Title
Moral fictions: girlhood and the material Bible in the sentimental novel

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6443g6zd

Author
Schulz, Melissa N.

Publication Date
2010

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
Moral Fictions:
Girlhood and the Material Bible in the Sentimental Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Literatures in English

by

Melissa N. Schulz

Committee in charge:

Professor Stephen Cox, Chair
Professor Margaret Loose
Professor Shelley Streeby

2010
The Thesis of Melissa N. Schulz is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________ 
Chair

University of California, San Diego

2010
For my parents
Little girls of ten who wear diamond rings, and are persecuted by fond papas into brain fever because they have conscientious objections to reading moral fictions on the Sabbath day, and talk about their souls to the young gentlemen they are ultimately to marry, happily do not exist in this country, and we do not wish to import them.

*Editor of the British periodical, The Academy, reviewing Elsie Dinsmore, 1874*
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page........................................................................................................... iii
Dedication.................................................................................................................... iv
Epigraph..................................................................................................................... v
Table of Contents....................................................................................................... vi
List of Figures............................................................................................................. vii
Abstract..................................................................................................................... viii
Chapter One: Body, Bible and Power in Uncle Tom’s Cabin......................... 1
Chapter Two: Tactility and the Gender of Books in The Wide, Wide World .... 27
Chapter Three: The Visual Bible in Elsie Dinsmore................................. 43
Appendix.................................................................................................................... 58
Works Cited............................................................................................................... 60
LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1: “Mrs. Montgomery’s head sank upon the open page” ......................... 58
Fig. 2: Elsie pausing in the doorway .............................................................. 58
Fig. 3: Frontispiece to Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* .................... 59
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Moral Fictions:
Girlhood and the Material Bible in the Sentimental Novel

by

Melissa N. Schulz

Master of Arts in Literatures in English

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Stephen Cox, Chair

Sentimental novels, particularly those written by Hawthorne’s “damned mob of scribbling women” during the latter half of the nineteenth century, have often been read and dismissed for their overtly religious content and clumsy depictions of female emotion. Increasingly since the 1970s, however, the Bibles and psychologically tortured
young heroines that populate these novels have been reconsidered in light of feminist criticism. A handful of feminist critics have considered the Bible as a potentially transgressive text in the sentimental narrative, and have thus turned to readership to assess the dynamic between the sentimental heroine and her Bible. Such criticism has, however, consistently failed to address that dynamic on a material level. Recognizing that this failure represents a gap in literary scholarship, this thesis considers the physical interplay of three sentimental heroines and their Bibles: Eva of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Ellen of The Wide, Wide World, and Elsie of Elsie Dinsmore. In each case, the Bible is shown to perform vital cultural work both within and beyond the novel. For Eva, the Bible becomes a surrogate body that offers an avenue to power in spite of her physical weakness; for Ellen, it becomes a material analogue whose presence legitimizes her physical body in the eyes of the reader; for Elsie, it becomes a visual counterpart that underlines the attractiveness and visibility of her body. By reading the Bible in dialogue with the female body, this thesis works toward a reassessment of the Bible and femininity in the sentimental novel.
Chapter One:

Body, Bible, and Power in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

It has become a commonplace in criticism of sentimental literature to read feminine illness as a kind of power. This is especially true of readings of the prolonged death of Eva St. Clare of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which tend to gloss Eva’s long illness as either a narcissistic appeal to the reader’s sympathy or an instance of spiritual transcendence over the bodily—a period of the dying child’s special connectedness with God and thus special power to convert those around her.¹

This latter reading is supported by a Victorian conception of femininity that praised the delicate and the sickly in women. Instances of morally admirable but tragically ill women in Victorian fiction are many—Beth of *Little Women*, Hester of *Retribution*, Marian of *Aurora Leigh*, and Eva of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* are prominent examples. And, in real nineteenth-century medical practice, old-fashioned modesty along with lingering notions of female hysteria had given rise to a limited understanding of women’s health, one that reinforced literary and social norms that linked femininity with sickliness. However, this conception of femininity was complicated by at least two additional discourses that competed with Victorian medical theory for social attention: suffragist feminism, which worked to undermine the notion that a woman’s natural state was one of illness and that her natural place was in the home; and “domestic feminism”,

¹ For a helpful review of the major criticism on feminine illness as of 1993, including a concise statement of the two poles I discuss here, see Diane Price Herndl’s *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940*, especially the introduction.
which advocated for the strength of women’s bodies but also asserted that a woman’s place was in her home (Herndl 43-44). Thus, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the ailing American woman had become a rather ambivalent focal point for social discourse: she was an object of scrutiny for her doctor, a site of indignation for her suffragette peers, a figure for expressing the moral lessons of her domestic-feminist sisters, and, if she was lucky, an object of sympathy for her husband.

In each case, the ailing woman sits (or swoons) significantly at the center of discourse. Whatever she meant for her Victorian readers, it is clear that she meant something important. This has led contemporary critics to argue that, in Victorian literature, a dying woman held a certain “influence” over her audience, and that she could use her influence for good or evil, depending on the point of view of the critic. Thus, from the perspective of Ann Douglas, Eva St. Clare’s extended illness becomes a paradigm for the ambivalent, far-reaching power of the Victorian “pale and pious heroine” to flatter her reader’s narcissism and hasten the advent of American “camp” consumerism (Douglas 4-5). From the more optimistic perspective of Jane Tompkins, on the other hand, Eva’s illness and death comes to represent a “supreme form of heroism” that reenacts the redemptive death of Christ (Tompkins 127). Both critics argue that the domestic novel was a re-centering of cultural power around the home and the mother, but, for Tompkins, this re-centering happened through a radical subversion of male culture, not, as Douglas argues, through a sadly empty re-affirmation of commercial domesticity. Eva’s death, when read as an instance of heroic Christ-like sacrifice, becomes a dramatization of the positive power that Tompkins associates with Victorian womanhood.
Though these two readings differ in how they interpret the kind of power Eva gets from her illness, both underscore the notion that her power is directly connected with her bodily frailty. This notion, however, especially when applied to the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe, begs reconsideration. When read in the context of Stowe’s other published accounts of ideal womanhood, Eva’s physical weakness appears to perform a function that is decidedly not connected with any kind of feminine power. Stowe, herself a domestic feminist, conceived of feminine power in a way that, if it is to be assigned to any of the characters in *Uncle Tom*, is most rightfully attributed to Ophelia—the capable, disciplined, self-sufficient “rock” of the St. Clare household. Eva’s illness and consequent dependence upon others aligns her more with her hypochondriac mother, Marie—Ophelia’s antithesis—than with Ophelia, and so distances Eva from Stowe’s expressed ideas about feminine strength and power. In light of this, it is surprising that Eva’s inner qualities—her selflessness and piety—are very much in line with the qualities that Stowe values in a strong woman. But this is precisely what makes Eva so interesting: her physical body is rendered weak even in spite of her inner merits, which ought to make her strong from Stowe’s perspective. Even so, Eva’s frailty must be read as a defect in Stowe’s eyes—a body problem in need of a remedy—not a source of power or influence.

The first part of this chapter will refute the notion that Eva’s sickness can be read as an avenue to feminine power; the second will propose a solution to Eva’s body problem: a surrogate body that she finds in the pages of her New Testament. After a long process of assimilation that is as much physical as it is psychological, Eva’s body is, at the moment of her death, literally incorporated with her physical Bible. If there is power
to be found in the room where Eva dies, it is to be found in the capable bodies that surround her bed: her New Testament, but also Ophelia—Stowe’s idea of perfect domestic womanhood.

_The Lady Who Does Her Own Work_

Through a series of short essays published in _The Atlantic Monthly_ in 1864 (a decade after _Uncle Tom_), Stowe outlines her ideal of Victorian womanhood. In one of these essays, “The Lady Who Does Her Own Work,” Stowe’s narrator praises the bygone days of his grandparents—the era of homespun in the American northeast—as a time when a woman “did her own work”:

> Then were to be seen families of daughters, handsome, strong females, rising each day to their indoor work with cheerful alertness, —one to sweep the room, another to make the fire, while a third prepared the breakfast for the father and brothers who were going out to manly labor; and they chatted meanwhile of books, studies, embroidery, discussed the last new poem, or some historical topic started by graver reading, or perhaps a rural ball that was to come off the next week. They spun with the book tied to the distaff; they wove; they did all manner of fine needlework; they made lace, painted flowers, and, in short, in the boundless consciousness of activity, invention, and perfect health, set themselves to any work they had ever read or thought of. (186)

Stowe’s ideal woman here seems to anticipate the impossibly exhaustive (and exhausting) lifestyle of the modern working mother: she cooks, she cleans, she manages

---

2 As Nicole Tonkovich rightly points out in her introduction to the Beecher sisters’ domestic manual, _The American Woman’s Home_, Stowe’s idealization of “the lady who does her own work” is rather contradictory in light of the fact that Stowe herself relied on servants. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I set aside this contradiction. Here, Stowe’s projected ideal of womanhood (the ideal that emerged in her writings and influenced her readers) matters more than her actual practice.
the household, she spins and sews her own clothes, but she is also thoroughly well read, artistically talented, and able to converse intelligently on anything from literature to politics to neighborhood gossip. She does, in short, everything that a woman can and, according to Stowe, should do to be a well-rounded Victorian individual, and she does it all in perfect health. Of course, for any woman to manage to do all of the things that Stowe lays out for her, she must be in excellent health. The importance of physical robustness to mental sharpness (and vice versa) becomes more apparent in Stowe’s discussion of the working lady’s antithesis: “The Lady Who Keeps Servants.”

Another of the Atlantic essays, “The Lady Who Keeps Servants” provides a context within which Stowe can set her ideal of robust, homespun womanhood against its opposite. The lady who keeps servants, though outwardly enjoying every luxury of not having to do her own work, is in fact “tired to death of her fine establishment, and weighed down with the task of keeping the peace among her servants” (“Her Own Work” 189). For the lady who keeps servants, the responsibilities of managing a household of “domestics” become a greater strain on the mind than working her house with her own hands would be. Besides this psychological tiredness, keeping servants effects a physical deterioration in a woman that is, in Stowe’s assessment, the greatest pitfall of an inactive lifestyle. With a lessening of practical, domestic work “comes a physical delicacy, the result of an exclusive use of the brain and a neglect of the muscular system” which produces a race of “fragile, easily fatigued, languid girls of a modern age, drilled in book-learning, ignorant of common things” (“Servants” 197).

Through these passages, it becomes clear that Stowe is attempting to strike a balance between the intellectual adroitness that she stresses in “The Lady Who Does Her
own Work” and the empty “book-learning” that she condemns in the modern, “languid”
girl who keeps servants. There is a difference, for Stowe, between the kind of
intelligence that is acquired passively at school and the kind that is developed at home
through brisk labor. A woman can and should be intelligent, Stowe seems to say, but her
knowledge ought not be acquired at the expense of her physical vitality. An admirable
woman, in Stowe’s estimation, is the product of her domestic labor: she is strong,
capable, resourceful, and intelligent. A valueless woman—one who does not “do her
own work” and who is therefore something quite less than “whole”—is the product of the
servant-keeping household: she is the wilting, complaining, decorative flower of
Victorian popular conception.

In other words, she is Marie St. Clare of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Perhaps Stowe’s
harshest evaluation of Marie is her suggestion that, because of her selfishness, lack of
perception, and bodily delicacy, she is not even a “whole woman” (Uncle Tom 133).
Interestingly, Stowe uses the adjective “languid,” which she would later use to condemn
the “languid girls of the modern age,” to describe Marie, who is seen reclining,
“languidly holding in her hand an elegantly bound prayer-book” (Uncle Tom 242). It is
apparent in these instances that Stowe associates Marie with the servant-keeping lady she
would later describe in her essay. Indeed, as will be shown much more thoroughly
below, the lady who does her own work and the lady who keeps servants may be mapped,
fairly readily, onto Ophelia and Marie. Before this can be done, however, it is necessary
to pause at one more of the Atlantic essays, “The Cathedral,” and consider the apex of
Stowian womanhood: Aunt Esther, who is figured, importantly, through the image of a
cathedral.
Aunt Esther is Stowe’s ideal of domestic sainthood. She is, of course, a woman, moreover a woman who does her own work, but she bears additional qualities that elevate her even above the lady who does her own work. The narrator of “The Cathedral” fondly remembers Esther, the “patron saint of the sick-room,” as a kindly, spinster aunt, and as an indispensable family nurse. Through Esther, Stowe adds to the intelligence, self-sufficiency, and physical strength of the lady who does her own work the qualities of selflessness, modest dress, rigid yet apparently effortless domestic order, an affinity for children and a facility for nursing the sick. Whereas Stowe praises the lady who does her own work as an ideal of self-reliant femininity, she renders Esther positively holy:

“When I build my cathedral, that woman,” I said, pointing to a small painting by the fire, “shall be among the first of my saints. You see her there, in an every-day dress-cap with a mortal thread-lace border, and with a very ordinary worked collar, fastened by a visible and terrestrial breastpin. There is no nimbus around her head, no sign of the cross upon her breast; her hands are clasped on no crucifix or rosary. Her clear, keen, hazel eye looks as if it could sparkle with mirthfulness, as in fact it could; there are in it both the subtle [sic] flash of wit and the subdued light of humor; and though the whole face smiles, it has yet a certain decisive firmness that speaks the soul immutable in good. That woman shall be the first saint in my cathedral, and her name shall be recorded as Saint Esther.” (204)

It is important to note the everydayness of Esther in this passage. Esther bears all the marks of an ordinary domestic woman: plain, homespun clothing; eyes more remarkable for their expression of inner qualities than for their beauty; a style of dress and a physical appearance that suggest domesticity, ordinariness, and this-worldliness. Yet Esther also has an unmistakable aura of holiness—“a certain decisive firmness that speaks the soul immutable in good”—that rests mysteriously “in” her physical eye and
face. Esther’s real strength, her sainthood, is in that firmness that emanates from her ordinary physical form. She is, above all, selfless, but also physically capable of giving herself completely to every person that needs her. This fusion of the holy with the everyday in the strong body of a woman (here Aunt Esther) is central to Stowe’s domestic feminist project: what makes Esther saintly is her willingness and physical ability to give herself completely to everyone around her; what makes her saintliness important is the sheer strength and domesticity of her body. In other words, Esther’s sainthood claims holy power for the home and for the body of the domestic woman.

But Esther’s sainthood—her power, we might say—does not derive solely from her physical body: it is also important to consider Stowe’s use of architecture as a device to characterize Esther. “I am going to build a cathedral one of these days,” begins the narrator, whose argument will be to justify his canonization of Esther and consequently his placement of her image inside his cathedral. The cathedral, as a traditional framing device, is a convenient way for Stowe’s narrator to begin talking about Esther in the context of holiness: she is literally inside a holy building. But the cathedral ceases to be a simple framing device in the final lines of the essay: “It is of souls thus sculptured and chiseled by self-denial and self-discipline that the living temple of the perfect hereafter is to be built” (214, emphasis added). The temple is to be built of souls like Esther’s, not with material somehow like those souls. Stowe’s use, here, of the metaphorical “is” and not the simulative “is like” clearly moves the cathedral from the tangible, visible world of pure architecture to the realm of women’s bodies: “souls,” such as Esther’s, that are “sculptured and chiseled” to resemble the marble façade of the Milan Cathedral, the catalyst for the narrator’s discussion.
Stowe’s intense, metaphorical “is” marks a significant distinction between her reference to the Milan Cathedral at the beginning of the essay and her use of architectural language at the end. The narrator begins with the casual, rather fanciful, “When my stocks in cloud-land rise, I’ll build a cathedral larger than Milan’s” (203). However, by the final lines of the essay, this casual attitude has become an earnest commendation of women whose souls are *built* like Esther’s. In the narrator’s last statement, these souls are not to be loosely equated with the material out of which the “living temple of the perfect hereafter is to be built,” they are that material. Esther is no longer simply inside the cathedral: she is the cathedral.

Esther’s close association with an inanimate object is not unique among Stowe’s female characters. In *Uncle Tom* alone we see women linked to varying degrees with locks of hair, “images”, money, and pieces of music, among other household items. Nor is it unusual in literature to see a woman characterized by means of a building, though normally that building is a house. The woman-as-house trope occurs in texts at least as early as the Talmudic period—undoubtedly earlier—and was especially relevant among the famously domestic Victorians. That Esther is imaged through a building so holy and *public* as a cathedral is unusual and certainly worthy of much further investigation, but

---

3 Eva associates herself with her hair in her famously Eucharistic death-bed scene (*Uncle Tom* 249-252); Topsy is an “image” at least twice (209, 218); Marie “consisted of a fine figure, a pair of splendid eyes, and a hundred thousand dollars” (133), and describes herself as “a poor, feeble piece” (151) which, on the next page, becomes “piece after piece” of music (152).

4 For an interesting discussion of rabbinic conceptions of the female body as a “house” complete with “chambers” and “vestibules”, see Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert’s essay, “The Woman as House: Conceptions of Women’s Corporeality in Talmudic Literature”.
for now let it be enough to say that her characterization is not unprecedented, particularly in Stowe’s work. Esther—the strong, hard-working, holy woman that is a (holy) building—has an antecedent in Stowe’s Ophelia.

Ophelia

“And now, while the distant domes and spires of New Orleans rise to our view, there is yet time for an introduction to Miss Ophelia” (Uncle Tom’s Cabin 135). These lines mark the beginning of a long, fairly oblique description of one of the principal characters in Uncle Tom: Ophelia, Eva’s father’s domestically accomplished cousin and New England transplant to the St. Clare household. The description picks up immediately after the passage quoted above by turning abruptly away from Ophelia to discuss the objects that have comprised her material life. In all, Stowe’s rendering of Ophelia’s material life spans two full pages, but only in the last two sentences do we actually see Ophelia in her human form. Until then, she is (or, more accurately, she is made to exist through) a rigidly ordered New England farm-house; a “respectable old bookcase” that holds an appropriate collection of historical, literary, and theological volumes; a series of conversations among members of her community; and, finally, a scandalously large traveling wardrobe which consists of “two new silk dresses and a bonnet” and, so the rumor goes, “a hemstitched pocket-handkerchief” (135-137).

Once we are thoroughly acquainted with the objects that make up Ophelia’s material life, and which seem to construct her identity insofar as it matters for the reader, we glimpse the woman herself in the following passage:
Miss Ophelia, as you now behold her, stands before you, in a very shining brown linen traveling-dress, tall, square-formed, and angular. Her face was thin, and rather sharp in its outlines; the lips compressed, like those of a person who is in the habit of making up her mind definitely on all subjects; while the keen, dark eyes had a peculiarly searching, advised movement, and traveled over everything, as if they were looking for something to take care of. (137)

Ophelia’s rigidity is particularly striking in these lines, but what is perhaps more interesting is the openness of Stowe’s descriptors. Words like “tall,” “square-formed,” “angular,” “thin,” “sharp,” “compressed,” and “keen” are certainly intended to express, by describing the visible features of her body, Ophelia’s blunt New-England practicality. But the juxtaposition of these descriptors with Ophelia’s traveling-dress in the first sentence is too apparent to be ignored. Every adjective that is used to describe Ophelia could just as easily describe her “very shining brown” dress—just as it would not be a stretch to imagine Ophelia herself as shining, if not brown (though she does share important qualities, particularly her ability to do household work, with the strong, black women of the narrative). Ophelia and her dress seem to merge in this passage: Ophelia wears the dress, but the dress also “wears” the qualities that Ophelia possesses. The effect is that the woman and the object are made to exist paradoxically next to and within one another: Ophelia is the dress, the dress is Ophelia, Ophelia and the dress are tall, angular, sharp, compressed, perfect embodiments of Stowe’s femininity.5

---

5 The duality that emerges is an enticing reflection of the holy trinity. The same kind of logic that is necessary to conceptualize Ophelia and her dress as distinct entities that co-inhabit one body-idea is applied, in Christian theology, to explain the simultaneous distinction and sameness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Of course, this reasoning goes farther into heretical territory than Stowe probably intended; nonetheless, it is worth considering the extent to which the parallel holds up.
Ophelia’s double status as object-hybrid and perfect woman points to her participation in two important themes in *Uncle Tom*: first, it demonstrates her domestic sainthood, and thus thoroughly distances her from Marie, Stowe’s quintessential “lady who keeps servants”; second, Ophelia’s relationship with her traveling dress is part of a pattern in the novel in which objects become bodily extensions or even bodily surrogates for the characters they attend. Eva’s surrogate body—her Bible—is perhaps the most important (and most interesting) bodily surrogate that we see in *Uncle Tom*, but there are others. Before these can be addressed, it is necessary to consider why Eva needs a surrogate body in the first place. If Eva clearly stands out as a moral exemplar in the story, moreover as the kind of moral exemplar (the dying kind) that garners the most sympathy and thus—according to prevailing scholarship—ought to have the most influence in a Victorian sentimental novel, why does she need an object to augment her power? The answer lies with Ophelia.

Ophelia’s physical strength should already indicate that she represents the kind of womanhood that Stowe values in “The Lady Who Keeps Servants,” but it is her almost compulsive desire to care for others—“the keen, dark eyes had a peculiarly searching, advised movement, and traveled over everything, *as if they were looking for something to take care of*”—that firmly aligns her with the domestic sainthood that Stowe illustrates in “The Cathedral.” Ophelia’s primary function in the narrative is to be the woman-in-charge of the St. Clare household, and later to nurse Eva in her illness. She supplants Marie—who, incidentally, tends to be seen among rather more delicate objects: expensive jewelry, vinaigrettes, fans, “an elegantly bound prayer-book”—as the *de facto*
mother the household, and promptly begins to mother everyone around her. As Marie becomes more shrilly hypochondriacal and retreats from her role as Eva’s mother, Ophelia gets stronger, more adept at managing the household, and more able to love and care for both Eva and the profoundly unmotherable Topsy. When the critical moment of Eva’s death arrives, it is Ophelia, “who had resolved to sit up all night with her charge,” who notices “the change” (256); Marie, rushing in at the last second, utters a fragment of an exclamation, and is abruptly hushed by her husband.

In this moment, each woman’s position in the novel is crystallized: Ophelia represents everything that Stowe values in a woman—strength, resourcefulness, an ability to nurse and an affinity for the weak; Marie is everything that Stowe despises. Eva, lying rather helplessly between them, doesn’t seem to fall completely into either woman’s category. Her body, like Marie’s, is compromised, but her inner qualities—selflessness, earnestness, a capacity to love—seem to excel even Ophelia in terms of saintliness. Eva, as Diane Price Herndl notes, is one extreme of “mid-century representations of the female invalid,” as she “endures her illness without complaint, more concerned with those who will be left suffering after her death than with herself” (51). It is Eva’s perfect selflessness—not the sympathy she might garner through her illness—that compels those around her (and presumably Stowe’s readers as well) to do what she urges them to do: pray, read the Bible, and love one another. Eva’s bodily frailty is an obstacle to her compassion, not an advantage. When Eva dies, the possibility of fulfilling her two greatest desires—freeing her father’s slaves and converting her father—dies with her.

Thus Eva’s illness must be seen to represent a profound weakness for Stowe. Though it is tempting to read her illness as an expression of the purest, most selflessly
pious and thus strongest mode of femininity, such a reading is impossible in the context of Stowe’s conceptions of feminine strength. Eva, unlike Ophelia and unlike Esther, lacks the body that she needs in order to wield real power in the immediate world that Stowe creates for her. Fortunately however, Eva is not left floundering. In place of Eva’s dying body, Stowe offers up a surrogate.

Tom and Eva

Tom and Eva—Stowe’s “two dying Christs,” as one critic has aptly named them (Steele 85)—are key participants in Stowe’s pattern of merging people with objects. At a crucial moment in the narrative and in his life as a slave, Tom literally becomes a trinity of body, Bible, and pocketbook; throughout the novel and her life, Eva cannot exist apart from her Bible. Documents play a foundational role in the lives of both characters, and, as we shall see, both Tom and Eva are profoundly implicated—through the powerful documents they incorporate—in the economy of literacy that underwrote both the slave economy and religion in the Victorian South. Papers—slave papers, free papers, newspapers, checks, bills of sale, letters, and printed posters advertising runaways—grounded in material reality the abstract legal system that legitimated slavery, and papers made possible the continuation of that reality. Paper also comprised the holy object that sat (and arguably still sits) at the center of Southern Protestantism: the Bible. To be a slave or a woman in the ante-bellum South, and to have any kind of power, one had to depend on paper.
Tom’s purchase by Augustine St. Clare—Eva’s father—demonstrates the importance of paper in the Southern slave economy and in Tom’s life as a slave. At the moment of his purchase, St. Clare bargains with Haley, the slave trader, over the price of Tom’s body and, more literally, over his pocketbook, which lies open between them:

There stood […] St. Clare, carelessly leaning one elbow on a bale of cotton, while a large pocket-book lay open before him. […] He was listening, with a good-humored, negligent air, half comic, half contemptuous, to Haley, who was very volubly expiating on the quality of the article for which they were bargaining.

“All the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco, complete!” he said, when Haley had finished. “Well now, my good fellow, what’s the damage, as they say in Kentucky; in short, what’s to be paid out for this business?” (Uncle Tom 128-129)

After a good deal of “banter” and more punning on the salability of religion and the eternal power of documents—“if you can assure me that I really can buy this kind of pious [Tom], and that it will be set down to my account in the book up above […] I wouldn’t care if I did [pay] a little extra for it”—Haley and St. Clare settle on a price, and Haley, taking out his own “greasy pocket-book,” fills out a bill of sale. With this bill, Tom’s life and future are handed over to St. Clare, whose now legal ownership of Tom—something that is, in reality, rather abstract—becomes, through the signing and exchange of the document, a tangible, powerful fact.

But the document also “becomes” Tom (or Tom becomes the document) in a way that recalls Ophelia’s incorporation of her traveling dress. St. Clare’s remark—all the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco—has the effect of a triple utterance: it simultaneously signifies St. Clare’s pocketbook, the black body he is about to purchase, and a Bible. “Morocco,” aside from being a sly reference to Tom’s “exotic” African heritage, is a type of expensive leather made from goatskin. The assumption, of course,
is that St. Clare’s pocketbook is made from this type of leather. St. Clare’s sardonic jesting throughout the rest of the conversation about his ability to purchase religious salvation by buying a pious slave suggests that a kind of ironic virtue rests in the buying power of his checks—the pages that are “bound” in his pocketbook. Thus, on a literal level, it is the pocketbook that possesses in its cash potential “all the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco.”

“Black morocco,” however, can also indicate Tom’s black skin. St. Clare’s remark punctuates Haley’s speech about “the quality of the article for which they were bargaining”—Tom. Tom, here an article, thus already seems to bear the mark of a document. As a kind of document, Tom’s various qualities as a slave are encased—are bound—inside his black skin, which is available for purchase because an African slave trade (if Morocco may stand synecdochically for Africa in this passage) bound the bodies of his ancestors. It seems that is Tom, then, who possesses “all the moral and Christian virtues bound in black morocco.”

But the utterance bears up under yet another interpretation. A leather-bound Bible—by far the most popular kind of Bible in America, even after the advent of cloth binding in the 1820s (Gutjahr 43)—would certainly contain “all the moral and Christian virtues” that St. Clare describes, and could resemble the black object to which he refers—indeed, a Bible is perhaps the most obvious and fitting object for St. Clare’s remark. However, as we have seen, a Bible is not the only possible object. St. Clare’s comment must be read for all three of its meanings simultaneously: the pocketbook, Tom, and the Bible must all exist in the same object-idea at the same time.
Thus, once again, Stowe has fused one of her characters with a meaningful object. Tom’s incorporation of two powerful documents—a Bible and a pocketbook—bespeaks his precarious situation in the story: he is, by the force of his slave papers, utterly under the authority of his master, but he also holds a certain power potential—similar to the cash potential in St. Clare’s pocketbook—in the next life. Tom has consistently been read as a Christ figure, and the double meaning of his bounded-ness in this world and to the next fits nicely with this reading. If the slave is a powerless figure, Tom’s fusion with objects that underscore his earthly subjection but enhance his power in heaven is a way to establish some measure of Christly power in the body of the slave. His three-fold body is, in other words, a citation of the famously empowering verse: so the last will be first, and the first last (Matt. 20:16).

Any reading of Uncle Tom that acknowledges Stowe’s adherence to Christian theology and evangelism will recognize that Eva, too, embodies this verse—which is to recognize the unique, corporeal relationship that Eva carries on with her Bible. This relationship begins with Tom. Because Tom is mostly illiterate, Eva reads his Bible to him, and gradually develops her own keen interest in it. As her readership develops, Eva’s spiritual or philosophical interest in her Bible quickly turns physical. Whereas “at first, she read to please her humble friend,”

soon her own earnest nature threw out its tendrils, and wound itself around the majestic book; and Eva loved it, because it woke in her strange yearnings, and strong, dim emotions, such as impassioned, imaginative children love to feel. (UTC 224)
The curious image of Eva’s “earnest nature” throwing out its “tendrils” and winding itself around the book that awakens “strange yearnings, and strong, dim emotions” is weirdly sexual in the pious context of Eva’s character. Sexual or not, this passage is the first indication that Eva is growing physically into her Bible. One imagines two organic bodies intertwining with one another in a slow, smooth dance that leaves both permanently altered. And Eva is forever changed by her experience with Tom’s Bible. As she reads it, she develops a special interest in Revelation, “whose dim and wondrous images, and fervent language, impressed her the more,” and, it seems, whose mode of perceiving the world through the lens of apocalypse injects itself into her experience of the physical world.

The paradoxical language of Revelation already contains the idea of multiple entities co-existing in one object or idea that enables Eva effectively to inhabit her Bible. Revelation plays with linguistic representations of time and space in order to accommodate the eternality of the world it describes in the following passage, which depicts “four living creatures” who

day and night they never cease to sing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne […] the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. (Rev. 4:8-10)

Here the individual moment (“whenever the living creatures give glory”) exists in the same action and at the same time as eternity (“day and night they never cease to sing […] to] him who lives for ever and ever”). The second action occurs “whenever” the first action does, but the first action is always and forever occurring. To conceptualize the scene that is being described, the reader must hold in mind two conflicting ideas—the
momentary and the eternal—at the same time. When one does this, Revelation seems to suggest, one begins to glimpse eternity: the world of a God that continually creates time but is also beyond time.

The same kind of logic applies to voice in Revelation, where “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angels speak in a single voice (Rev. 5:11-12), and where the voice of Christ sounds at once “like the sound of thunder” and like “harpers playing on their harps” (Rev. 14.2). Images such as these demand that the reader shift into a different mode of understanding, one that accepts Revelation’s “both and” reasoning along with its vision of the apocalypse—“what is, and is to take place hereafter” (Rev. 1:19). Indeed, the reader readily makes this shift because the content of Revelation is, within Christian theology, so important. Eva “question[s] vainly of [its] meaning,” but she does not doubt its importance, and does not hesitate to read its symbolism as a profound yet unknown language whose meaning will be revealed to her “when she passes beyond the veil” (UTC 224-225).

Eva’s symbolic reading of Revelation is, in fact, quite a natural way to read the book. Revelation demands that its images be interpreted symbolically, and, beyond this, that the world outside of it be read for its symbolic, apocalyptic meaning. Scholars and ordinary readers have attempted to decode the universe according to Revelation for centuries, and this is precisely what Eva does once she gets a taste of it. After she first reads Revelation in Tom’s Bible, and increasingly as her body declines, Eva perceives herself in a revelatory mode: she becomes part of the story of the gospel and apocalypse, and she understands the world around her as though she were looking at it from inside her
Bible. Thus, in the famous scene in which Eva first foretells her death to Tom, she glimpses an image directly out of Revelation:

It was Sunday evening, and Eva’s Bible lay open on her knee. She read,—“And I saw a sea of glass, mingled with fire.”

“Tom,” said Eva, suddenly stopping, and pointing to the lake, “there ’tis.”

“What, Miss Eva?”

“Don’t you see,—there?” said the child, pointing to the glassy water, which as it rose and fell, reflected the golden glow of the sky. “There’s a ‘sea of glass, mingled with fire.’” (226)

Eva’s Christ-like ability to foresee her own death in this scene has often been noted (Steele 85; Smith 317), but what has been overlooked is her strangely biblical perspective. In Revelation, the speaker sees something that “appear[s] to be a sea of glass mingled with fire” (Rev. 15:2); Eva sees a real “sea” (a lake) and interprets it symbolically as the much more abstract image from the book. While Revelation works to bring the abstract world of apocalypse closer to the reader by rendering it through a familiar image from nature, Eva’s intent is in the opposite direction: she sees the real, concrete objects around her as belonging to the abstract, highly symbolic world of Revelation.

Eva’s “vision” occurs shortly after her initial intermingling with Tom’s Bible, and after her passionate, physical involvement with Revelation has been made clear. Like so many others who have read Revelation and attempted to carry its logic into the material world, Eva is reading the lake as though it—and she—were part of the visionary universe described in the book. This reading of Eva is importantly different from other readings that have cast her as a kind of Christ figure: Eva is not, or at least she does not perceive herself to be, a Christ-like figure living out a fate similar to Christ’s in the present world;
she is and she remains Eva, but, as she inculcates herself physically into her Bible, she begins to act out the story within it. This story happens to be largely the story of Christ, but also that of the apocalypse.

The trope of a child “diving in” to a favorite book and living among the characters she finds there is a common one, and this is essentially what is happening with Eva and her Bible. As her physical body weakens, she takes natural comfort in the New Testament’s promise of a glorious afterlife, and she begins to spend more and more time reading—perhaps “communing” with her Bible in very intimate sessions that subvert the real world and allow Eva to inhabit the world of the book. In these sessions, Eva lives “in that book” (239). She interacts with, rather than reads, the Christ she meets there, who

had ceased to be an image and a picture of the distant past, and come to be a living, all-surrounding reality. His love enfolded her childish heart with more than mortal tenderness; and it was to Him, she said, she was going, and to his home. (239)

Clearly, Eva is no longer just reading her Bible. Stowe’s language seems rather to indicate that Eva has stopped reading altogether and is now experiencing the text as a “living, all-surrounding reality.” From this perspective, what have been read as Eva’s Christ-like actions—her all-white wardrobe, her frequent prophesies of her own death, her self-identification as a suffering martyr, her serenely assured departure from this world (Steele 85-86)—become visible reverberations of the world she is experiencing

*inside* her Bible.
But what, one might ask, does Eva’s “diving in” to the pages of her Bible have to do with her bodily power (or lack thereof)? The answer is simple: just as Tom’s connection to his Bible is a way of establishing his heavenly power here on earth, Eva’s special fusion with her Bible allows her to do things—to have the power to do things that those around her cannot. Eva’s conversion of Topsy is a clear and dramatic example of the kind of power that her incorporation of her Bible has afforded her.

After weeks of unsuccessful mothering on the part of Ophelia, Topsy has finally broken Ophelia’s resolve by neglecting an assigned task (hymn study) and cutting up one of Ophelia’s bonnets to make dolls’ clothes. Exasperated, Ophelia tells St. Clare that Topsy is a lost cause, and that she will no longer exhaust herself trying to save her. “Why,” says St. Clare, importantly, “if your Gospel is not strong enough to save one heathen child, that you can have at home here, all to yourself, what’s the use of sending one or two poor missionaries off with it among thousands of just such?” (245). The critique of missionary work is clear, but what is more interesting is St. Clare’s reference to “your Gospel.” The problem, it seems, does not lie with the gospel in general, but with Ophelia’s particular version of it. Earlier, Eva had been described as St. Clare’s “little gospel” (158); here, St. Clare’s statement seems to suggest that someone else’s gospel—perhaps Eva’s—is needed to save Topsy and the other “heathen.”

The idea that the gospel can be owned or appropriated, or that it could be different depending on who owns it, should not be surprising in light of Stowe’s use of object identification elsewhere in the novel and in her other writings. Indeed, Eva’s particular gospel turns out to be exactly what is needed to convert Topsy. While Ophelia and St. Clare are talking, Eva confronts Topsy—in a reading room, of all places—and delivers
her own gospel: an abbreviated version of the Beatitudes, supplemented by another Christly foretelling of her pending death:

“O, Topsy, poor child, I love you!” said Eva, with a sudden burst of feeling, and laying her little thin, white hand on Topsy’s shoulder; “I love you, because you haven’t had any father, or mother, or friends;—because you’ve been a poor, abused child! I love you, and I want you to be good. I am very unwell, Topsy, and I think I shan’t live a great while; and it really grieves me, to have you be so naughty. I wish you would try to be good, for my sake;—it’s only a little while I shall be with you.” (245)

With this brief speech, “a ray of real belief, a ray of heavenly love, [penetrates] the darkness of [Topsy’s] heathen soul,” and Eva, “like the picture of some bright angel stooping to reclaim a sinner,” revels in her evangelistic power.

In a poignant coda to this scene, Eva is seen “reclining,—her Bible half open, her little transparent fingers lying listlessly between the leaves” as though sharing in its life force (247). Her posture calls to mind a familiar scene in Victorian painting, that of the beautiful young woman reclining on her settee, her face pale and serene, and her hand limply grasping some graceful object—a bouquet of flowers, a letter. An aura of tranquility envelops her, and it is suggested that, even if she can get up, she doesn’t need to. Stowe’s depiction of Eva in this posture is perhaps an allusion to this reclining woman of Victorian art, but with an important twist. The object that attends Eva is her Bible, and she does not limply grasp it, she is infused with it. Her “transparent fingers” and the organic “leaves” of her Bible seem to grow together: the channels between the woman and the object are open, and something important is being exchanged.

But what, we ask, is passing in the exchange? The temptation is to alter the image and replace Eva’s Bible with some other object. Suppose Eva carries out her symbiotic
relationship not with her Bible, but with a different kind of book. Suppose she is never seen without her faded, dog-eared copy of a more secular (though no less popular) book: Fanny Fern’s 1854 short-story collection, *Little Ferns for Fanny’s Little Friends*—certainly recommended reading for a child Eva’s age at mid-century, and, as Fern notes, a child’s “little heart, like a delicate vine, will throw out its tendrils for something to lean on” (37, emphasis in original). So, suppose Eva throws out her tendrils for *Little Ferns*: she reads meaningful selections to Tom, she recites her favorite passages in the same mesmeric tones that she might use to quote Bible verses, and she urges her father’s slaves to take comfort in the book that she finds so comforting. What is the effect?

Perhaps it is a bolstering of Eva’s identity. It is not uncommon for a child to appropriate an object—a favorite book, or, more recently, a movie, pop star or television series—as she constructs her identity. Today, bedroom walls plastered with posters of a favorite celebrity or character often mark a critical period of obsession in a child’s life, a few fragile years when the child’s own developing identity needs the supplement of a stronger, more clearly defined object. A book like *Little Ferns*—one that is already approved for children, moreover one that explicitly tells children how to be good children—would fill Eva’s need for object identification at this stage in her life. She might even “infuse” with it as she does with her Bible, and she might thus draw a kind of fortifying power from *Little Ferns*. But, that power transfer would end in Eva’s body and identity.

There is a significant difference in the sentimental novel between the power of the Bible and that of a secular book like *Little Ferns*: the power that Eva draws from her Bible, unlike that which she might get from another book, extends beyond her own
identity: whatever power Eva gets from her Bible, she gives back to it in equal measure. The Bible comes to Eva already bearing several centuries of cultural power, and it is this power that leads those around her to understand her earnest attraction to it as evidence of her piety, her otherworldly wisdom and thus her authority to instruct them in Christian salvation. Eva’s Bible does not merely shore up her childlike identity; it reaches through her and touches those around her as well. And the Bible gets a measure of power back from its adorable “Little Evangelist”: Eva—sweet, beautiful, pure, and pious—is a palatable package for Stowe’s Christian, abolitionist message. Eva’s Bible, all by itself, contains the potential for conversion, but its power is not activated until Eva takes it up and delivers it.

The evangelical function of the sentimental novel is often cited as way to explain the staggering popularity of a genre that many argue offered relatively little in the way of literary merit to its largely Christian audience—hence Eva, Stowe’s rather insipid “little evangelist.” But *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, with its driving plot and comparatively compelling characters, is perhaps the best example of a sentimental novel that offered its readers a decent (if not artistically superior) read. Eva might not be the complex, three-dimensional heroine that one looks for in a work of high art, but her appeal as a beautiful, sympathetic child is apparent even to the modern reader. More importantly, Eva performed vital cultural work for her Victorian audience: she was an exemplar of “good” Victorian femininity, an irresistible advocate for abolition, and a centerpiece for Stowe’s evangelistic message. As the next two chapters will demonstrate, Eva was not the only little girl to “package” and deliver a Christian message for a sentimental audience, though
she may have been then most interesting. In 1850—two years before Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—American readers encountered the plain, pious, yet bafflingly alluring Ellen Montgomery in Susan Warner’s epic of domestic girlhood, *The Wide, Wide World*. Warner’s novel, which spans 569 pages (excluding a final, unpublished chapter) and almost five years of Ellen’s life, is productively different from *Uncle Tom* insofar as it offers a physically healthy female protagonist who nevertheless clings to her Bible in much the same way as the dying Eva clings to hers. Whereas Eva’s spiritual development occurs on and through her visible (and markedly beautiful) body, Ellen’s struggle is largely psychological: she must learn to temper her emotional responses to an unjust world and develop a quiet, persistent devotion to her God. Even so, Ellen’s tangible body takes on a significant role in Warner’s novel, particularly when it becomes associated with her Bible. If we read Eva as existing somehow *within* her Bible, we might read Ellen as existing in a similarly important way *next to* hers.
Chapter Two:
Tactility and the Gender of Books in *The Wide, Wide World*

Ellen Montgomery selects her “little red Bible” after an ecstatic and highly sensual perusal of every Bible in the bookshop. Surrounded by the “delicious smell of new books,” Ellen “[flies] to the place […] where a dozen different Bibles [are] displayed,” “throw[s] off her light bonnet,” and, “with flushed cheek and sparkling eye,” pours “in ecstasy over [the] varieties of type and binding,” “very evidently in love with them all” (*The Wide, Wide World* 29-30). As scholars of sentimental fiction have often noted, the passion that Ellen displays in this episode is striking, particularly in light of the fact that it is unchecked by her mother, a paragon of female restraint, who nevertheless “gaze[s]” at her daughter “with rising emotions of pleasure and pain,” not rebuke (30). At every other point in the brief narrative of Ellen’s life with her mother, Mrs. Montgomery’s primary concern has been to instill in Ellen the value of commanding her emotions and humbly submitting herself to God’s will. This lesson—which will resume just as soon as Ellen leaves the bookshop—reflects the larger narrative arc of *The Wide, Wide World*, as well as the didactic aim of the sentimental genre more generally: Ellen—like any good, Christian little girl—must learn to give herself completely to God and to the service of those around her; she must strive to forget her worldly concerns, to stifle her passionate responses to the daily injustices of her life, and, above all, to take to heart her mother’s now famous command: “though we *must* sorrow, we must not rebel” (12).
Of course, Ellen’s excited response to the Bibles in the bookshop is not strictly a rebellion, but it does contain many of the markers that Victorian mothers, ministers and conduct manuals associated with dangerous, passionate activity not fit for girls. Conduct manuals represented shopping in particular as a fraught pursuit through which a young girl might fall victim to the insidious allure of frivolous objects, aimless pleasures, and reckless self-indulgence (Merish 73). Had it been depicted in a conduct manual, Ellen’s frantic reaction to the sights and smells of the bookshop might have served as a cautionary tale against indulgent shopping, as it seems to indicate exactly the kind of physical, self-focused arousal that a girl in Ellen’s situation must strive to suppress.

According to the strictures of Victorian etiquette and morality, Ellen should not get so excited, especially over an object, and especially in a store. Mrs. Montgomery’s approving reaction to Ellen’s display in the bookshop is thus quite perplexing—why does she permit Ellen to shop with such zeal?

One answer to this question may lie in the object of Ellen’s shopping. A Bible was not a “frivolous object” in Victorian America—on the contrary, it was an intensely important text, a vessel for Christian improvement and an indispensable attendant to a young girl’s developing femininity. Ellen’s selection of her Bible marks a turning point in her young adulthood: now in possession of a Bible just like her mother’s, Ellen is ready to begin a spiritual journey that will bring her out of her girlish passions and into a restrained, pious womanhood. *The Wide, Wide World* is often described as a

---

6 It might be argued that Ellen’s passionate outburst is a way of channeling the anger that she feels at her pending separation from her mother, anger that she is not permitted to express in any other way. Channeling this anger into excitement over a Bible may be a small rebellion, but, given that Ellen’s options are often painfully limited, even a small outburst bears important emotional weight.
bildungsroman that tracks Ellen’s development from childhood to a mature Christian womanhood; as Ellen’s display in the bookshop occurs very early in this development, it might be excused as a starting place for her growth—not an example of correct behavior. Additionally, Ellen’s behavior might be condoned because her passion is directed toward a sanctified object. Later in the narrative, when Ellen is asked to purchase some merino for a new dress at a department store, she displays a discomfort in the shopping environment that clearly marks her as unfamiliar with and even disdainful toward the empty pleasures of purchasing vain objects (WWW 45-48). Ellen’s distress in the department store is in sharp contrast with her ecstasy at the bookshop. If these two episodes are intended to teach proper female behavior, as such episodes in sentimental novels often were (Merish 119), the reader of The Wide, Wide World clearly perceives correct Christian behavior in both.

Neither of these answers, however, fully accounts for the sheer sensuality of Ellen’s encounters with her Bible, both in the bookshop and throughout the rest of the narrative. Ellen’s Bible exists for her as more than a holy text or a catalyst for her developing womanhood, and the attentive reader (the reader who is as engaged with the narrative as Ellen is with the books she reads) can’t help but notice that Ellen receives a degree of condoned, sensual pleasure from her encounters with her Bible. Apart from being a textual lesson in spirituality and correct womanhood, Ellen’s Bible is a tactile object that constitutes an important part of her material life. In moments of despair, Ellen “[sinks] her head upon” her Bible (WWW 413), her “tears drop down upon it” (342), and, in illness, Ellen’s Bible lies comfortingly near her in her bed (207). Ellen’s Bible, hymnbook, and her copies of Pilgrim’s Progress and even Life of Washington become
her companions in cloistered moments of private readership—charged moments of touching and meditation that often have little to do with reading. Even Ellen’s affectionate referencing of her “little red Bible” suggests a pun on “red” that diminishes the status of the book’s “little-read” text, pointing instead toward its meaningful presence in Ellen’s life, hands, and bed (279, 370).

The material fact of the Bible in Ellen’s life is an important and, as of yet, little explored dynamic that is poised to re-cast Ellen’s femininity as something far more tactile and far less submissive than that of the pious, transcendent heroine of Victorian repute. Beginning with her passionate perusal in the bookshop, Ellen maintains a tactile relationship with her Bible that opens up a space of physical engagement within a feminine ideal that impels her to read and even feel (within certain parameters), but never to touch. The material and, as I will argue, gendered Bible reworks the sexual economy that frames Ellen’s life, and, within that economy, allows Ellen to occupy a far more complex and powerful position than that of the demurring female child. By casting Ellen, her Bible and her hymnal as analogous material entities, Susan Warner suggests an alternate value system to that of the Christian patriarchy that Ellen’s extreme self-abnegation seems to support. If the explicit message of The Wide, Wide World is a re-affirmation of the masculine-spiritual over the feminine-corporeal, the novel’s implicit critique rearranges those dichotomies, genders Ellen’s Bible, and praises both the girl and her Bible as perfectly spiritual and corporeal. The gendering of Ellen’s Bible begins with the gendering of her hymnal, which—like the “feminization” of many pious, submissive heroines of sentimental literature—happens in bed.
The bed is a pregnant symbol in Victorian literature. Victorians were born in their beds, but they also died in them. The bed was a place of illness, healing, intimacy (both filial and sexual), conception, comfort, isolation, and death. Glimpses of heaven and last-minute religious conversions occurred in bed, and were recorded both in fiction and in accounts of real life. The way a bed was made could speak volumes about the class and refinement of its owner, as a properly made bed corresponded to a properly disciplined femininity—even to a properly ordered soul (Merish 108-111; Sensational Designs 165-172). In their widely published household manual, The American Woman’s Home, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe take up bed making in a chapter significantly titled, “A Christian House.” “The best end for a woman to seek,” begins the chapter, is the training of God’s children for their eternal home, by guiding them to intelligence, virtue, and true happiness. When, therefore, the wise woman seeks a home in which to exercise this ministry, she will aim to secure a house so planned that it will provide in the best manner for health, industry, and economy, those cardinal requisites of domestic enjoyment and success. (27)

The lengthy, detailed descriptions and illustrations of properly made beds that follow this passage make sense in light of the religious gravity that the sisters vest in the arrangement and furnishing of the home. In a home so minutely planned as to effect the

---

7 In Sensational Designs, Jane Tompkins describes the death-bead conversion and elated last words of a New York woman as recorded by a “Visiter” with the New York Tract Society. “Don’t weep for me,” whispers the woman at the moment of her death, “I shall soon be in the arms of my Saviour” (151). The scene, which Tompkins takes directly from the Visiter’s report, closely parallels Warner’s description of Alice’s last moments in The Wide, Wide World (440), and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous depiction of Eva’s death in Uncle Tom’s Cabin (256-257).
eternal salvation of the souls within it, the treatment of every household object takes on special significance. The bed in particular, “a subject of marked importance, as being characteristic of good or poor housekeeping,” is a central component of the well planned, well managed Christian household (271). Naturally, then, the sisters devote a fair amount of their manual to describing the proper construction, use, and maintenance of beds.

The Beecher sisters’ careful attention to the bed in *The American Woman’s Home* illustrates an impulse in Victorian culture to wed household economy to religious devotion. To borrow another phrase from Stowe, “the art and mystery of bed-making” contributed to a ritual of domesticity that defined Christian womanhood throughout the nineteenth century (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 211). In a Victorian Christian worldview, a woman’s home was in a very literal sense her temple: the making of the bed, the sweeping of the hearth, and the darning of socks were soul-strengthening activities that were considered as much a part of religion as were prayer and Bible study. In literature written by and for domestic, Christian women during this period, the bed was a complex symbol of class, gender, and spirituality. Thus, when Ellen Montgomery buries her tears in her bed, or when Eva St. Clare dies in hers, we must read the bed for its symbolic, largely feminine meaning. Encountering the books and letters that occupy Ellen’s many beds in *The Wide, Wide World*, we must ask: what does it mean when a Victorian brings an object into her bed?

Ellen brings a book into bed with her at two crucial moments in *The Wide, Wide World*. First, after her painful separation from her mother and a trying day of traveling with her cruel companions, the Dunscombes, Ellen finds comfort in a hymnbook that was given to her during her journey by a kind stranger. Before falling asleep alone in a hotel
cot, Ellen “remove[s] her little hymn-book from the pocket of her frock to a safe station under her pillow” and assumes a posture that encapsulates sentimental childhood: “it was with her hand upon it that Ellen went to sleep; and it was in her hand still when she was waked the next morning” (88). Here, the hymnbook is a complicated symbol for Ellen, and it must be read for everything it represents to her as it lies in her bed: the hymnal stands in for George Marshman, the kind stranger who plays a pivotal role in Ellen’s developing Christianity; it contains powerful spiritual lessons in the form of hymns that Ellen studies and discusses with her spiritual mentors throughout the narrative; finally, importantly, its physical presence is a comfort to Ellen in moments—such as the night at the hotel—of pain and isolation.

While it would be incorrect to assume that Warner purposely wrote sexual undertones into these moments, it is significant that Ellen maintains physical contact with the hymnal in her bed and in her sleep. Reading the hymnal for its representational significance alone, one might imagine that Ellen spends the night “touching” George Marshman in her sleep, as she had slept in his arms the day before while traveling. Or, Ellen’s contact with her hymnal might be read as a physical approximation of contact with God—a moment of “falling asleep in Jesus” that anticipates the supreme comfort of a Christian death. Indeed, both readings are sensible, and Ellen’s hymnal ought to be read for its capacity to represent the important people and ideas in her life. But the significance of the hymnal in this moment is not fully understood without considering the book’s placement in Ellen’s bed.

The bed is a purely female space in Ellen’s world. Aside from Ellen herself, the only other people to come into her bed are women. Ellen lies in bed in moments of
intimate conversation with her friends Ellen Chauncey and Miss Sophia; Grandmother Lindsay tenderly caresses Ellen in bed; even the dreadful Nancy Vawse forces herself into Ellen’s sickbed to torment her—but no man, not even Ellen’s beloved John, ever enters her bed. By establishing Ellen’s bed as a distinctly female space, Warner reiterates a middle-class “ideal of domestic propriety” that demands, as Lori Merish observes with respect to the household more generally, “a material environment differentiated in terms of gender,” where “men and women should sleep separately and their personal belongings should be stored in individualized compartments” (99).

Ellen strives to enact this ideal throughout the narrative. Indeed, Ellen’s struggle to perfectly compartmentalize (or “command”) both her emotions and her material life is part of her development into mature, middle-class Christian womanhood. It makes sense, then, that Ellen should thoroughly affirm the notion that only women should enter her bed, just as it makes sense that she should swoon over the tiny, perfectly-fitted compartments of her writing-desk, or fret “beyond measure” that Nancy Vawse should disrupt the careful ordering of her work-box (WWW 211). Given Ellen’s wholesale endorsement of maintaining separations between things—like men and women—that ought to be kept separate, it is reasonable to assume that only women, or feminine objects, are welcome in her bed. When Ellen brings her hymnal into her hotel cot, she situates it within the gender matrix that defines that space for her. The hymnal in Ellen’s bed is thus a feminized object: it is marked as female enough to be there.

The feminization of the hymnal through its placement in Ellen’s bed can be extended to the other books and objects that Ellen brings into bed with her. A collection of letters from Ellen’s mother is already associated with the absent figure of Mrs.
Montgomery, but when Ellen lays those letters next to her own body and falls into a deep, sad sleep, the scene evokes earlier moments of repose, physical contact and emotional pain that Ellen had shared with her mother (490).

Similarly, Weems’s *Life of Washington*—arguably a more masculine object than Mrs. Montgomery’s letters—enters Ellen’s bed in a manner that recalls the presence of another woman in Ellen’s life, her friend Ellen Chauncey. Early in their friendship, reluctant to interrupt their conversation for something so trivial as undressing for bed, Ellen and Ellen Chauncey agree to undress in bed together:

“I’ll tell you what!” said little Ellen [Chauncey], jumping up,—“mamma said we mustn’t sit up too long talking, so I’ll run and get my things and bring ‘em here, and we can undress together; won’t that be a nice way?”

[...] Little Ellen Chauncey soon came back, and sitting down beside her on the foot of the bed began the business of undressing. (288)

Ellen Chauncey occupies Ellen’s bed in this moment out of friendship, novelty and excitement: the new friends simply don’t want to part. This dynamic is repeated when Ellen acquires another new “friend,” her copy of *Life of Washington*. “Even when [Ellen goes] to be dressed,” the “little book” is, like “little” Ellen Chauncey, “laid on the bed within sight, ready to be taken up the moment she [is] at liberty” (330). Ellen’s copy of *Life of Washington* in her bed is a *companion* for her, just as Ellen Chauncey was.

Warner renders the girls’ friendship as positively as she renders Ellen’s interest in *Life of Washington*, suggesting that companionship is precisely what a little girl—and, as it turns out, a book—ought to offer in Ellen’s world. In doing so, Warner lays a second level of femininity upon Ellen’s book and the other objects in her bed. Even insofar as *Life of Washington*, Mrs. Montgomery’s letters and Ellen’s hymnal are already feminized because they are placed within the feminine space of Ellen’s bed, these objects also
perform some of the same cultural work that women in Ellen’s world are expected to perform: they offer companionship and comfort through physical proximity and contact.

“Cultural work” offers a productive framework for considering the second crucial moment when Ellen brings a book into her bed: her Bible. During a long illness, when Ellen is confined to her bed at Aunt Fortune’s house, it is a “pleasure” to Ellen “to have her Bible and hymn-book lying upon the bed, and a great comfort when she [is] able to look at a few words” (207). Reading, however, is not the primary function of the Bible and hymnal in this moment, as Warner is careful to point out in her addendum to Ellen’s enjoyment of the books: “though not equal to reading, she felt the touch of [her hymnal] a solace to her” (207).

In her sick bed, both the hymnal and the Bible exist for Ellen in a way that is analogous to how Ellen exists for the men in her life, particularly Uncle Lindsay. Throughout the novel, Ellen, her Bible and her hymnal act as touchable, highly desired “comfort objects” for those around them, receiving caresses and giving pleasure in moments of intimate embrace. By comparing Ellen’s tender touching of her Bible and hymnal with Uncle Lindsay’s almost compulsive caressing of Ellen, we can begin to see the ways in which Ellen and her Bible are material analogues for Warner, and we can begin to imagine the implications of casting both the girl and the Bible as significant physical objects.
Ellen touches her Bible as frequently and as intently as she reads it. For Ellen, touch is not merely a prerequisite for reading scripture; rather, touch is part of a sensual and mental engagement with the text that heightens the Bible’s presence in her life. Ellen does not open her Bible—she “slowly” “turn[s] it over” in her hands, taking time to feel its presence as she “look[s] along its pages to catch sight of something cheering” (344, 557). Ellen “cling[s] fast” to her Bible for spiritual refuge, and—in a posture that both emulates and seeks the physical body of her mother—prays with her head “bent” upon it (556, 352). By praying in this way, Ellen reenacts a climactic spiritual moment in which Mrs. Montgomery is seen praying with her head resting “upon the open page” of Ellen’s Bible, “as if bowed by an unseen force” (42; fig. 1). Ellen’s prayers, which mime those of Mrs. Montgomery, demonstrate the extent to which touching the Bible is as important as reading it.

Mrs. Montgomery’s prostration before God on Ellen’s Bible is one of the most emotionally stirring moments in The Wide, Wide World. Though Ellen cannot perceive the real reason for her mother’s posture (“she supposed that one of her […] frequent feelings of weakness or sickness had made her lean her head upon the Bible”), the reader—who is given access to the desperate prayer that Mrs. Montgomery utters into the pages—recognizes the posture as an expression of perfect bodily and spiritual submission to God. Through her prayer, Mrs. Montgomery is performing religious devotion both for Ellen and for the reader. A moment after Mrs. Montgomery utters her prayer, Ellen begins to emulate her mother’s posture, without fully knowing its significance, when she
takes “her old place by the side of her mother’s sofa,” and bows “her head upon her
mother’s hand.” The comfort that Ellen receives from the warm touch of her mother’s
hand in this moment becomes an important sense memory that Ellen will invoke every
time she bends her head over her Bible in prayer. Ellen’s head touches her Bible in a
way that invokes her mother's prostration before God, but the posture literally repeats
Ellen’s comforting caress of her mother’s hand. In this way, the Bible is at once a
religious fetish (a worldly stand-in for God) and a tangible reminder of Mrs.
Montgomery’s body. Ellen wants to touch her mother as much as she wants to touch
God; to do both, she touches her Bible.

Ellen’s desire to touch her Bible parallels the intense desire to touch her that is
felt by the men she meets (and most of the women). Just about everyone who meets her
wants to kiss and caress Ellen—from the pious George Marshman (82) to the earthy Mr.
Van Brunt (116)—but Ellen’s Uncle Lindsay’s desire for her is particularly acute.
Lindsay is eager to possess Ellen as his “own little daughter,” and touch is a means for
him to do this. Thus, when Lindsay meets Ellen for the first time,

    his look instantly softened […] he drew her to his arms with great
    affection, and evidently with very great pleasure; then held her off for a
    moment while he looked at her changing colour and downcast eye, and
    folded her close in his arms again, from which he seemed hardly willing to
    let her go, whispering as he kissed her, “you are my own child now.”
    (504)

Lindsay’s embrace, coupled with the performative “you are my own” that signifies his
acceptance of Ellen as his daughter, combines his “very great” physical pleasure with his
sense of ownership and filial affection for her. Lindsay literally has Ellen, both
physically and legally, from this moment until she is able to emancipate herself as an adult.

For Lindsay, touch is a way to initiate and, later, to reiterate his paternal ownership of Ellen. Lindsay’s hand is, as Ellen recognizes, “the hand of power,” but its touch is also “exceedingly fond” (510). As Lori Merish argues, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries popular Western philosophy reconfigured patriarchal domination (such as that of a husband over a wife, or a father over a daughter) as reciprocal love: the hand that ruled, though still male, became as “exceedingly fond” as Lindsay’s, and women—though still “objects of man’s ‘natural’ authority”—were seen to willfully, lovingly submit to its power (58). Thus, “when Mr. Lindsay clasped her to his bosom, Ellen felt it was as his own,” and “perhaps Ellen did not like [him] much the worse for this” (WWW 505, emphasis in original). Both Ellen and Lindsay feel ownership and masculine power in their frequent embraces: for Ellen, those embraces are a reminder that she is the “willful” and “loving” subject of her uncle; for Lindsay, they are a pleasurable reaffirmation of his paternal authority.

What emerges out of Warner’s juxtaposition of Ellen’s touching of her Bible and Lindsay’s touching of Ellen is an image of both the girl and the Bible as objects to be touched and thus loved and owned. Ellen’s Christianity and emotional stability (her ability to move on from her mother’s death, her capacity to endure the many trials of her life) are founded upon her tactile relationship with her Bible; Lindsay’s perception of himself as a patriarch and thus a man is founded upon his ability to touch and own Ellen. It is important to recognize that this parallel effects a reversal of traditional Victorian values. The corporeality (the “touchability”) of the female body is a given in sentimental
literature: to inhabit a body is unavoidable in Ellen’s world, to transcend the body (as Alice and Mrs. Montgomery do in death, and as Ellen strives to do through spiritual submission) is ideal. The “corporeality” of the Bible, at least according to transcendent Christian philosophy (the kind Ellen adheres to) is oxymoronic: the Bible exists to impart a spiritual message through readership, discussion and meditation; its physical form—attractive as a leather-bound, royal octavo edition may be to a sentimental consumer—is irrelevant. Warner’s suggestion seems to be to the contrary: the Bible, like the girl, is a physical object that bears meaningful worldly and spiritual weight precisely in its physicality.

Of course, Warner explicitly emphasizes Ellen’s and her Bible’s capacity to improve those around them spiritually, but her subtler message seems to be an affirmation of Ellen’s corporeality through repeated comparisons of her body to the positive physicality of her Bible. Thus, if the masculine-cerebral-spiritual is consistently praised over the feminine-corporeal-fallible in Victorian patriarchy, and if the sentimental novel is read as generally reiterating patriarchal norms, Warner’s subtle celebration of Ellen’s physical body seems to suggest an ever-so-slight subversion of those philosophical and generic norms. If women were thought to be inescapably corporeal in the culture that framed Ellen’s existence, Warner’s message seems to be that corporeality had its own kind of value.
“To Ennoble and Spiritualize”

“I wonder,” said Ellen, smiling as she closed her eyes, “why every body calls me ‘little;’ I don’t think I am very little. Every body says ‘little.’” (535)

In her afterward to the Feminist Press edition of *The Wide, Wide World*, Jane Tompkins observes that American “women, in the pre-Civil War era, were seen as instruments of spiritual and moral refinement, existing to ennoble and spiritualize men” (607). Like art, women in ante-bellum Christian thought were perceived as “vehicles of inspiration,” “objects” that existed “only to negate their own materiality” (607). As Ellen grows out of the passionate, consuming girl who swooned over the Bibles in the bookshop and into the mature woman who—in Warner’s final, unpublished chapter—soberly assesses the religious meaning of the paintings that decorate her home, it seems that she at last succeeds in “negating” the preoccupation with material pleasure and pain that plagued her as a child. Now John’s wife—no longer “little” Miss Ellen—and able to interpret the world alongside him rather than according to his dictates, it seems that Ellen has transcended her physical, womanly form, has ceased in fact to be a bodily woman in any morally significant way, and has become instead a transcendent “vehicle” of Christian inspiration.

Such a conclusion, however, denies the value that Warner vests in “little” Ellen’s body. The little girl, like her little Bible, may exist to ennoble and spiritualize those who seek her, but she does not need to erase her materiality in order to do this. Perhaps this is what Warner implies when she has Ellen select the Bible in the bookshop that most resembles herself—the “little red” Bible that is neither too large nor too small, that
displays neither the heavy, severe masculinity that prevents Uncle Lindsay from finding
God on his own, nor the light, silly girlishness that spoils empty-headed girls like
Margaret Dunscombe. Ellen’s Bible is, like Ellen herself, the perfect combination of
material appeal and spirituality; it is the spiritual vessel that grows Ellen’s Christianity,
but it is also the physical object that legitimizes her feminine body.
Chapter Three:
The Visual Bible in *Elsie Dinsmore*

In the front pages of Dodd, Mead and Company’s 1893 reprint of Martha Finley’s enormously successful novel, *Elsie Dinsmore*, the reader encounters an illustration of a beautiful little girl limply grasping a bouquet of flowers (fig. 2). The girl—Elsie—wears a sweet expression. Timidly, even a bit sadly, she pauses with one hand on the knob of an open door, and gazes into the eyes of the reader. Thirty-four pages into the novel, she speaks: “I have come to read,” she says, “and I have just been out to gather these for you, because I know you love flowers” (34).

The image is enticing: Elsie is a beautiful child, and her delicate features are echoed perfectly in the graceful lines of the bouquet. Perhaps it’s disappointing, then, when the reader discovers that Elsie never intended to give her the flowers. It becomes apparent with Elsie’s speech on page thirty-four that the bouquet is a gift for her friend, Rose Allison, who accepts the flowers along with a “graceful curtsey” from Elsie. Nevertheless, the reader can’t be blamed for desiring Elsie’s gift. Though her shy statement, “I have just been out to gather these for you,” is explicitly addressed to Rose, the Elsie that we see in the illustration looks beyond Rose, even beyond the novel itself, and engages the reader, whom she invites into her gift through the visual pull of her gaze. What results is a triangular dynamic between Elsie, Rose, and the reader that encourages the reader’s identification not with protagonist Elsie, but with her interlocutor—in this case, Rose. The reader, who is also the viewer of the illustration, stands alongside Rose and drinks in Elsie’s loveliness. As Rose accepts the bouquet, the reader—the silent,
invisible third party in the exchange—receives the aesthetic gift of a pleasantly rendered little girl with flowers.

Sadly for the modern reader, Elsie’s visual “gift” might not be enough to mitigate the tedium of book that follows, which spans almost 400 pages (Finley’s publishers amputated an additional 373 pages to make a sequel, *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*), and tells a story that is almost unrecognizable as story from a modern perspective. Elsie, the radiant, pious daughter of a dead mother and an absentee father, struggles through the narrative of her estranged father’s return, his cruel withholding of affection, and finally his acceptance of her with a humble persistence that borders on masochism. As it turns out, Elsie’s persistent desire for paternal affection is the connective tissue that renders the individual episodes of her psychological torture a cohesive novel. Aside from Elsie’s struggle to earn her father’s love, however, there is very little story in *Elsie Dinsmore*: no clear momentum compels Elsie and her compatriots from one scene to the next; no “coming of age” moment marks her transition from girlhood to womanhood; there is no building of tension, no dramatic eruption, no turning point, no climax—the novel is, actually, as outwardly monotonous as were the real lives of the nineteenth-century girls who read it.

And *lots* of girls read *Elsie Dinsmore*. From its initial publication in 1867 until Dodd, Mead and Company’s final printing six decades later, over five million copies of the novel were sold (Gaul 135). Riding this wave of success, Martha Finley wrote twenty-seven more *Elsie* books, including *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*, in a series so popular that only Finley’s death in 1909 could end it. Even then, Elsie remained in the public gaze in multiple reprints of the original series, satirical spin-offs such as *Phyllis*
Crawford’s *Elsie Dinsmore on the Loose* (1930), and modern adaptations, most notably Mission City Press’s “newly adapted and updated” series, *Elsie Dinsmore: A Life of Faith*—each volume of which features, on the front cover, a colorful photo of a winsome, lipstick-wearing “Elsie” in billowy period costume. Thus, even in spite of (or perhaps because of) an insipid heroine and an almost absent plot, *Elsie Dinsmore* has managed to catch and hold the attention of generations of American girls. This fact alone speaks to *Elsie*’s relevance as an object for literary analysis, but the prominence of a visual Elsie both in the Mission City Press series and in Finley’s original novel demands that we take this analysis to the level of images. The image of Elsie is, after all, still waiting for us in the doorway where we left her at the beginning of this chapter, beckoning us with her gaze. Let us enter the scene again, then, as readers—perhaps a bit embarrassed now at having intruded on Elsie’s tender gift—and ask ourselves: what is this image doing here?

What is interesting about the reader’s presence in this image is the voyeuristic perspective that she takes. The reader encounters Elsie in the doorway and is invited to pause and ruminate on her loveliness *for as long as she likes*, both in the still lines of the illustration and in the words of Finley’s description on page thirty-four. That description is, moreover, not the only opportunity for the reader to gaze uninterrupted at Elsie’s image. Rather, the Elsie that we encounter pausing in the doorway is as still and viewable as the Elsie that unwittingly poses in posture after seductive posture of female readership in images that recur throughout the novel. In each of these images, the reader—along with Horace, Elsie’s father, and along with Rose—is invited to consume Elsie as a highly desirable and available visual object.
Not that this is at all surprising. By repeatedly framing Elsie as a visual object, Finley only re-affirms her participation in a Victorian society that, according to Sharon Marcus, “encouraged women and girls to desire, scrutinize, and handle simulacra”—like Elsie—“of alluring femininity” (Marcus 112). What is surprising—and what will be the subject of this chapter—is the fact that Finley satisfies her reader’s “erotic appetite for femininity” by visually packaging Elsie not just with flowers (which are, after all, a fairly common literary trope for femininity, one that extends into history well beyond the nineteenth century), but also with a Bible.

The Bible under Elsie’s arm is not readily apparent in the illustration (look again and you’ll see it, if you haven’t already), but it adds an important dimension to the “visual gift” that Finley offers her reader. Elsie explains the book by saying that she has come to read, and Finley adds that she looks “bright and fresh and rosy as the morning” with “her little Bible under her arm, and a bouquet of fresh flowers in her hand” (34). It is easy to understand the evangelistic logic behind packaging a Bible with a “fresh and rosy” little girl, to say nothing of the lovely flowers in her hand: as a brief digression into Scottish Common Sense philosophy will demonstrate, it is but a short step from loving the flowers to loving the girl to loving the Christian object that she bears. But the Bible under Elsie’s arm is more than traditional evangelism: it is, like Elsie and like her flowers, an erotic object—and here I use “erotic” in the rather open sense that informs Marcus’s reading of Victorian visual culture, as a term denoting “intensified affect and sensual pleasure, dynamics of looking and displaying, domination and submission, restraint and eruption, idolization and humiliation,” but not, necessarily, sex (114)—that spins the image toward a different kind of Christian message. As I will argue in this
chapter, Finley’s packaging of Elsie’s gift combines the feminine-erotic visual culture that Marcus describes with the moral materiality of Common Sense Christianity. The Bible and the girl are already morally significant objects according to the precepts of this school of religious thought; the girl and the bouquet are already alluring images in Victorian visual culture. Finley’s juxtaposition of all three (the girl, the bouquet, and the Bible) creates a triply attractive and powerful image that—she must have hoped—couldn’t fail to convert her reader. We’ll begin unpacking—or, perhaps more graciously, “unwrapping” Finley’s gift-image by turning once more to Elsie in the doorway, and considering her in conjunction with Ellen Montgomery, who strikes a remarkably similar pose at the beginning of The Wide, Wide World.

The frontispiece of Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World shows a blooming Ellen Montgomery waist-high in lilies and clutching a Bible (fig. 3). Below the frontispiece, a stanza from Longfellow reads: “Bear a lily in thy hand: / Gates of brass cannot withstand / One touch of that mighty wand.” The presence of the image above the stanza doubles the meaning of “that mighty wand” in Longfellow’s verse: Ellen is seen lightly touching a lily with one hand, but the object she “bears” is her Bible—arguably a more fitting “wand” than a lily to open the brass gates of heaven. Even so, the presence of the Bible in Ellen’s hand does not mean that the lily completely abdicates its religious meaning. When the lily is read in the context of Longfellow’s 1842 poem, “Maidenhood” (the last six stanzas of which are excerpted below), it becomes clear that the call to “bear a lily in thy hand” is already religious, even before the introduction of Ellen’s Bible.
In the poem, Longfellow’s speaker addresses a girl on the verge of womanhood, urging her to “gather” the happy fruits of childhood while she can, for adulthood will bring suffering that will require her to draw upon the strength of her reserved youth:

Childhood is the bough, where slumbered
Birds and blossoms many numbered;—
Age, that bough with snows encumbered.

Gather, then, each flower that grows,
When the young heart overflows,
To embalm that tent of snows.

Bear a lily in thy hand;
Gates of brass cannot withstand
One touch of that magic wand.

Bear through sorrow, wrong, and ruth
In thy heart the dew of youth,
On thy lips the smile of truth.

O, that dew, like balm, shall steal
Into wounds, that cannot heal
Even as sleep our eyes doth seal;

And that smile, like sunshine, dart
Into many a sunless heart,
For a smile of God thou art. (127-128)

This last line adds an important twist to Longfellow’s characterization of girlhood. Hitherto, the poem had contained feminine youth in images from nature: the “bough” of childhood, the overflowing heart, “birds and blossoms,” the “dew of youth,” and the “sunshine” of “that smile” that works like a “balm” on the wounds of the heart. In these images, the body of the maiden—“whose locks outshine the sun, / Golden tresses, wreathed in one, / As the braided streamlets run!” (125)—merges with the sun, the streams, and the animals of the natural world in what seems to be a strangely un-Christian avowal of a personified Mother Nature. The last line of the poem, however, re-
contextualizes this merging as a manifestation of God’s grace: the maiden, along with the natural world that she embodies, is really “a smile of God”: the message of the poem has been, as it turns out, a Christian one.

If we look back at the stanza that Warner excerpts from this new perspective, we see that the lily in the maiden’s hand is, like the maiden herself, only part of the graciousness of Longfellow’s God. From this perspective, the “gates” that “cannot withstand” the lily’s touch are not the gates of heaven, but they do take on religious significance: they become the “brass gates” of the human heart that cannot resist the saving message that the maiden with the lily brings. This reading of the stanza is in fact born out by *The Wide, Wide World*, which features Ellen “bearing” the message of Christianity through gifts of bouquets and her own attractive countenance to just about everyone she meets. The Bible is, of course, an important part of Ellen’s evangelism, but its presence in the frontispiece does not negate the lily’s religious purpose. Rather, through their visual juxtaposition—both with one another and with Longfellow’s stanza—the lily and the Bible are made to share their religious functions: Ellen touches the brass gates to the hearts of her companions both with her Bible and with her lily, and her companions, thus doubly pressed, are doubly weak to resist.

This sharing between the Bible and the bouquet illuminates an important aspect of the “girl with flowers” trope in the sentimental novels that I consider here. Flowers, like Bibles, have religious work to do in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *Elsie Dinsmore*, but Bibles, like flowers, also serve as decorations in the hands of the respective heroines of these novels: Eva, Ellen, and especially Elsie. Encountering the illustration at the beginning of *Elsie Dinsmore*, we note that Elsie looks lovely with her
Bible under her arm, but we must also consider the fact that this illustration—the first piece of information that the reader encounters in the novel—does not depict Elsie reading. Indeed, though there are several indications in the novel that Elsie enjoys reading her Bible, and though Elsie does participate in Bible-reading sessions with some of her friends (Rose, Aunt Chloe, and Horace prominent among them), the Bible appears far more frequently in the narrative of Elsie’s readership as a closed book. Since the static, alluring presence of Elsie’s Bible contributes to the visual impact of several key scenes throughout the narrative, I’ll continue considering these scenes with the same attention toward still, visual detail that I gave to the illustration. Indeed, as Elsie and her Bible sit utterly still before the gaze of the reader in these scenes, they are better understood—and better treated—as tableau than as text.

Finley tells the story of Elsie’s readership through a series of tableaus: Elsie with “her little Bible under her arm, and a bouquet of fresh flowers in her hand” (34); Elsie “in the rich glow of the sunset, with her sweet, grave little face bending over the holy book” (227); Elsie “bending over her Bible, an expression of sadness and deep humility on the sweet little face” (194); Elsie sitting down, leaning against her father’s knee, her Bible and a copy of Pilgrim’s Progress lying next to her on the floor (280). Each tableau represents a moment of stillness in the narrative, a visual frame that ties Elsie to her Bible and asks the reader to interpret the juxtaposition. Reading these images, we might make the most basic assumption that Elsie enjoys reading her Bible, and this assumption would be correct: Elsie frequently expresses her love of Bible-reading to anyone who will listen. But reading is only part of the reason for the Bible’s presence in Finley’s tableaus.
Though we can see that Elsie *is reading* in most of the images, and though we can use her posture and facial expression to guess at her reaction to the text, we are told very little about what part of the Bible she is looking at, or how she is processing the words on the page. Unlike Eva, Elsie does not repeat scripture unprompted in the course of her regular conversation with others; unlike Ellen, Elsie does not often turn to the text of her Bible for comfort. Rather, Finley’s tableaus seem to characterize Elsie as a visually “sweet little” reader, but say little about her apprehension of the text itself. Furthermore, the images cast Bible-reading as an aesthetically beautiful practice, one that has value quite apart from its capacity to deliver spiritual knowledge through the text on the page. In the tableaus, we encounter Elsie once again as voyeurs: we gaze, along with Horace, and we are smitten by the lovely figure of the girl with her Bible—never mind what part of it she is reading. “The darling!” we say with Horace, because Elsie strikes us as “lovely as an angel” with her angelic book (227).

Elsie’s loveliness is, in fact, central to Finley’s characterization of her as a good Christian. Elsie is cast as an exceedingly beautiful child whose “large soft eyes of the darkest hazel” and “golden brown curls” are physical manifestations of a “lovely and well-developed Christian character” (9, 21, 34). “Well-developed” seems an odd descriptor for something so abstract as “Christian character,” but it is no surprise that Elsie’s inner beauty—like that of Ellen and especially Eva—should be qualified as physical, and should manifest in the visible features of her body. Phrenological assumptions that linked a well-formed body to a well-tempered soul saturated the cultural atmosphere in which Finley wrote, and inevitably informed her rendering of Elsie. Moreover, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, the material world (the world of
houses, bodies, and furniture) played heavily into Victorian understandings of Christian morality.

Here again, Jane Tompkins’s observation that women and art in Victorian America existed in order to “ennoble and spiritualize men” aids our understanding of why Finley would choose to render Elsie as physically beautiful as she does. By the end of the novel, Elsie’s beauty succeeds in rousing the affections—if not the Christianity—of the aloof, agnostic and even anti-Christian Horace. Ultimately, it will be Elsie’s body (her illness, “death,” and subsequent “resurrection”) that will bring about Horace’s conversion, but this will not occur until the second Elsie book. Even before he is willing to accept Elsie’s religious message, however, Horace frequently enjoys the sight of her body—an enticing replica of her dead mother’s—as he might enjoy a piece of art that he has purchased. The language of purchasing and ownership is, actually, a good way to describe Horace’s desire to possess Elsie as his “own little daughter,” which rivals that of Uncle Lindsay for Ellen (Elsie 186), and often manifests in scenes, like this one, of intense voyeurism:

Elsie laughed, kissed his hand, and tripped away to her window, while he threw himself down on the couch and took up a newspaper, more as a screen to his face, however, than for the purpose of reading; for he lay there closely watching his little daughter, as she sat in the rich glow of the sunset, with her sweet, grave little face bending over the holy book.

“The darling!” he murmured to himself; “she is lovely as an angel, and she is mine, mine only, mine own precious one; and loves me with her whole soul.” (227, emphasis in original)

Horace’s emphatic “mine, mine only, mine own” brings home the sense of visual consumption and ownership of Elsie that is implied in this scene. Elsie is not Elsie in Horace’s gaze: she is a tantalizing visual object, one that he can (and does) own. Given
Horace’s intense interest in her, the Bible in the scene seems to do little more than add an extra layer of pious beauty to Elsie’s body—and this is, perhaps, all that Horace will acknowledge of its significance. However, according to Scottish Common Sense philosophy (which, I argue, informs the construction of the scene), the mere presence of the Bible sitting before Elsie lends a religious dynamic to Horace’s enjoyment of her that he cannot escape. Sitting prominently in the room and in the image, the book literally radiates Christian goodness into Horace.

The centrality of Scottish Common Sense philosophy to nineteenth-century sentimentalism has been well established (Gutjahr 39-88; Merish 29-87). As historian Paul C. Gutjahr has argued, Common Sense philosophy lent at least two important precepts to American thinking about morality and the material environment: first, the idea that “reality could be experienced directly and accurately through one’s senses,” and second, the view that human beings possessed a sixth, “‘moral sense’ that facilitated their ability to know, and act upon, truth” (45). According to this philosophy, every individual was physically and mentally equipped to recognize truth in the knowable environment. Provided that that individual’s “moral sense functioned properly” (Brissenden 54), his or her subjective responses to the world could generally be trusted to correctly distinguish between the good and the morally reprehensible. Naturally, then, the presence of a truth-bearing object (like a Bible) could only work to enhance an individual’s ability to perceive and act upon moral goodness—thus the familiar image of the Bible placed in the center of the Victorian parlor. Seen in this context, Finley seems to plant the Bible in Horace’s gaze just as a nineteenth-century homemaker would have displayed the family Bible prominently in her home, in the hopes that it would “infuse its surroundings with a
sense of the moral and the sacred,” and foster the Christian development of those around it (Gutjahr 47). And, as becomes increasingly apparent when Horace progresses from gazing at Elsie’s Bible only as a consequence of gazing at her body to actively reading the Bible with her, Finley’s plant turns out to be successful. The radiating influence of the Bible, combined with the allure of Elsie’s physical body, effectively converts Horace by the end of the second novel.

Horace’s conversion, however, is secondary to that of a more valuable—because more real—individual: the reader. The sentimental genre is widely recognized as a “pedagogical” and, more importantly for our purposes, evangelistic genre that was marketed primarily to female readers (Merish 119). Thus, Finley could rightly anticipate that the individual who picked up her novel would be a woman or a girl, and her reader could legitimately expect to receive some domestic instruction and moral enlightenment—along with a little entertainment—from her reading. To construct an argument based solely on Horace’s male gaze would therefore be to miss the point of Elsie Dinsmore: Finley’s female reader must be considered alongside Horace as a significant “visual interlocutor” in the tableaus that frame Elsie and her Bible.

The female gaze is inescapable in Finley’s tableaus. Indeed, as “Victorian commodity culture incited an erotic appetite for femininity in women,” and “framed spectacular images of women for a female gaze” (Marcus 112, emphasis mine), it might be argued that Elsie was even more attractive to Finley’s female reader than she is to Horace. Elsie’s erotic allure certainly does not terminate in her father’s desire for her; rather, it simultaneously stimulates (“incites”) and satisfies the desire of the reader to see
and enjoy a nicely formed, well-decorated female body—hence the flowers. It has been argued that Horace’s desire for Elsie is, in fact, sexual desire: incest “glossed over as filial and parental affection” (Jackson and Kendall 58). I would argue, however, that once Horace’s gaze is understood to coincide with that of Finley’s female reader, his erotic attachment to his daughter makes more sense as a means to foster the female reader’s stimulation than as incest (it would, of course, be fallacious to assume that either incest or the stimulation of the reader was intentional on Finley’s part). It is no accident that Elsie is at her most alluring precisely when she appears before Horace: the loving eyes of a father—particularly those of a young, man-of-the-world father like Horace—are able to perceive Elsie’s physical beauty in a way that would not befit a chaste female mentor like Rose Allison, a motherly black caretaker like Aunt Chloe, or a respectable lady novelist like Martha Finley. It is only by sharing Horace’s male perspective that the female reader is able to satisfy her erotic desire for images of Elsie without losing her sense of feminine decorum.

Following Marcus still further, we must emphasize the fact that the reader’s “homoerotic” desire for images of Elsie’s beauty does not equate to a deviation from Victorian social code; rather, such desire was a legitimate “component of conventional femininity” (113). Women in Victorian culture were, according to Marcus, encouraged to enjoy images of other women and girls in contexts (such as women’s magazines, doll play, and sanctioned social activities) that celebrated and reinforced the femininity of the viewer precisely insofar as she enjoyed looking at women. Thus, if the sentimental genre was and is considered “pedagogical” by nature, Finley’s encouragement to her reader to feel and gratify a desire for Elsie’s beautiful body by identifying with Horace’s male gaze
becomes a lesson in femininity: a woman should take pleasure in seeing another beautiful woman; by looking at and enjoying images of a beautiful Elsie, Finley’s reader learns to behave as a woman.

Of course, *Elsie Dinsmore* is not just feminine pedagogy, and Elsie does not stand before us at the beginning of the novel holding flowers alone. She holds her Bible, and her claim that she has “come to read” it with us is a genuine one. Apprehending *this* Elsie in the doorway, we feel the visual punch of Finley’s package. Her framing of Elsie as a lovely little girl with flowers plays on the Victorian female reader’s desire to see and enjoy images of feminine loveliness, but her addition of a Bible to this image enacts Scottish Common Sense philosophy’s belief in the power of material objects (including images, bodies, flowers, Bibles, and perhaps even sentimental novels) to engender moral goodness in the individuals that apprehend them. In short, morality combines with erotic desire in the image of Elsie and her Bible to create a new package that intensifies the appeal of both.

When we broaden our gaze to consider the equally visible (if not always explicitly illustrated), equally appealing packages of Ellen Montgomery with her Bible and Eva St. Clare with hers, we begin to recognize that more is at stake in these images than simple evangelism. Eva, Ellen and Elsie are beautiful, inescapably corporeal “vessels” for the spiritual improvement of the sentimental reader, and it would be a mistake to read them otherwise. But it is also a mistake to disregard the value of the female body in these images. Intentionally or not, Stowe, Warner and Finley wrote legitimacy into the physical bodies of their heroines: the fairy-like form, the golden locks, and the hazel eye
do more than decorate Christian souls in these novels, they frame flesh-and-blood female bodies that exist with—not beneath, behind, or subordinate to—the leather spine and paper pages of the Bible.
Appendix

Fig. 1. “Mrs. Montgomery’s head sank upon the open page; and her whole soul went up with her petition” (*The Wide, Wide World* 42).

Fig. 2. From the front pages of Martha Finley’s *Elsie Dinsmore*, Elsie pausing in the doorway. Notice the Bible tucked under her arm.
Fig. 3. Frontispiece to Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*.

“Bear a lily in thy hand: Gates of brass cannot withstand One touch of that mighty wand.”
Works Cited


--,”The Lady Who Does Her Own Work.” Parker, ed. 183-193.

--,”Servants.” Parker, ed. 195-197.


