches. Undine, by contrast, was born into a middle-class family determined to move into the leisure-class. Her main influence is her father, a successful businessman. His influence and the business acumen that she inherits from him gives her agency whereas Lily’s comfortable, frivolous upbringing gives her none. In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton explains, “a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals. The answer, in short, was my heroine, Lily Bart” (207). Wharton’s portrayal of Lily’s destruction by the very society that defines her shows just how little agency Lily has in *The House of Mirth*. When revisiting the same society in *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton emphasizes the changes in the make up of the leisure-class: the nouveau riche have overtaken the old money families as the taste makers and are more welcoming to those rising from the middle-class to the leisure-class—the self-made men such as Abner Spragg and Elmer Moffatt. The nouveau riche
care more for money and conspicuous consumption than for the respect and status that the old money families valued. Along with these changes comes an increase in female agency—this is seen in Undine Spragg, an almost twin of Moffatt’s self-made man.

Wharton’s novels provide insight into the inner-workings of societal expectations and rules of conduct, as evidenced by Hermione Lee’s observance in the epigraph opening this chapter. Wharton was well versed in the rules of social behavior as she explains in A Backward Glance, “I used to say that I had been taught only two things in my childhood: the modern languages and good manners” (48). However, Wharton is aware of the changing tide and continues, “now that I have lived to see both these branches of culture dispensed with, I perceive that there are worse systems of education” (48). Her dismay at the growing lack of good manners in society is evident in her depictions of nouveau riche and rising middle-class characters in The Custom of the Country and, to a lesser extent, in The House of Mirth. In both novels the marriage market, societal expectations, and gender and class performance work together to show the limitations for women in turn of the century society. Lily Bart is hemmed in by the expectations of her gender and class, and her futile attempts to break the rules leads to her downfall, while Undine is able to work within the same expectations and gain autonomy.

Critical Overview

Wharton’s use of material culture as a means of social commentary, while Jennifer Shepherd uses the idea of conspicuous consumption and wardrobe choices to analyze the New York society in which Lily Bart lives. Mary McAleer Balkun’s *The American Counterfeit* considers the role of market capitalism and how “the language of objects can indeed become the language of the self” in her analysis of Lily as a commodity and object (8). In *Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women’s Fictions* Elaine Neil Orr looks at Lily’s lack of negotiating skills in the marriage market and calls attention to Gerty Farish’s Women’s Club activities as a site of true feminism. A foundational study of capitalism in *The House of Mirth* is Wai-Chee Dimock’s article “Debasing Exchange: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*” which uses capitalism and business to provide an important analysis of the marriage market. Elizabeth Ammons’s influential *Edith Wharton’s Argument with America* (1980) argues that Wharton “agreed the position of women in American society was the crucial issue of the new century; she did not believe that change was occurring. In her opinion the American woman was far from being a new or whole woman being” (3). This idea translates into how Wharton portrays both Lily and Undine; she shows both women being partially formed. Lily is an object for ownership with no sense of self, while Undine is a performer and mimic—a shadow of a person, not a fully formed self.

The majority of the scholarship on *The Custom of the Country* recognizes the novel as a feminist novel and a satire of the consumer culture of the early twentieth century. Most critics find Undine Spragg to be an over-the-top caricature of the “invading” rising middle-class business-oriented families. Ariel Balter argues that Undine’s story as a satire of the rising middle-class invading leisure-class social circles; Undine is the epitome of Veblen’s leisure-class wife whose only job is conspicuous consumption of her husband’s wealth. Elizabeth Ammons
connects *The Custom of the Country* with Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics*. Beyond the economics of class, Ellen Dupree and Debra Ann MacComb both highlight the gender expectations Wharton explores and writes against throughout the novel.

However, critics have underestimated is the influence of conduct advice on Undine’s behavior and performance. Wharton satirizes the conduct advice and Undine’s missteps to show the loss of the “proper” society in which she was raised. In addition to being taught social conduct as a child, Wharton also knew Mary Cadwalader Jones who contributed a chapter to Scribner’s *The Woman’s Book*. Jones’s chapter relates the various opportunities and activities women should engage in whether living in a town or in the city: the advice given is similar to that in other popular conduct books of the time period. Undine’s loyal reading of the advice and gossip column “Boudoir Chat” throughout the first part of the novel (until her marriage to Marvell) is a clear indication that Wharton was aware of the various types of conduct advice available—whether it was in book or serial form—and the type of advice given is a clear indication of Wharton’s satire of advice writing. This is evident by Undine’s disappointment in receiving Mrs. Fairford’s invitation to dine on plain white paper instead of the pigeon’s blood colored stationery she bought after reading that it was what the most fashionable ladies used.

Conduct books and implied social codes of conduct instruct young women (and men) on how to act in every situation; these are merely descriptions of how one should perform their gender. Judith Butler explains, “as in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (140). Butler defines gender as a socially scripted performance that is ingrained in
society and goes on to explain that people who do not perform their prescribed gender roles are usually punished in some way—either by being outcasts or being labeled unnatural (136-140). Wharton’s heroines perform their gender to varying degrees of success: Undine is a, seemingly, natural mimic and is therefore able to perform her role easily, albeit hollowly, and Lily is very successful at performing her role as a leisure-class woman until it is time for her to make a marriage match. Lily is able to perfectly perform social rituals regardless of her emotions and opinions, while Undine has not fully embodied the rules of social conduct and makes mistakes throughout much of the novel.

Summary of The Custom of the Country

The Custom of the Country, a lesser-known work of Wharton’s, centers around Undine Spragg and her rise through the ranks of the New York social elite. Undine’s parents move with her to New York City, from the Midwest town of Apex, shortly after her quick marriage and divorce to Elmer Moffatt, a conniving businessman. The Spraggs move in order for Undine to make a better marriage match; she succeeds in catching the attention and admiration of Ralph Marvell, a member of old New York leisure-class society, and they are married. Undine realizes too late that the Marvells are not as wealthy as others in their social circle—as members of the old guard in New York, they stay in the leisure-class and elite circles due to their history, reputation, and connections, not due to their wealth. Undine feels increasingly trapped and disappointed by her marriage and remains disconnected to those around her, including Ralph and their son, Paul. She has an affair with Peter van Degen, a Marvell family friend and nouveaux riche member of the leisure-class, and runs off to Europe with him where she receives word of
Ralph falling deathly ill. She ignores this summons to return to New York at first, but eventually returns stateside to divorce Marvell.

After her divorce, she returns to Europe and sets her sights on Raymond de Chelles, who she skillfully woos and eventually marries. In order to marry de Chelles, a devout Catholic, Undine must procure an annulment from the Vatican. Her actions cause Ralph to invest in a business deal with Elmer Moffatt—who has climbed the financial and social ranks to become part of the New York social scene and has learned of Undine’s first marriage. This knowledge destroys Ralph and he kills himself, thus making Undine a widow in the eyes of the Catholic Church, which allows her to marry de Chelles. However, the de Chelleses, like the Marvells, lead a modest life even though they own large properties in France and have a royal title, and Undine is again restless and disappointed with her unexciting life after a few years. She reunites with Moffatt when an art dealer brings him to the de Chelles estate to look at priceless tapestries. Soon after this reunion, Moffatt and Undine are married, again, because he can give her the lavish, exciting lifestyle she wants. The novel ends with Undine’s first dinner party at her new home in New York and with her realization that she wants to be an ambassador’s wife, but will never be able to because she divorced Marvell and de Chelles.

In the end, it is a never-ending thirst for what she cannot have that is Undine’s downfall. She is always looking for the better match, for the next level, and, therefore, is never happy. She is also unable to breach the divide between the nouveau riche and the established wealthy. In her mind all wealthy people should have enough liquid assets to always live lavishly; however, the established wealthy society to which she wants to belong lives more modestly and invests their wealth to provide for subsequent generations. This was the problem with the Marvells; they were so established that Ralph was not expecting to have to work at all—he assumed he would
be able to pursue his writing instead of providing for a wife and family. He also failed to realize what Undine’s expectations of lifestyle were.

The Marriage Market

_The Custom of the Country_ is, in essence, a critique of what Charlotte Perkins Gilman called “the sexuo-economic relation” (45), the dependent relationship between men and women in which marriage is necessary for men to show off their wealth via their wives and necessary for women to survive in a society in which they are kept in economic subjugation. Gilman asserts, “although marriage is a means of livelihood, it is not honest employment where one can offer one’s labor without shame, but a relation where the support is given outright, and enforced by law in return for the functional service of the woman, the ‘duties of wife and mother’” (45).

Gilman, and Wharton to a certain extent, sees marriage as an uneven relationship in that women are expected to perform the “duties of wife and mother” in return for the support of their husbands; this, of course, implies that a woman who fails to perform these tasks well may be abandoned or not supported by her husband—the husband may stop working as hard or even divorce his wife. Wharton turns this idea on its head in _The Custom of the Country_ when Undine and other young girls from Apex divorce and abandon the men who do not have enough money to keep up the lavish lifestyles they wish to lead. Wharton explores the sexuo-economic relationship as if it were an equal one: when either partner does not live up to the expectations of the other, no matter how unreasonable those expectations, the relationship is dissolved.

---

25 Wharton explains in _A Backward Glance_ that “the acquiring of wealth had ceased to interest the little society into which I was born…. For the most part my father’s contemporaries, and those of my brothers also, were men of leisure” (56). The Marvells seem to fit into this particular group and mindset, since Ralph is well educated, but not expected to actually work.

26 Gilman discusses this idea as one that would not be socially acceptable.
The Custom of the Country is not the first or only time Wharton criticizes the economics of marriage; she uses Lily in The House of Mirth to examine the ideas that Thorstein Veblen discusses in The Theory of the Leisure Class. Because a woman was expected to show off her husband’s success through her conspicuous consumption and performance of etiquette, unmarried women, especially those who showed interest in making money, were a threat to the leisure-class (Veblen 80-85; 350-360). As an unmarried woman, who repeatedly refuses to close the deal on any prospective engagement, Lily is a threat to the patriarchal, structured leisure-class society. Elizabeth Ammons explains that Lily’s refusal to marry is “an action that not only makes her useless to the society Wharton portrays, but also, and for the reasons Gilman and Veblen outline, threatening” (30). It is Lily’s refusal to play by the rules and make a marriage match that ultimately leads to her downfall, whereas Undine exploits the marriage market and treats it like a business.

Wharton’s exploration of the marriage market in The House of Mirth marks Lily as a commodity; she is constantly being valued on an economic and social economic scale by the various men in the novel. When Rosedale meets her outside the Benedict and offers her a ride to the train station, he is trying to buy social standing from her—the mere act of being seen with her would raise his societal capital. Lily refuses because she would lose some of her social capital to be seen with him; however, Rosedale’s seeing Lily leave Selden’s apartment building could also cost Lily, but for her the price of being seen with Rosedale is more than the expense of Rosedale telling other leisure-class society members about her visit to Selden’s apartment. This negotiation of cost and society illustrates Wai-Chee Dimock’s observation that “business, in the social world, operates by what we might call the commodification of social intercourse” (784). Lily has to negotiate these types of social business deals throughout the novel.
In *The Custom of the Country*, Wharton expands upon the idea of a mercenary marriage that she touched on in *The House of Mirth*, but to which Lily refused to acquiesce. While Lily found that type of marriage not suiting to her and her desire for freedom, Undine has no problem hopping from marriage to marriage, each one more advantageous, in her eyes, than the last; Undine is empowered by her manipulation of the marriage market, not disgusted by it as Lily is. Both Lily and Undine are expected to marry someone who can keep them in the high society lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. Jennifer Shepherd explains, “though women were imaginatively empowered by the ability to choose the perfect suitor in the same way that they would choose the best product, factors such as women’s unequal access to employment simultaneously reduced them to commodities within the actual economics of marriage” (147). So, while both Undine and Lily seem to have the freedom to marry whomever they wish, they still are expected to make an advantageous match and are unable to opt out of marriage without punishment, as Lily tragically finds out.

However, Undine is willing to forgo any kind of love for a good match and does not believe that her freedom will be compromised by marriage; she is wrong and finds herself hemmed in by her various husbands’ expectations. As Ammons points out,

> Undine approaches marriage as a simple economic contract in which both parties have well-defined, mutually aggrandizing, agreed-upon roles; and because she accepts the commercial nature of matrimony and is willing to negotiate herself on the marriage market (which she manages to do not just once, but four times), Undine is unique among Wharton’s early heroines. (98)

Undine’s uniqueness makes a clear statement about the marriage market and how it can be manipulated to aid a family’s assent into the leisure class from the middle class. Wharton makes
it clear from the beginning of *The Custom of the Country* that Undine’s goal is to marry into the leisure class and to live the life she reads about in the society pages. The portrayal of the marriage market in *The Custom of the Country* is akin to the business deals Elmer Moffatt makes throughout the novel: for Undine, the marriage market is her business and she is as ruthless as Moffatt in making herself successful.

The marriage market portrayed in *The House of Mirth* is different from *The Custom of the Country* because Lily’s attitude towards it is one of utter disgust, while Undine relishes the strategizing involved. The business side of social interactions is also one of the reasons Lily continually damages her chances of getting married. She turns down Rosedale’s multiple offers of marriage because he makes it clear that it would be to gain social capital; every time Lily is reminded of the business side of any marriage match, she withdraws herself from it. Chambers and Shepherd both discuss Lily’s actions when confronted with the business side of marriage. Shepherd asserts that “Lily’s reconciliation with her status as a commodity in the marriage market begins to disintegrate from the moment she meets Selden at the train station in the novel’s opening scene” (149) and that Lily “exercises her agency in passive-aggressive fashion, refusing to close the sale of herself in marriage until she receives an offer of her own choosing” (149). While Shepherd makes a good point concerning Lily’s desire for a marriage match of her own choosing—one that would give her financial support and the freedom to live as she chooses—suggesting that the opening meeting with Selden causes Lily’s discomfort with and bristling against the marriage market fails to take into consideration Lily’s record of setting up the potential engagement and then slipping off just when she has clinched the interest of the would-be suitor. In the novel, Carry Fisher suggests that Lily sabotages herself “because, at
heart, she despises the things she’s trying for” (Wharton 148). This observation reinforces Lily’s, and Wharton’s, distaste of the economics of marriage.

Lily seems to not mind when men (and women to a certain extent) view her as an object of fascination and art; it is only when they commodify her and try to buy her that she objects and pulls away. Once she realizes (repeatedly) the mercenary side of most marriage matches, she revolts and sabotages herself. This can be seen in her performance in the Tableaux Vivants; she literally makes herself into a piece of art to be admired by all (especially the men) in attendance. This performance is, in some ways, her last chance to attract a husband, and while she thinks she wants to marry Selden, in the end, she cannot do even that because even a marriage to him would result in a sexuo-economic relationship.

This sexuo-economic relationship extends beyond just the marriage market, even despite the emergence of the New Woman, who Elizabeth Ammons explains “could work outside the home in dignified occupations, she could marry whom she pleased, she could divorce if she had to, she could even swim and smoke cigarettes if she were truly daring” (3). Ammons goes on to argue that Wharton “examined the disjunction between popular optimism and the reality as she saw it. Typical women in her view—no matter how privileged, nonconformist, or assertive…were not free to control their own lives” (3). This lack of freedom can be seen in Wharton’s portrayals not only of major characters such as Lily and Undine, but also of minor characters such as Gerty Farish, Carry Fisher, and Clare van Degen. Gerty Farish is destined for a life of service and hard work as an unmarried woman; Carry Fisher is dependent on her rich friends and status to keep up her lifestyle, and Clare van Degen is trapped in a loveless marriage with a philandering husband. None of these women have the freedom that the New Woman is supposed to have.
On one level, *The Custom of the Country* is a parallel tale of how men and women climb the social ladder; on another level, it is a searing satire of the changes in American society after the infiltration of working class, middle class, and immigrants into the leisure class. Undine and Moffatt are materialistic, money- and status-driven characters who do not let anything get in the way of what they want. Throughout the novel, Undine barely shows concern for anyone other than herself, unless that concern would get her whatever it is she desires at the moment. Her son, Paul, knows her only through the newspaper clippings that Mrs. Heeney shows him since he spends most of his time at boarding school; and Paul has no recollection of his biological father, only his French father, de Chelles. Elmer Moffatt seems to be a mirror image of Undine—even his rise through the social and economic ranks mirrors hers. Carol Baker Spona observes:

> Wharton uses [Undine] to criticize not only the women of this society but also the men. Undine is most threatening to society because she looks like the ideal woman but behaves like the successful Wall Street tycoon. Of course, she adapts the methods of business to fit her female situation, but the underlying philosophies are the same. (280-81)

Undine’s mercenary method is threatening to leisure-class society because she circumvents the social rules of polite society, much like Moffatt and Simon Rosedale in *The House of Mirth*. The American myth of the self-made man is an exalted story for many, but by portraying Undine as a self-made woman using the same business strategies as self-made men, Wharton shows the ruthless, ugly side of the self-made myth.
While not exactly a self-made woman, the character of Carry Fisher in *The House of Mirth* can be seen as a precursor to Undine Spragg. Carry is divorced and uses Gus Trenor (and possibly other wealthy men) to gain money and retain her social standing; Carry also brings the nouveau riche and social climbers into the leisure-class fold. Carry and Undine are alike in the ways in which they maintain their social standing and their attitudes about leisure-class society. Caren Town explains, “Carry absorbs—or consumes—her surroundings; Lily incorrectly assumes, with tragic consequences, that her surroundings reflect her vision of herself. Because Carry has the ability or inclination to become what she beholds around her, she will rise in a society obsessed with the material” (45). Undine, much like Carry, understands how to survive in the materialistic American culture. Undine also has Carry’s “ability…to becomes what she beholds around her” which is how she is able to gain access to the leisure-class society and marry into it so quickly. Once her status is established, Undine expands her social circle to include people on the edges of leisure-class society, much like Carry Fisher, who brings in new blood to the social circles in *The House of Mirth*.

As a member of the rising middle-class and daughter of a self-made man, Undine has to learn proper leisure-class conduct. She takes many of her social cues from conduct and etiquette advice printed in newspapers and magazines, including ordering “a large supply” of “the new pigeon-blood notepaper with white ink” and rising “too late to share the family breakfast, [and] usually had her chocolate brought to her in bed by Celeste, after the manner described in the articles on ‘A Society Woman’s Day’ which were appearing in ‘Boudoir Chat’” (Wharton 15, 32). Wharton pokes fun at some of the more gossip-oriented conduct publications with her invention of “Boudoir Chat.” Since the entire novel satirizes the marriage market and the ruthlessness of some social climbers, Wharton is also satirizing the conduct book and magazine
industry, which by the time *The Custom of the Country* was published in 1913 had become a staple in the publication industry—even the title of the novel seems to be pointing to conduct and etiquette, or customs, in the United States.

Since Undine gets most, if not all, of her ideas of proper New York high society from the pages of “Boudoir Chat,” she is disappointed and unprepared when faced with the realities of New York high society. The first time Undine’s acquired knowledge of manners and etiquette is put to the test is when her mother receives an invitation from Mrs. Fairford, Ralph Marvell’s sister, asking for her to dine with the Fairfords and Marvells. Undine is unsure if she should use her pigeon-blood colored notepaper, since Mrs. Fairford used plain white stationery, much to Undine’s dismay. However, her instincts about manners seem to be on point, because she replies using plain hotel paper instead of her “stylish” pigeon-blood (Wharton 15). While Undine chose wisely in this instance, at the dinner party, she openly talks of divorce—much to the Marvells’ chagrin. Undine explains, “‘Out in Apex, if a girl marries a man who don’t come up to what she expected, people consider it’s to her credit to want to change’” (Wharton 75). In Apex society, divorce is a perfectly natural thing for a young woman to do, since her sole occupation is to find the best marriage match for herself. Wharton is pointing out the economics of marriage in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century, as well as making it clear that Undine does not know the proper conduct expected of her in social situations.

Contrasted with Lily’s easy social grace and charm, Undine is a bit rough around the edges for the first part of *The Custom of the Country*, but the longer she is around the leisure class the more she learns and is eventually able to use her artistry skills to manipulate the various men in her life. When she is in Europe with Peter van Degen she is able to make him jealous and stir Raymond de Chelles’s interest at the same time:
Undine, on entering, had seemed to be in the same mood as her companions; but Bowen saw that, as she became conscious of his friend’s observation, she isolated herself in a kind of soft abstraction; and he admired the adaptability which enabled her to draw from such surroundings the contrasting graces of reserve…. Bowen noted the skill with which Undine, leaving him [Van Degen] to Mrs. Shallum’s care, contrived to draw Raymond de Chelles to the other table. Still more noticeable was the effect of this stratagem on Van Degen. (Wharton 129)

Here she is using similar moves as Lily, paying attention to one possible suitor to attract the attention of her current interest—granted, Lily never became someone’s mistress, but she was well versed in pitting men against each other in vying for her attention. Undine has a different motive; while Lily is, at least on the surface, trying to find the right marriage match in order to keep her freedom, Undine just wants to find the best economic marriage match to keep up her expensive lifestyle.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily performs her role as leisure-class woman fairly adeptly in the first half of the book as evidenced by her time at Bellomont. As part of her societal duties—as an unmarried woman who does not yet have the income to sustain her lavish lifestyle—she acts as social secretary first for Judy Trenor and later, in a more official capacity, for the nouveau riche Welly-Brys. Lily does not enjoy her guest and social secretary duties, as we see in the language she uses to describe it while she is at Bellomont: “she had found that her hostesses expected her to take a place at the card-table. It was one of the taxes she had to pay for their prolonged hospitality, and for the dresses and trinkets which occasionally replenished her insufficient wardrobe” (Wharton 24). However, Lily knows she owes Judy for keeping her at Bellomont,
refreshing her wardrobe periodically, and for repeatedly trying to help Lily get married, so she follows the rules and expectations.

Her debt to Judy is not a monetary one—married women do not deal in money—it is a debt of social drudgery in the form of letter writing. Elaine Neil Orr asserts, “Wharton provides another (and older) depiction of sororal intercourse when Lily joins Judy Trenor in the domestic world of letter writing…. A form of feminine language that reinforces distinct gendered spheres, the writing of notes is as unappealing to Lily as is marriage with the wealthy Percy Gryce or a flat like Gerty’s” (33-34). As ladies of the leisure-class, Judy and Lily know that letters and invitations need responses in a timely manner and with precise wording, Helen L. Roberts advises, “a note in time and in the right place is an invaluable and easily dispatched evidence of good intentions and kind thought not to be otherwise conveyed” (474). Lily’s disgust of this type of domestic and social work points to her larger issues with the rules of conduct expected of her; she feels more and more trapped by the expectations of her as the novel progresses.

In many society novels, the society itself acts like a Greek chorus commenting on the actions and behavior of the protagonist. Rosalyn Dixon observes, “In The House of Mirth, turn-of-the-century New York modifies as Lily Bart moves downward, but the community always is presented as an unthinking powerful adversary perpetuating specific standards of behavior” (212). Dixon is pointing out the rules of conduct that Lily alludes to throughout the novel—she is always aware of not only how people see her, but also what they will think of her based on her actions. Dixon goes on to explain, “what provides the central focus in the novel, is the struggle experienced by those who do not unquestioningly comply with New York’s social code. Lily’s error is not that she participates in the various exchanges, for that is the route of survival. But under Selden’s influence, she becomes hesitant and inconsistent, a parasite rather than a
committed and equal participant in the game of life” (215). Dixon implies that it is Selden who leads to Lily’s downfall; however, from the very beginning, when she acknowledges Selden’s presence in Grand Central Station, she is walking the fine line of impropriety with him—already she is making questionable (vis-à-vis the New York social code) decisions. In fact, it is only because it is summer and most people are out of town that she agrees to have tea at his apartment—she knows the likelihood of being seen, and therefore judged accordingly, is slim. She is full of remorse (for being seen, not for the tea) when she runs into Sim Rosedale coming out of the Benedict, knowing that she will owe him for his silence. While Selden does enable Lily to question and “become hesitant and inconsistent” (Dixon 215) in participating in New York social conduct, it is ultimately Lily’s decision not to conform—not to clinch the marriage deal with Gryce (and others). Because Lily had been known for letting other would-be fiancés slip away, Selden cannot be the sole influence on her behavior, or lack of proper conduct.

Performance

The performances in both novels are two-fold, gender and class; Undine and Lily are performing both a feminine and leisure-class identity. Lily has been trained in these performances her entire life, while Undine uses her mimicry skills and advice literature to quickly learn how to pass as a leisure-class lady. To prepare for social outings, Undine practices and performs in her bedroom before events. The narrator recounts, “already Undine’s chief delight was to ‘dress up’ in her mother’s Sunday skirt and ‘play lady’ before the wardrobe mirror. The taste had outlasted childhood, and she still practiced the same secret pantomime, gliding in, settling her skirts, swaying her fan, moving her lips in soundless talk and laughter” (Wharton 18). The fact that Undine continues to “play lady” through adulthood is telling of her
ambitions and of society’s expectations of her gender. She also practices what she will be doing at the dinner she has been invited to at Mrs. Fairford’s: “Within a few days she would be enacting the scene she was now mimicking; and it amused her to see in advance just what impression she would product on Mrs. Fairford’s guests” (Wharton 18). This mimicking is Undine’s putting to use the conduct knowledge that she has gleaned from watching leisure-class society, from reading “Boudoir Chat,” and from practicing how to perform what is expected of her as a lady of the leisure-class. Undine’s practicing of social rules of conduct and etiquette help perfect her performance over the course of the novel.

However, she is a quick study and realizes early that to be part of New York society, you have to be seen at the right places: the opera and art museums are two of those places. So, she forces her father to buy a box at the opera for the season and only goes to be seen and to see who is visiting whom in the box seats, not because she enjoys the actual opera. Undine also frequents the art museums and mimics the other women in their stances while looking at the various art pieces, but she does not understand or appreciate the pieces of art. Much like at the opera, she is there to see and be seen, not to enjoy the artwork. Undine is so adept at pretending to be an authentic member of the leisure-class, that eventually she is taken for one and comes to represent the leisure-class woman to her European friends and Raymond de Chelles’s family. Mary McAleer Balkun explains, “In the final irony, the counterfeit turns out to be the standard by which authenticity is determined, the embodiment of American ideology, …. the counterfeit has learned how to package and sell the self, but in the shadows are the dangers associated with a manufactured identity” (17). By the time Undine is in Europe, after leaving Marvell and Van Degen, she is able to sell herself as a member of the American leisure-class, as Wharton’s narrator explains “a woman with tact, who’s not in a position to remarry, will find society
extremely indulgent…provided, of course, she keeps up appearances” (186). Undine is now very aware of how to keep up appearances; she has culled and perfected her conduct after her short marriage to Marvell. Undine used her years of marriage to Marvell to her advantage gleaning much knowledge from the leisure-class society set to which she was now a member.

Unlike Undine, Lily Bart is a social and domestic artist; she is well versed in the customs and conduct of the leisure-class society and is able to adapt to most situations. This is evident through much of the first half of The House of Mirth. From the very first sentence, the audience has the notion that Lily is a piece of art and quickly discovers that she is also well-attuned to how others perceive her and how best to show off her assets—in short, Lily is an artist and her own masterpiece. The novel opens with Lily being spotted by Selden, “In the afternoon rush of Grand Central Station his eyes had been refreshed at the sight of Miss Bart” (Wharton 3). He decides to test her motives by walking directly past her noting “that if she did not want to be seen she would contrive to elude him and it amused him to think of putting her skill to the test” (Wharton 4). Here, Selden is bringing Lily’s social artistry skills to the attention of the audience and trying to test them; however, Lily wishes to be seen since she has missed the early train to Bellomont and must wait for the late afternoon train.

The first overt performance of Lily’s in the novel is when she invited Percy Gryce to join her for tea on the train to Bellomont. Gryce is the latest eligible bachelor for her to try to capture; however, rules of proper society limit her actions as does the information she knows about Gryce—he is very timid and under the control of his mother. She puts this information to use by creating an air of domesticity in the train during the tea service. The display of her domestic skills during tea solidifies Gryce’s interest in and admiration of her. This is why she invites him to join her for tea, an activity they can engage in without Gryce feeling too
uncomfortable and also stay within the confines of leisure-class conduct. Gryce is able to admire the artistry of Lily’s tea service on the bumpy train ride:

> When the tea came he watched her in silent fascination while her hands flitted above the tray, looking miraculously fine and slender in contrast to the coarse china and lumpy bread. It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train. (Wharton 18)

This display of her domestic skills solidifies Gryce’s interest in and admiration of her. Later at Bellomont, she places herself against the backdrop of nature when she misses going to church with Gryce—hoping to catch him on his way back. Selden, who interrupts her plans, makes her aware of her commodified nature and changes her mind about going after Gryce. Lily explains that she envies Selden’s bachelor freedom to live on his own, come and go in society as he pleases, make his own living—freedom that she will not be able to experience since she is a woman and a member of the leisure-class.

Lily’s most obvious performance in the entire novel is that of a piece of art at the Tableaux Vivants. This is a literal performance, but for Lily it is also her last chance to secure a husband, so she has to be the showstopper. This leads to a proposition by Rosedale, a kiss with Selden, and, later, Gus Trenor’s attempt to force himself on her. Lily views this performance as a success because she is the talk of the event; however, as many critics have pointed out, she attracted the wrong kind of attention as evidenced by Mr. Ned Van Alstyne’s statement

> “Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn’t a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!” (Wharton 106). Her most successful performance may be the one she pulls over on herself—she believes almost until the end of the
novel that she will be able to secure the freedom she so desires, first through marriage, then once she rebuffs all offers, through labor—in a millinery or some other fashionable shop. In the end, she realizes that this is not a possibility because she was not raised in such a way that would enable her to perform any kind of manual labor, so she commits suicide. It is only in death that she finally gets her freedom from societal expectations.

Conclusion

Wharton presents two models of womanhood in Lily Bart and Undine Spragg; similarly to how each represents the changes in society at the turn of the century, they also showcase the ideals of the True Woman and the New Woman. In many ways, Lily is the True Woman and nineteenth century lady, while Undine is the New Woman. Coming into leisure-class society as an outsider gives Undine the power to work within the system to gain a kind of independence. She uses the knowledge she gains of how to attract attention to make ever increasingly advantageous marriage matches. Her marriages become a way for her to be independent from her parents and she uses her husbands’ wealth to live comfortably. Lily, however, is trapped by the ideals of true womanhood that Undine aspires to perform. As an insider, Lily has trouble challenging the ideals and when she attempts to work within the system she fails miserably and ends up scandalized. While Wharton writes Lily Bart as a tragic heroine to highlight a frivolous society, she writes Undine Spragg to show the mercenary nature of inherent in the idea of self-madness. However, Undine’s ruthlessness is what enables her to work within the boundaries of leisure-class society and gain a sense of autonomy that Lily is unable to do.

Throughout The Custom of the Country and The House of Mirth, Wharton uses expectations of social conduct and the marriage market to show the changes happening in
American society. The more structured leisure-class society, which is the backdrop of *The House of Mirth*, is not the same leisure-class society found in *The Custom of the Country*. Lily Bart represents one aspect of Old New York society, while Undine Spragg represents the new fashionable society, which values materialism and money over heritage and tradition. Along with these changes comes a greater sense of female agency. Undine embraces the business aspects of the marriage market and is empowered by it—she utilizes her marriage matches to climb up the social ladder and distance herself from her humble middle-class beginnings and family. This is a drastic change from Lily Bart’s repugnance every time she was reminded of the business deal that is a marriage contract. Lily felt powerless by the pressure to make an advantageous marriage match and hemmed in by the expectations that accompanied marriage: she wanted to have financial stability without giving up her independence. Undine, on the other hand, maintained, relatively, her independence and wanted to be free to spend as much money and live as lavishly as she desired with little to no input from her husbands.

In these two drastically different heroines, Wharton shows the changes in American leisure-class society in the beginning decades of the twentieth century. Lily Bart is representative of old New York, while Undine Spragg represents the new society that is materialistic and consumer-oriented. Even by today’s standards, Lily Bart seems old-fashioned when compared to Undine, who could easily assimilate into contemporary American society. Wharton’s assessment of the changing atmosphere of leisure-class society is critical—although Undine is empowered in ways Lily is not, she has lost the essential manners and etiquette that Wharton values and that Lily possesses.
In the previous chapter, I argued that Edith Wharton uses social codes of conduct to explore how limited leisure-class women’s choices were. In this chapter, I continue examining how authors dealt with the limited option for women in the nineteenth century. While Wharton’s heroines, Lily Bart and Undine Spragg, show the difference marriage makes, Kate Chopin’s and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s heroines are both married; Chopin and Phelps examine the ways in which motherhood and marriage affect women in different ways and include “good” and “bad” examples of mothers and wives.

Similarly to Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin had a public experience with her father which had a lasting impression on her. Emily Toth recounts the tale in Unveiling Kate Chopin; according to family lore, young Chopin wanted to know where her father went and whined so much that he agreed to take her with him one day:

First they went to early mass (dull on weekdays), but then they rode down to the levee—a thrilling place for a little girl, with monstrous steamships, real Indians, ribald sailors, and disreputable women. Young Katie got to gawk at a raffish world that respectable young girls were not supposed to know anything about. According to family tradition, the outing created a special bond between father and daughter—but for Kate, it also sparked a lifelong revolt against keeping young ladies ignorant about the rest of the world. (4)

Chopin’s experience sparked in her a desire to experience the whole of society, not just what was
considered proper for girls and ladies. This experience, along with her education at Sacred Heart Academy and at home, had a clear impact on her writing; characters in her works routinely go where they should not and bend or break societal rules.

While Phelps does not isolate any particular incident as being monumental or noteworthy during her childhood, she does describe in detail what it was like growing up in the college town of Andover and her vague memories of her grandfather, whom she credits with her streak of independence. Phelps does discuss how dedicated to writing and motherhood her mother was and how she never felt neglected as a child regardless of what her mother was doing. Reading Phelps’s autobiography *Chapters from a Life* clarifies how much her childhood in Andover influenced her in writing *The Story of Avis*. This semiautobiographical novel conflates Phelps’s childhood and Avis’s and portrays Harmouth as a disguised version of Andover society.

Avis’s struggle between her art and her children seems similar to her mother’s struggle—though from Phelps’s memories it seems her mother was better at achieving balance than Avis is. Of her mother’s writing, Phelps explains, “I can remember no time when I did not understand that my mother must write books because people would have and read them; but I cannot remember one hour in which her children needed her and did not find her” (13). It’s clear that Phelps’ mother, whose name she took after her mother’s death, was a strong influence showing her at an early age that a woman can balance a writing career and motherhood. Phelps explains the influence that her mother had on her: “It was as natural for her daughter [Phelps] to write as to breathe; but it was impossible for her daughter to forget that a woman of intellectual power could be the most successful of mothers” (12). Her mother’s ability to balance writing and motherhood instilled in Phelps the idea that women can balance the demands of a writing career and the demands of motherhood. While she explores this in *The Story of Avis* and shows it to be
difficult—more difficult than she explains in *Chapters from the Life*—Avis’s struggle is realistic, more so than Phelps’ childhood reminisces of her mother’s seemingly easy balance between writing and motherhood.

Most critics consider Kate Chopin and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps feminist writers; both authors wrote about the female experience in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Chopin and Phelps explored the various roles women were expected to fulfill by writing characters who both went with and against the grain of society. Both authors’ works include an undercurrent of popular domestic advice. These advice books reified gender roles and emphasized the importance of domesticity and separate spheres for women and men. Although these novels were published twenty-two years apart and are written by authors of different generations, they speak to the same issues. Elaine Showalter examines the differences between authors of Phelps’s era and Chopin’s in “Tradition and Female Talent.” The authors of Phelps’s generation she explains, Claim[ed] both male and female aesthetic models, [and] they felt free to present themselves as artists and to write confidently about the art of fiction in such essays as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s “Art for Truth’s Sake.” Among the differences the local colorists saw between themselves and their predecessors was the question of “selfishness,” the ability to put literary ambitions before domestic duties. (38)

Phelps’s generation of writers were writing when women were finally being allowed access to the public sphere and education, so Phelps and other authors found importance in presenting themselves as artists and as equals to male writers.

Twenty years later, however, Chopin and other local colorists were struggling with maternity and artistry. Showalter explains, “Motherhood no longer seemed to be the motivating
force of writing, but rather its opposite. Thus artistic fulfillment required giving up maternal drives, and maternal fulfillment meant giving up artistic ambitions” (39). So while Phelps and her contemporaries actively tried to balance motherhood and their art, Chopin’s contemporaries were more inclined to choose one over the other. Chopin, however, may be an exception: she was a mother and wife before she began writing, and she did not start writing until a decade after her husband’s death, by which time her children were older. Chopin could be seen as straddling these two generations of women writers—at least in her decision to be both mother and artist.

There is limited information about Phelps’s personal papers—there is her autobiography and only a handful of known letters to George Eliot have been examined and published, so it is hard to prove whether or not she was familiar with any particular domestic advice texts; however, she was friends with and greatly admired Harriet Beecher Stowe. Because of this friendship and the popular nature of domestic advice Phelps was likely familiar with some form of domestic advice text. While she does not directly address or mention specific texts in her autobiography, she does include the story of one Andover girl who was scandalized after being kissed by a boy—so it’s clear that she was at least familiar with social codes of conduct if not with advice texts themselves.

Unlike Phelps, Chopin’s personal letters and papers have been collected and published by Emily Toth and Per Seyersted. Chopin’s personal papers, namely her Commonplace book and her honeymoon diary, include some mentions of social expectations and codes of conduct as well as references to books she read including The Women’s Kingdom by Miss Mulock, who also published advice books as Dinah Mulock Craik—most notably, A Woman’s Thoughts on Women. Craik’s book was concerned with the status and role of women in society; Chopin is also concerned about this as the excerpt she copied from The Women’s Kingdom shows:
“The men make or mar its outside fortunes; but its internal comfort lies in the woman’s hand alone. And until women feel this—recognize at once their power and their duties—it is idle for them to chatter about their rights.” [emphasis in original] Men may be bad enough out of doors; but their influence is limited and external. It is women who are in reality either the salvation or the destruction of a household. (Toth and Seyersted 82)

From this excerpt in Chopin’s Commonplace Book, and the line she emphasized, it seems that she was interested in ideas about women’s role in society and how to use the domestic role to her advantage. Elsewhere in her Commonplace Book she complains about the never-ending cycle of social events:

New Year’s Eve Dec 31st 1868 Rain! Rain! Rain!—I am going to receive calls tomorrow—My first winter I expect a great many visits. I trust the weather will change this rain is intolerable.—What a nuisance all this is—I wish it were over. I write in my book to day the first time for months; parties, operas, concerts, skating and amusements ad infinitum have so taken up all my time that my dear reading and writing that I love so well have suffered much neglect. (Toth and Seyersted 64)

Here, again, we see Chopin’s observing social codes of conduct and women’s role and seemingly disdaining the pressure to go around to all the social event of the season when she would rather be reading and writing. After she is married, Chopin’s contempt of society people only grows, “But how immensely uninteresting some ‘society’ people are! That class which we know as Philistines. Their refined voices, and refined speech which says nothing—or worse, says something which offends me” (Toth and Seyersted 179-80). Chopin’s growing derision of
society people and codes of conduct can be seen in her works, especially in Edna Pontellier who separates herself from society and its codes of conduct throughout *The Awakening*.

Critics such as Elaine Showalter, Ann Heilman, and Kathleen Streater have written about Chopin’s *The Awakening* as a feminist novel; Mary E. Papke, Ivy Schweitzer, and Diane McGee have written about the domesticity running through the novel. Elaine Showalter’s “Tradition and Female Talent” (1988) forms the basis of many feminist readings of *The Awakening*; Showalter focuses on the bond between women, artistic talent, and the precarious nature of artistic endeavors and motherhood. Showalter observes that the generation a female author was born into determines how easily she is able to have a writing career and be a mother simultaneously. In “Adèle Ratignolle: Kate Chopin’s Feminist at Home in *The Awakening*” (2007) Kathleen Streater argues that Adèle is a feminist who works from inside the confines of the patriarchal system by ruling her domestic sphere and by performances of her gender, especially when she calls attention to her pregnancy. Ivy Schweitzer focuses on motherhood in her reading of *The Awakening*, while Mary E. Papke places Chopin’s characters on a continuum of females responding to ideology: woman as ‘true woman,’ a seemingly helpless being who is defined only through relationships to and with men; woman as outsider, an artist of a new world view; woman as dual self, a female precariously balanced between submission and self-will. (34)

In “The Structures of Dinners in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*” (2000), Diane McGee reads domesticity in the form of meals, specifically the formal dinners occurring periodically throughout the novel, and provides an interesting insight into Chopin’s knowledge of domestic advice. McGee asserts “Food is also presented in two ways in the novella: as beckoning, erotic, sensual, liberating, and as a part of the traditional domestic structure that Edna is trying to
Domestic advice manuals often included detailed instructions on how to give dinners including such topics as the proper way to invite guests, what to serve and when, how to set and decorate the table, and how to seat guests.

Chopin’s work is more well-known than Phelps’s *The Story of Avis*; Showalter and Ann Heilman both link the two novels because of their treatment of women. While most critics focus on Phelps’s other novels, notably *The Gates Ajar* and *The Silent Partner*, *The Story of Avis* is a novel worthy of study because of its characterizations of women who push the boundaries of societal expectations. Because Avis is an artist, critics such as Jack Wilson focus on the *kunstleroman* aspects of the novel and explore Avis’s story as a growing and developing artist. Lori Duin Kelly and Carol Farley Kessler have also examined Avis’s trouble conforming to gender expectations; however, the majority of the criticism about *The Story of Avis* focuses most prominently on Avis as failed artist and how her story reflects some biographical elements of Phelps’s life. What critics have overlooked is the tension brought on by the two opposing forces in Avis’s life, her work and her home: examining this tension brings to light the pervasive nature of codes of conduct and expectations of behavior. While Phelps uses her childhood experiences with her mother as the basis for Avis’s struggle, the forces at work on Avis are different than the memories Phelps has of her mother splitting time between writing and her children. The undertones of *The Story of Avis* show the influence societal expectations of gender performance have on even the most obstinate characters, such as Avis.

Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* (1877) both examine the plights of women who are uncomfortable in the role of wife and mother. The protagonists of both novels, Edna Pontellier and Avis Dobell, find themselves in unfulfilling marriages, with children underfoot, and their lifestyle choices limited. While Edna
and Avis both buck convention in their own ways, both have foils who follow societal expectations, Adèle Ratignolle and Coy Rose, respectively. Adèle and Coy are seemingly natural wives and mothers who make Edna and Avis seem unnatural. The tension between portrayals of natural and unnatural mothers and wives highlights a major flaw in domestic advice and in societal expectations of the time period—namely, the assumption that women are naturally fit to be wives and mothers. Domestic advice books such as Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home*, Mrs. L.G. Abell’s *The Skillful Housewife*, and John S.C. Abbott’s *The Mother at Home* all support this supposition that woman’s natural role was wife and/or mother. Adèle Ratignolle and Coy Rose perform, seemingly with ease, the tasks domestic advisors associate with motherhood—nurturing, tending house, cooking, sewing, and overseeing any hired help. Edna and Avis are inconsistent at best with their performance of these motherly and wifely duties—Avis is much more nurturing than Edna, who is sporadic in her attention to her children and husband. Both Edna and Avis would rather focus on their own desires; Edna wants the freedom to do whatever she wants whether it’s going to the races or spending time on her drawing and painting, while Avis wants to focus on her art completely.

*Domestic Advice*

Domestic advice books were very common in the late nineteenth century; many were given as gifts to adolescent girls and to newlyweds. These books covered a vast array of domestic information including how to conduct oneself in various social situations, how to set up a home, how to care for sick children and spouses, how to dress for various occasions—some also included information against the traditional tight corsets many women wore—and how to prepare healthy food for ones family. Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The
American Woman’s Home is among the best-selling, influential, and most well-known domestic advice manuals. Other domestic advice books such as Mrs. L.G. Abell’s The Skillful Housewife’s Book (1846), William Andrus Alcott’s The Young Wife, or Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation (1837), and Peter Parley’s Bright and Happy Homes (1882) include very similar advice as Beecher and Stowe’s volume. Some domestic advice books, such as, William Makepeace Thayer’s Womanhood: Hints and Helps for Young Women (1895) and Mrs. L.G. Abell’s Woman in Her Various Relations: Containing Practical Rules for American Females (1851) include explanations of social conduct, manners, and etiquette as well as household advice. Still other books, such as John S.C. Abbott’s The Mother at Home; or the Principles of Maternal Duty (1833) and Arthur Freeling’s The Young Bride’s Book. An Epitome of the Domestic Duties and Social Enjoyments of Woman, as Wife and Mother (1845) include guidance for raising children and proper temperaments for wives and mothers to have.

While many domestic advice books written for young brides and mothers reified the ideas of separate spheres for men and women, including Beecher and Stowe’s volume, Beecher and Stowe also wanted to “elevate both the honor and the remuneration of all the employments that sustain the many difficult and sacred duties of the family state, and…render each department of woman’s true profession as much desired and respected as are the most honored professions of men” (13). They wanted women’s work to have the same level of respect and training as men’s work, so that women would be valued as members of society and not seen as mere ornamentation—Beecher and Stowe valued hard work and disagreed with the idea that women of a certain socio-economic status should be above domestic work.

Like many domestic advisors, Beecher and Stowe relate domestic work to family happiness and harmony, “It is the earnest desire of the authors of this volume to make plain the
falsity of this growing popular feeling, and to show how much happier and more efficient family life will become when it is strengthened, sustained, and adorned by family work” (22). Beecher and Stowe argued that a household of any means could be a happy one, if the family members followed the advice set forth in their volume. Other domestic advisors, such as Mrs. L.G. Abell, also argue that maintaining an orderly home will ensure happiness in the household.

Despite never being a wife or mother, Catharine Beecher was a strong, outspoken proponent of domesticity and the woman’s sphere. This paradox between her work and life can be seen as problematic; however, Beecher argues that mothering can be found in various professions including teaching, a profession in which she did actively participate. In *The American Woman’s Home* and other publications, Beecher states, “A woman who inherits property, or who earns her own livelihood, can institute the family state, adopt orphan children and employ suitable helpers in training them; and then to her will appertain the authority and rights that belong to man as the head of a family” (204). The idea of a woman providing for herself and a family of her own choosing is an interesting and controversial one. This idea adds to the paradoxes in Beecher’s work—she is a proponent of True Womanhood, yet also encourages self-sufficient women. While Beecher was not the only domestic advisor to lead a paradoxical life to the one she expounded in her advice books, Beecher remains one of the most famous and influential domestic advisors of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps more troubling than the disjuncture between Beecher’s personal life and public writings is, as Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis argue, that her:

> vision for American womanhood had remained narrow. Premised on the experiences of white, middle-class Protestant women like herself, it never challenged the class or racial divisions that tore at nineteenth century America. To
the contrary, by limiting the difference to the matter of gender, Beecher helped create a rhetoric that veiled many of the forms of privilege and deprivation in her world. (14)

Beecher’s worldview and writings were narrow and not representative of the American public as a whole; then again, the majority of advice book authors shared this narrow view of American society. These writers were not concerned with embracing racial diversity and economic disparity as much as they were concerned with formulating a homogeneous middle-class and upper-middle class identity.

Beecher and Stowe uphold the ideals of True Womanhood and the exalted image of mother-women in their advice book, “Her great mission is self-denial, in training its members to self-sacrificing labors for the ignorant and the weak: if not her own children, then the neglected children of her Father in heaven” (19). Here, Beecher and Stowe equate women’s work not only with the domestic sphere, but also with Christianity; they go on to state that “those who train immortal minds are to reap the fruit of their labor through eternal ages” (19) which inexorably links mothering and heaven or eternal life. Beecher and Stowe are not the only ones to link mothering and religion—most advice books had religious undertones. Abbott’s *The Mother at Home* includes similar language about maternal duty and the joy children bring. This common verbiage of the joys and duties of motherhood are echoed in both *The Story of Avis* and *The Awakening* through the portrayals of mother-women like Coy and Adèle, and these ideals of motherhood are also questioned by the portrayals of unnatural mothers, Avis and Edna.

These domestic advice books all claim the domestic sphere as the natural place for women. While some domestic advisors see control over the domestic sphere as a chance for women to influence the public sphere, authors such as Chopin and Phelps find the domestic
sphere limiting to some women. Chopin’s and Phelps’s novels include women who are empowered by the domestic sphere and women who are limited by the domestic sphere. While one could argue that since the protagonists of the novels are hemmed in by the domestic sphere Chopin and Phelps are both arguing for women to engage in the public sphere, both authors also include a woman successfully and happily navigating the domestic sphere; therefore, I contend that the authors are showing that women should have the freedom and the choice of remaining in the domestic sphere or joining the public sphere.

While neither novel directly addresses or reference domestic advice books—like Edith Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* does—both include an undercurrent of domestic advice. In providing characters who are successful in the domestic sphere such as Madame Ratignolle and Coy Rose who are compared to Edna and Avis, Chopin and Phelps are utilizing literary devices that many domestic advisors used as well. Domestic advisors such as Lydia Marie Child in *Good Wives* (1833) and William Makepeace Thayer in *The Poor Girl and True Woman: or, Elements of Woman’s Success Drawn from the Life of Mary Lyon and Others, A Book for Girls* (1859) profile women’s lives who exemplify the traits of proper wives and mothers. That advice writers and novelists utilize similar devices is significant because it shows how both types of text work to create, maintain, or work against cultural expectations.

*Social Expectations & Conduct*

Although Chopin does not directly address domestic advice books in *The Awakening*, the social expectations and code of conduct these type of books propagate is clearly at work in the novel. In *The Awakening*, the characters, especially Edna and Adèle, are referred to by their proper names—Mrs. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle—by the narrator unless they are stepping
outside of social norms and expectations. Mrs. Pontellier becomes Edna fairly early in the novel. Mrs. Pontellier becomes Edna when she decides to no longer worry about societal expectations of her; while this begins at Grand Isle, it becomes pointedly clear after the Pontelliers return to New Orleans and the narrator explains:

On Tuesday afternoons—Tuesday being Mrs. Pontellier’s reception day—there was a constant stream of callers….Mrs. Pontellier, attired in a handsome reception gown, remained in the drawing-room the entire afternoon receiving her visitors…. This had been the programme which Mrs. Pontellier had religiously followed since her marriage, six years before. (Chopin 48)

However, in the next paragraph “Edna” tells Mr. Pontellier that she did not keep her regular reception day that week, did not leave an excuse, and just felt like going out. Léonce is angry and frustrated that his wife has ignored her societal duties because it reflects badly on him and his desire to move up the social and economic ladder. Most domestic advice books of the time period included a section on making and receiving social calls. It was an expectation for society women to not only have a designated reception day, but to also return those social calls throughout the week or month; there was also an expected dress code depending on the time of day when social calls occurred.

Many domestic advice manuals of the time period explained in detail the expectations of the social call. Helen Roberts’ The Cyclopedia of Social Usage (1913) explains the customs of calling:

In fashionable society all formal calls are paid in the afternoon, between three and half-past five o’clock….. The formal call has this distinction: it is always made in the discharge of a social duty. It is a courtesy paid to signify
appreciation of hospitality offered or received; to acknowledge the beginning of a new acquaintance; to express congratulation or condolences; to designate the recommencement of a social season, or of an individual’s participation in social activities. (Roberts 37)

While Roberts’ book was published in the beginning of the twentieth century, the routines and codes of conduct regarding social calls was the same in the nineteenth century and these were the rules of polite society that Edna was breaking, much to Lèonce’s chagrin.

In As Others See Us (1896), another advice manual discussing social calls, the unnamed author explains how various members of society view the custom of the social call:

To the busy man or woman, the scientific, professional, or literary worker, whose circle is narrow down to a few chosen friends, the ceremonious call is regarded as an irksome exaction to be avoided. To the fashionable individual, whose life is a round of society’s demands and returns, its strictly defined code is at once a law and a protection, without which society would become chaotic. To the sensible, well-bred person, though he may avoid fashionable society on account of its ceremonious demands, the rules which govern it are a recognized necessity, and the understanding of them a part of his education. (169)

This commentary is interesting in light of Edna’s and Lèonce’s differing opinions of the necessity and use of social call and reception days. While Lèonce falls into the last two categories, “the fashionable individual” and “the sensible, well-bred person,” Edna falls into the first category who finds these calls “an irksome exaction to be avoided”—in Edna’s case she does not see the purpose of calls and would rather spend her time doing whatever she desires.
Edna’s views on social calls recall Chopin’s own views of society people and social functions both of which she found tiresome.

Edna begins breaking the rules of leisure-class society after her awakening experience at Grand Isle. Some critics have pointed out that Creole society lived by different rules and Edna’s transformed attitude is more in line with Creole society and less an act of outright rule-breaking. Nancy Walker argues that “Edna is not behaving in shocking, inexplicable manner… she is not flaunting the mores of the society she finds herself in” (99). Because Creole society is “openly sensual” and values the pleasures of “music, color, and food” Edna’s embrace and awakening to these pleasures is more a rejection of the Puritanical society “Edna had been reared in” (Walker 98-103). Walker’s point is well-taken; however, Edna is not a Creole and her husband, though a Creole, has embraced non-Creole society—the Pontelliers are known as Mr. and Mrs. not Monsieur and Madame as the Ratignolles and LeBruns are known.

Only once is Lèonce referred to as Monsieur Pontellier: when Edna recalls how she met and married him. So Lèonce gives up the French honorific when he marries a non-Creole and non-Catholic. In marrying Edna, he chooses to embrace the Puritan work ethic which makes up the backbone of the self-made man myth. Since Lèonce is seemingly moving beyond Creole society—he spends the last part of the novel in New York attempting to expand his business interests—he explains that Edna must keep her reception day and “observe les convenances if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession” (Chopin 49). From his outrage and frustration that his wife missed callers and this comment of getting on and keeping up, it can be construed that Lèonce wants to move up in society, which means adhering to non-Creole society rules. Lèonce wants Edna to conform to the Cult of True Womanhood and to the behavior set
forth in various domestic advice books of the time period—most of which subscribed to the notions of True Womanhood.

Again, Léonce embraces ideals of the larger American society over Creole society. While Edna may be embracing Creole society over the more Puritanical one in which she was raised, Léonce has chosen the opposite, so Edna’s rule-breaking is more complex when Léonce’s actions are considered. Edna, however, no longer wants to be the good little wife as Jarlath Killeen notes, “her strategy for obtaining independence is to appropriate masculine values to herself. So she enters into the world of exchange and begins to sell her own paintings. She goes to the races, she smokes, she initiates sexual activity, she adopts the double standard as her own” (420). While Edna breaks society’s rules by going to the races with known rake, Alcée Arobin, smoking, and eventually having an affair, she is able to do so in part because she is married. If she were a single woman, she would have to have a chaperone for some of her excursions, much like Mrs. Highcamp attempts to be for her daughter—who always manages to not attend the social events her mother plans, but which her mother attends in her stead. As a married woman in Creole society, Edna is granted a certain level of freedom and she takes full advantage.

Much like *The Awakening*, *The Story of Avis* includes commentary on the expected conduct of women throughout the novel. The narrator observes the proper and improper conduct of the characters as well as certain characters themselves. Avis and her best friend Coy are two characters who notice their own conduct and that of others in relation to societal expectations—both the Harmouth society, which is more intellectual since it is a small college town, and the more general society. Coy notes the difference between Harmouth and other places, “‘In Harmouth, it’s improving your mind. It comes hard on me,… I ought never to have been born in Harmouth, it’s improving your mind. It comes hard on me,… I ought never to have been born in Harmouth. If I’d been just a downright society girl now, I could have been a dunce….. But the
amount I’ve read this last four years!’” (Phelps 17). The status quo in Harmouth requires the young women to belong to reading clubs and debate great works of literature and philosophy. The novel opens at one such meeting, and they occur sporadically until Avis gets married. A number of domestic advice books, including Timothy Shay Arthur’s Advice to Young Ladies on Their Duties and Conduct of Life (1848) and Marianne Farningham’s Home Life, or How to Make Home Happy (1870), include prescriptions for female education; domestic advisors thought that regardless of socioeconomic status, girls should possess some formal education as well as housekeeping. Domestic advisors such as Charles Deems in What Now? For Young Ladies Leaving School (1852) warned against reading romances, sensational novels, and love stories because these were seen as detrimental to the mind. Similar meetings to the ones described in The Story of Avis are mentioned in The Awakening; Mrs. Highcamp’s daughter is always attending some club meeting, and Dr. Mandelet asks Lèonce if Edna has joined a woman’s club as a possible explanation for her behavior. Dr. Mandelet is insinuating that Edna is learning to be a New Woman; as discussed in chapter three women’s clubs were involved in the change of ideology of womanhood from the True Woman to the New Woman.

In addition to cultivating their minds, Harmouth girls are also expected “to be versed in those domestic accomplishments to which the feminine nature was created” (Phelps 28). Avis’s Aunt Chloe attempts to teach her various housekeeping skills; however, much to Aunt Chloe’s dismay, Avis detests all domestic affairs. She explained to her father, “I hate, hate, to sew chemises; and I hate, hate, hate, to go cooking round the kitchen. It makes a crawling down my back to sew” (Phelps 27). Aunt Chloe is clearly well-versed in domestic advice and housekeeping. She realizes that Avis needs to know how to keep a house regardless of her socioeconomic or marital status—Aunt Chloe has never been married. The narrator notes that
“Aunt Chloe believed in good blankets and towels, and a plenty of them” (Phelps 15). This is similar to advice found in Beecher and Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home*, which details how to set up and run a happy, healthy home. Although Aunt Chloe tries very hard to teach Avis domestic skills, Avis flatly refuses to learn and devotes herself to her artwork instead.

**Motherhood**

Domestic advisors had a plethora of advice and guidance regarding motherhood. This advice ranged from nutrition and clothing to the differences in educating boys and girls in the home. In much the same way a wife reflected on the success of the husband, children reflected how successful a mother a woman was. Chopin points out how the Pontellier boys are less prone to cry for their mother when they scraped a knee, while the other children at Grand Isle, especially Adèle Ratignolle’s, would run to their mothers for comfort. These mother-women, as Chopin calls them, were prone to “fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). These ministering angel type of mothers are what many domestic advisors argued all women should strive to become.

Madame Ratignolle spends most of the novel perfectly performing her role as doting wife and mother. However, she breaks the code of conduct during her pregnancy: Adèle repeatedly calls attention to her pregnant state while in Grand Isle—including faking a fainting spell—and she asks Edna to be with her when she is in labor and this is the one time the narrator refers to her by her first name instead of Madame Ratignolle. This occurs after she complains about being neglected and abandoned, “‘Neglected, indeed!’ exclaimed the nurse. Wasn’t she there? And
here was Mrs. Pontellier leaving, no doubt, a pleasant evening at home to devote to her? And wasn’t Monsieur Ratignolle coming that very instant through the hall?” (Chopin 104). Adèle has broken the social code by complaining about being neglected when she clearly is not and by requesting Edna to be present; Chopin has broken social code by including a graphic, for the time period, depiction of childbirth. Adèle in labor is described as “clad in an ample white \textit{peignoir}, holding a handkerchief tight in her hand…. Her face was drawn and pinched, her sweet blue eyes haggard and unnatural” (103); while her labor pains are described as “agonizing moments” (104). Contrasted with Edna’s memory of giving birth, “her own like experiences seemed far away, unreal, and only half remembered. She recalled faintly an ecstasy of pain, the heavy odor of chloroform, a stupor which had deadened sensation, and an awakening to find a little new life,” Adèle’s labor is visceral and real—a “scene [of] torture” (104).

In addition to the harrowing childbirth scene, Adèle proves to be an important foil for Edna. Adèle is the embodiment of the Mother-Woman and, much like Coy in \textit{The Story of Avis}, a natural mother and wife; Adèle is also adept at performing her gender. Kathleen Streeter argues that Chopin “uses Adèle’s character to show readers another form of resistance: Adèle reveals her strength and feminist identity by working the patriarchal system to her advantage” (407-8). Streeter discusses Adèle’s use of her pregnancy to garner attention at Grand Isle and her over the top performances of feminine “weakness” to get what she wants in the moment. She pulls Robert away from Edna at the beach, under the pretense of “cramp in her limbs and stiffness of the joints,” but with the intention to discuss Edna with him because “‘she might make the unfortunate blunder of taking [him] seriously’” (Chopin 19; 20). Adèle also performs her role as devoted wife with ease. Edna’s dinner with the Ratignolle’s in New Orleans is a performance of the utmost domestic bliss with Monsieur Ratignolle speaking “with an animation and earnestness
that gave an exaggerated importance to every syllable he uttered. His wife was keenly interested in everything he said, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth” (Chopin 54). This show of compatibility and companionship is diametrically opposite of Edna and Lèonce, who barely speak at meals and when they do it is antagonistically. Streater sees the domestic exchange between the Ratignolles as “signifying that in the home sphere, Adèle is equal, perhaps even dominant partner in the marriage” (410). Adèle’s seeming dominance in the home sphere is in accordance to Beecher and Stowe’s advice in *The American Woman’s Home*. Beecher and Stowe state that “woman is [the home’s] chief minister” (19); Adèle Ratignolle certainly fits this idea—she is the head of her domestic sphere.

Adèle is depicted as a natural mother and wife, in fact, as Streater observes, even Edna “perceives a traditional, male-defined and idealized mother image” in Adèle (409). Streater goes on to argue that “Chopin uses Edna’s character to expose how deeply imbedded the traditional gender role of selfless mother exists in our society: Edna (and ironically many critics) immediately and wrongly perceives Adèle as passive, self-sacrificing, and passionless because she is labeled ‘mother-woman’” (409). Chopin, like Phelps, is criticizing patriarchal society in the portrayal of Adèle as a natural mother-woman. Because Adèle performs this role seemingly with ease, the audience and Edna assume that it is natural for women to act this way; however, as Edna shows, it is not natural for every woman to be a mother-woman or wife. After her dinner with the Ratignolles, she realizes “the little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui” (Chopin 54). The differences between Edna and Adèle are pointed—domesticity is not Edna’s forte or even a desirable thing for her, while
Adèle flourishes in the domestic sphere. Edna is not able to perform her gender as flawlessly as Adèle.

Much like Avis, Edna is not a natural mother. Edna and Avis both rely heavily on domestic help—Edna has a quadroon nanny for the children, a cook, and a maid, like most other Creole families of her station, and Avis hires a maid to help with the children and domestic matters. Avis interacts with her children more consistently than Edna does, and Avis does seem to truly care for her children; it is unclear how Edna feels about her children—at times she loves them dearly and at other times they are barely a passing thought. The narrator describes:

She was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them…. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her. (Chopin 19)

One difference between these two characters and their children is that Avis has a son and daughter—her son dies at a young age, leaving her with just a daughter—while Edna has two sons. Avis’s consistent love and attention to her children is the major difference between her and Edna. Avis may not be a natural mother, but she learns how to become an adequate mother, while Edna never does.

Although Avis is not adept at performing her socially prescribed gender, other women in the novel are and provide a sometimes stark contrast to Avis. Coy, Avis’s closest friend, is used as a foil to Avis’s lack of domesticity. Avis wonders at how Coy can so easily manage her household, husband, and children. The narrator explains, “Coy had three children: they were not kept out of the parsonage-parlor any more than the sun or the air. Coy’s children did not tire her:
she looked radiantly at Avis across the brisk Babel in which they sat” (Phelps 247). This description of Coy as radiant mother contrasts starkly with descriptions of Avis as mother, “The rare tears filled Avis’s eyes as she lifted him; and then Julia brought the baby, and the bump, and the brown paper. And there she was sitting, pinioned, with both children, patient and worn, with the bright colors of her paints around her, and the pictures, with their mute faces to the wall” (Phelps 203-204). It is clear that Avis is overwhelmed by the children, she has two and a nursemaid to help her out, whereas Coy has three with no outside help. Phelps is pointing out that while Coy is a natural wife and mother—at the beginning of the novel it is Coy who laments how much literature and philosophy they have to read as Harmouth girls—Avis is in no way natural as a wife or mother. Avis is most natural undisturbed in her studio or out walking by the shore. Phelps seems to be pointing out that for some women the performance of their prescribed gender role is so ingrained as to be seemingly natural, while for other women this expected performance is so foreign to them that makes it clear that domesticity is not a natural feminine attribute.

*Marriage*

Marriage was, of course, the expected vocation of all girls, and domestic advice books included information for young ladies on how to properly secure a desirable marriage. Most of this advice was how to comport oneself in public and at home during courting calls. Chopin’s and Phelps’s novels approach marriage in different ways—Avis is reticent about marriage, while Edna marries without much thought. Edna does not swear off marriage as a young girl, as Avis does, but instead gets married as an act of defiance:
Her marriage to Lèonce Pontellier was purely an accident…. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her…. Add to this the violent opposition of her father and her sister Margaret to her marriage with a Catholic, and we need seek no further the motives which led her to accept Monsieur Pontellier for her husband. (Chopin 18-19)

Edna’s marriage to Lèonce is not quite a choice as it is a chance for her to escape her family and defy them. In a way, Edna’s marriage to Lèonce could be seen as her first attempt at rule-breaking. She realizes that she has to marry someone, and she chooses someone outside her Protestant, Kentucky upbringing—even when following societal expectations she is breaking them.

Phelps also explores the ways in which marriage helps and hinders women. In the case of Avis, her marriage drastically hinders her artistic ambitions; however, her marriage and her children help her become a well-rounded woman, or as Jack Wilson explains, “Avis’ growth into a fuller humanity is consequent of the sorrows of her married life and exhibits itself in a growing devotion to others and a concomitant repression of her artistic vocation” (67). Before marriage and children, Avis was very self-centered and self-focused, and as a natural development of having to sacrifice for her husband and, more importantly, for her children, she is able to care for others in ways that she was unable to prior to her marriage. She seems fairly indifferent to Ostrander when he returns to Harmouth after being injured in the war, yet later when they are married she makes herself ill from the strain of caring for her sick son and husband. Wilson asserts “Avis’ commitments to her art and to her intellectual and emotional independence have
been progressively exchanged for a number of traits that served to define the essence of woman in the nineteenth century” (Wilson 69). So even though Phelps was trying to write against the grain of gender expectations, she finds herself hedged in by them in order to move the narrative forward. For without Avis’s marriage to Ostrander, she would not have had her daughter, Waitstill and at the end of the novel she would not have any hope for the next generation of women having more freedom to do what they wish with their lives and not be forced into marriage.

Avis’s marriage in of itself is slightly unexpected since from the beginning of the novel Avis is adamantly against getting married. As a young woman, Avis decided that she would not marry; she wanted to pursue an art career instead: “‘Marriage,’ said Avis, not assertantly, but only sadly, as if she were but recognizing some dreary, universal truth, like that of sin, or mister, or death, ‘is a profession to a woman. And I have my work; I have my work!’” (Phelps 71). In choosing work over marriage, Avis is again challenging societal expectations of proper conduct for a young woman. Christine Stansell observes:

It is significant that even Avis, the most joyously liberated heroine, is inexorably forced into marriage by the “imperative surrender of her nature” (184), as if even at the zenith of her psychological health Miss Phelps felt the malignant need for the male gnawing at her. (252)

Vivid imagery aside, Stansell’s observation is a keen one. Avis must be married in this novel, because without her marriage she would not have her children, specifically her daughter, Wait,

---

27 While Wait is named for her paternal grandmother, it is clear that Phelps is using the names of these two characters to comment on the state of women’s lives. Ostrander’s mother, Waitstill, waited a long time for her son to visit her and for him to get married. Avis’s daughter Wait will not have to wait for gender expectations to change; at least, that is Avis’ hope.
and without Wait there would be no hope for a future generation of women to live unencumbered by domesticity. Avis reflects on this near the end of the novel:

For her, she had her child. It would be easier for her daughter to be alive, and be a woman, than it had been for her; so much as this, she understood; more than this she felt herself too spent to question. She folded her arms about the little girl, and laid her cheek upon her hair, and closed her eyes. (Phelps 247)

So, while Avis is Phelps’s “most joyously liberated heroine” she still needs the institution of marriage to give birth to the next generation.28

While it was imperative for Avis to get married to produce the next generation of slightly more liberated women, her marriage is rife with economic strife—Ostrander is unaware of the cost of things and has little desire to work at the university. Within the first year of their marriage, Ostrander has gone against everything he promised he would not do: he interferes with her art by having debt that cannot be paid back on his salary, and he brings guests unannounced and expects Avis to have dinner prepared and entertain the guests. Avis expected Ostrander to keep his word: allow her to continue painting without having to worry about household things (including paying their bills), not expect her to be a housekeeper, and not bring home unexpected guests for her to feed and entertain. Phelps shows that Ostrander is not fully immune from societal expectations of gender and domesticity regardless of what he may have said prior to their marriage. Ostrander is very adept at performing his role of husband and father who expects his household to be run smoothly without his assistance.

After she is married, Avis surprises herself by “stroking the curtains, and patting the pillows, like, other women whom she had seen in other new houses…. The thrill of possession,

28 It wouldn’t be until Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1915 novel, *Herland*, that women would be depicted as having children without needing men around.
the passion of the home, had awaked itself in a sleeping side of her nature” (Phelps 132). It seems that even Avis, who from the beginning seems to be breaking the mold and refusing her prescribed gender role, succumbs to societal pressure to conform and follow a general set of rules of conduct. Avis fights this conformity to some extent: she, at first, does not do any of the household work, since she is not well-versed in those duties, but as time goes on and she has children she begins to learn how to do some domestic work—cooking and child-rearing, but still no sewing. Avis’s behavior shows how powerful these codes of conduct are and how societal expectations shape a woman’s behavior.

By making their protagonists struggle with their prescribed gender roles, Chopin’s and Phelps’s novels focus on showing how ingrained these gender performances are in society. Carol Farley Kessler explains that “Avis becomes Everywoman who aspires to goals that her society has set apart for me and who then finds her striving steps hedged in. The novel thus documents what Phelps considers to be man’s distraction to woman’s achievement” (87-88). Avis’s struggle to break free from the constrained image that nineteenth century American society had of women’s work ruins her artistic talent—by the end of the novel her hands shake when she paints and she is only able to teach children, not able to produce any great work of her own. The years of housewifery and domestic drudgery have taken a toll on Avis; those years drained her of her artistic abilities, but she remains hopeful that her daughter will not suffer the same fate.

Societal expectations of women in the nineteenth century were that women would rule the domestic sphere of the household and be a True Woman, in some sense, while men would tend to the public sphere. While some authors wrote True Woman heroines—a lot of male domestic advice writers incorporated these into there advice manuals—Phelps’s works stands in
stark contrast: none of the major female characters completely fit the ideal of domestic goddess or True Woman. Lori Duin Kelly explains that in all of her writing

Phelps’ aim…was to contrast the prevailing view of idealized womanhood with reality…. Her goal was to ‘portray life as it is.’ And in real terms what the stereotype of womanhood meant was a generation of sickly and frustrated women who suppressed their talents and arrested their own development to care for others as society on all fronts told them thy must. (60)

This generation of sickly women includes fictional characters such as Edna Pontellier and Wharton’s Lily Bart. These characters are hemmed in by societal expectations of them, which limits their options. Avis is able to break free of these expectations in the end, because she is a widow she has the freedom to pursue a career without much societal disapproval. Like Edna, Avis uses her status as mother and married woman (and widow at the end) to bend societal expectations and codes of conduct. While she was able to pursue her art with some success before she had children, by the end of the novel she is unable to paint—all she can do is teach the next generation of artists. Avis’s true talent is her artwork, and she paints one masterpiece, The Sphinx, which haunts her throughout the book. She is constantly worried that she will not be able to paint another masterpiece, especially as she gets bogged down in domestic drudgery.

Conclusion

Edna and Avis are cut from the same cloth: neither is a natural mother or wife, and both reject domestic bliss wholeheartedly. These two heroines call into question what is the natural role of women. Motherhood and domesticity are so soundly rejected by them that it must not be true that woman’s nature is domestic and maternal. Chopin and Phelps are both challenging the
status quo by questioning the “natural” role and place of women. Though their novels were published twenty-two years apart, society’s ideal of women had not changed much: both authors expose ingrained patriarchal notions of gender roles within society. Neither Avis nor Edna succeed in having the happy home promised by books such as Beecher and Stowe’s. The result of the Edna’s failure is a fractured family after her death, but Avis begins a new life as a teacher with her daughter. While Avis does not succeed in the domestic sphere, she eventually is able to nurture her daughter and perform some of the duties of motherhood.

In some ways, Edna, who is chronologically a member of Waitstill’s generation, is the new type of woman Avis wants Wait to be. Edna is able to dabble in art, break society rules with little recourse, and move into the pigeon house because of women of the preceding generation, like Avis. Edna is benefitting from the era of the New Woman, which was beginning at the fin de siècle; she also benefits from the generation of women before her who begin to push against social boundaries for women. So, reading these two novels together is worthwhile and important because Edna Pontellier’s story could be that of Wait’s generation. Avis realized her daughter would have more freedom and choices than she did, but Avis also knew that Wait’s daughter would have even more freedom and choices.

Avis and Edna both struggle to conform to societal and familial pressures to perform their prescribed gender roles. By the end of Phelps’s novel, Avis is able to maintain a life for her and her daughter and support them by teaching art. Edna’s story, however, ends with her death—the only escape from the society into which she did not fit. These two protagonists reflect the struggles women writers of Phelps’s and Chopin’s respective generations faced: Phelps’s generation felt pressure to balance domesticity and art and Avis feels the same pressure, which leads to a decline in her artistic abilities. Chopin’s generation felt the pressure to choose
domesticity or art, and Edna, though not a true artist, was pressured into the domestic sphere even though she was not fit for it, which led to her death and escape from societal pressure. Domestic advice books like Beecher and Stowe’s encouraged women to embrace the domestic sphere over all else. The popularity of these books and the general acceptance of the ideals of True Womanhood led to women such as Avis and Edna being forced into lifestyles that destroyed them in some way.
Epilogue: Self-Made Women and Conduct Books

My original idea for this dissertation was to study the characteristics of the self-made woman in nineteenth century American literature, but over the course of my research that changed to the influence of conduct books on the performance of gender in nineteenth century American literature. On the outset these two ideas—gender performance and self-madeness—do not seem related or to even work well with each other; however, through my research and writing I have discovered that these ideas are tangentially related. By using the advice given in conduct books a working-class woman could learn the correct way to perform her gender and blend into the middle or leisure-class much the way Undine Spragg does in Wharton’s The Custom of the Country. The women’s club movement and working girls clubs also relate to the idea of self-madeness because the advice given to working girls was to help them move out of the working-class, or at least out of the factory, through learning domestic skills, money and household management, and advantageous marriage.

In the years after the Civil War, the story of the self-made man became widespread and formed the basis for the American Dream (even though this term was not used until the 1930s). The self-made man is a trope that can be traced back to Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography and was popularized in the nineteenth century by Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick novels, which were dime novels about a plucky young boy’s rise to the middle-class from street urchin. The basic rags-to-riches story of the self-made man is one of a white Protestant male pulling himself up by the bootstraps and becoming a wealthy, educated man of business. The self-made man has been
discussed in various critical works, most notably Irvine G. Wyllie's *The Self-Made Man in America* and John Calweti's *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*. While this American trope is well-known, there is a parallel trope for women, the self-made woman. This basic story does not work in the case of the self-made woman story; for self-man women first had to overcome the controlling male force in their life (usually a husband or father) before setting off on the path to become self-made. For women then, it was not a rags-to-riches story, but a riches-to-rags-to-riches story since women were not expected to work unless absolutely necessary for their—and their family’s—survival. Even though there are many working girl novels that bear resemblances to the self-made woman stories, such as *Ruth Hall*, these working girl novels (such as *Maggie, Girl of the Streets*) end with the girl either being rescued by a man and taken out of the factory or serving as cautionary tales for working girls to avoid prostitution. While there certainly are examples of the working girl who is self-made—Nettie Crane in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is one such example—these girls are rarely a main character in the novel. In the case of Nettie Crane, she serves as an example of what Lily Bart could have had if she had not been raised to be an ornament in society.

In Mary Paniccia Carden’s *Sons and Daughters of Self-Made Men*, she asserts “American literature is in large part shaped not by its embrace of the self-made man, but by its critique of him, its resistance to his demands, its persistence in imagining alternatives” (12). The self-made woman is one of these alternatives, since women are inherently excluded in the trope of the self-made man (by not being men). As an alternative to the self-made man, the self-made woman expands the scope of who could succeed in American society and what success means. For the self-made woman, success is not solely economic; success is achieving the domestic ideal—a comfortable middle-class existence—a sense of self, and fulfillment. Unlike the self-made man
who may have a wife and children who serve as accessories to his success, the self-made woman casts off her husband (either by death or divorce) and possibly sees her children as the reason for her needing to be successful. The self-made man must be a success in order to obtain a wife, but the self-made woman’s success is born out of the end of a marriage. Wharton’s Undine Spragg is a notable exception to this rule; however, with the ending of each of her marriages, she is able to move up the social ladder, which is her measure of success.

Most of the women characters discussed in this dissertation can be considered self-made women in one form or another. Jo March forges her own path by using her inheritance to start a school as equal partners with her husband; Perley Kelso and Sip Garth establish a cross-class friendship and devote their lives to helping others instead of following societal expectations to marry well. Phelps’s Avis Dobell finds success and fulfillment teaching art after the death of her husband, and Wharton’s Undine Spragg climbs the New York social ladder and ends up with her self-made man counterpart Elmer Moffatt among members of the coveted leisure class. Edna Pontellier and Lily Bart both fail at their attempts to step outside of what is expected of them. Both of these characters try to push back against the societal expectations and narrowly defined gender roles with varying degrees of success. Edna is able to briefly flaunt the rules, before deciding to end her life when she realizes she will not be able to live in her pigeon house forever. Lily is unable to support herself outside of the leisure-class circles, so when she is scandalized and forced out of her social circle she ends up dying in a boarding house. It’s important to note that the two characters who are unsuccessful in breaking free of societal expectations seemingly choose death over a life spent performing the role of leisure-class lady any longer.

While this dissertation has focused on the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, contemporary society, and women especially, is still ruled by codes of conduct and
societal expectations. These expectations and rules of conduct have changed over the past 150 years to keep up with the times; however, there are still numerous sources of advice to be found in newspapers, women’s magazines, and books. Most conduct books are categorized as self-help books now; some recent titles include Arianna Huffington’s *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder* (2014), Alexis Jones *I Am That Girl: How to Speak Your Truth, Discover Your Purpose, and #bethatgirl* (2014), and Sheryl Sandberg *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013). These three titles are aimed at women who want to set their own expectations, not be ruled by the expectations of others; however, these books still perpetuate a set of societal expectations and code of conduct—how to be your own authentic self.

Other recent books in the general conduct genre include domestic advice books such as Amy Sedaris’s *I Like You: Hospitality Under the Influence* (2006), Martha Stewart’s *Homekeeping Handbook: The Essential Guide to Caring for Everything in Your Home* (2006), and Cheryl Mendelson’s *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House* (2005). These books are more in line with books such as Beecher and Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home* and Child’s *The American Frugal Housewife* from the nineteenth century. Although Sedaris’s book has a tongue-in-cheek tone, it offers serious entertaining advice and recipes, while Stewart’s and Mendelson’s books continue the tradition of organization and cleaning advice for a happy and healthy home life. While these contemporary versions of conduct books have evolved over the past 150 years, the advice for the domestic sphere remains aimed at women, with the major change being in the authorship of these books. In the nineteenth century both men and women wrote advice manuals for women and now it is very uncommon for men to author these types of texts aimed at women. So women now have the linguistic power to formulate their own
ideology of womanhood, which nineteenth century women were striving for; however, this ideology of womanhood is not vastly different from that espoused in previous centuries—the ideal woman is still expected to be well-versed in domesticity and be interested in marriage and children. While contemporary women can more easily opt out of marriage and/or children, those who do are asked about their choices more so than men who opt out of marriage and/or children.

Much like nineteenth century texts that link conduct and self-madeness, the same link still exists in contemporary culture. This link between conduct and self-madeness is most clearly seen in the performance of gender and socioeconomic class. Unlike nineteenth century novels that show women being successfully self-made after leaving marriage, contemporary versions of self-made women do not necessarily marry since women can now own property and work in any field, unlike in the nineteenth century. Books such as Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* show women how to perform the role of a successful woman, by facing inherent gender differences in the business world head on—Sandberg advises women to take on projects they may not feel they can successfully execute and explains that the corporate ladder is more of a jungle gym with multiple paths to the top. However, Susan Faludi’s review of *Lean In* and its organization, LeanIn.org, shows that Sandberg’s advice is not all it seems to be. While Sandberg encourages women to push for success in their careers, she neglects to consider the personal ramifications of this advice—how the personal and family lives of these women may be negatively affected, and how she is reifying the gender norm of women always saying yes and taking on too much by encouraging them to “lean in.” Faludi recounts the Lowell Mills strike and how the millworkers, who were mainly women, connected “labor and women’s rights.” Unlike the Lowell Mill workers who unwittingly began what would become the woman’s movement of the late nineteenth century by focusing on the community of women and social reform instead of
focusing on the individual, Sandberg’s Lean In “argues that women need to break down ‘internal obstacles’ within themselves that are preventing them from moving up the work ladder” (Faludi). This strategy only works with a very select subset of women workers, namely those in higher ranking positions and those living well above the poverty line; for the working class woman worker “leaning in” may result in termination or be met with intimidation. Much like some of the nineteenth century conduct books, Sandberg’s contemporary version is not applicable to everyone.

While the popularity of conduct books as a genre may have waned over the years, advice columns and other sources of advice have remained part of publications and the genre is now called self-help, which is more inclusive of various types of advice texts. In addition to publications, social media websites, such as Pinterest, can act as a type of conduct or domestic advice text. The majority of Pinterest users are women and much of the content is focused on lifestyle, food, and fashion. Some of the advice pinned on this website calls back to advice given in nineteenth century conduct books; one example of this is the advice on alternate uses for a hanging shoe organizer which looks very similar to a drawing in Beecher and Stowe’s The American Woman’s Home. These similarities show how timeless some advice is in some instances. Because Beecher and Stowe’s book focused mainly on household advice, much of it is still applicable 135 years after The American Woman’s Home was first published. In addition to home organization advice, Pinterest is a plethora of parenting advice and activities for families. The ideals of motherhood and womanhood are in full display on the various pages of Pinterest and in recent books by Huffington, Sandberg, Sedaris, and Stewart. It is clear that codes of conduct and societal expectations are still part of the fabric of American culture, especially for women.
References


As Others See Us, or the Rules and Customs of Refined Homes and Polite Society.


Town, Caren J. “The House of Mirrors: Carrie, Lily and the Reflected Self.” Modern


