Reconstructing Women's Subjectivity in Woman in the Nineteenth Century, The Lamplighter, and Behind a Mask

Rachel L. Chaffee

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Reconstructing Women's Subjectivity

in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century, The Lamplighter, and Behind a Mask*

by

Rachel L. Chaffee

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Nineteenth-century American history is full of avid reformers, both women and men, seeking to make drastic changes in the social, cultural and educational systems of their country. Margaret Fuller, writer, critic and cultural reformer, was a key figure in the advances for women on all economic and social levels. It is with Fuller’s approach to female identity as offered in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* that this thesis centers upon. The first half of the thesis establishes the narrow domestic and educational framework of nineteenth-century female selfhood upon which Fuller bases her approach. The first two chapters examine the way in which Fuller offers woman a way into self-definition-making, encouraging not only the reevaluation of past and present female roles, but claiming that positive potential selfhood is attainable by repositioning and defining woman both inside and outside of the context of nineteenth-century social, cultural, and gender norms. By refuting the socially rigid definitions of female education, the social institution of marriage, and the confines of domesticity, Fuller’s text offers us a lens through which to examine both the inherent flaws and possibilities in approaching female selfhood outside conventional nineteenth-century ideologies of personhood.

Chapters three and four examine the practicality of Fuller’s approach to female selfhood within the context of nineteenth-century women fiction, mainly, Susan Cummins’ novel *The Lamplighter* and Louisa May Alcott’s novella *Behind a Mask*. By examining the main characters of each story, Gerty Flint and Jean Muir, this thesis attempts to demonstrate the possibility of constructing a fully cultivated female identity based less on gender assumptions and more on the individual capacity Margaret Fuller believed all women held within them.
Imagining Reform

*I will write well yet,...I shall by no means be discouraged, nor take what they say for
gospel, but try to sift from it all truth and use it. I feel within myself the strength to
dispense with all illusions and I will manifest it. I will stand steady and rejoice in the
severest probations!*

-Margaret Fuller *Journal, 17 April 1840*

It is surprising that a woman as brilliant as Margaret Fuller was insecure about her
ability to express herself in writing. Known from an early age for her strong skill as a
conversationalist, Fuller remarks in her journals how surprised gentlemen are “that I
write no better because I talk so well” (*Self-Definitions* 9). Certainly, Fuller’s
upbringing surrounded her with many influential writers, including Emerson,
Thoreau, and others from the transcendental movement. But despite Fuller’s
extensive education and stimulating environment, she was not blind to the reality of
her culture and its preference to domesticate, rather to educate women.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Fuller’s major work, *Woman in the
Nineteenth Century*, in which she maps out the cultural cynicism towards woman’s
intellectual capacity and the skeptical approach taken to educating her. *Woman in the
Nineteenth Century* reveals the hidden abilities Fuller longs to establish for women—
intellectual and mental abilities that have long been stifled by the nineteenth-century
environment of domesticity and sentimentality which only encouraged women to bind
themselves to marriage and the home.

A leading advocate of female potential development, Fuller’s desire to
“dispense with all illusions” of female incapacity finds its voice in *Woman in the
Nineteenth Century*. Fuller was certainly not alone in her idea that the female identity
was in much need of redefining. Women reform writers of the nineteenth century increasingly argued for the inclusion of women in more areas of social and political life, hoping to encourage a reexamination of female education and the conflicting position of marriage as the central point around which female development was fostered.

Many of these reform writers were women authors, whose fictional works dominated female readership between the years of 1820-1870. In a sometimes subtle fashion, these stories introduce centralized female characters with an acute awareness of the effects that nineteenth-century social and political culture were having on women's development. Authors like Susana Maria Cumm and Louisa May Alcott bring a level of complexity to the female voice in their characters, offering stories that demonstrate the stifling nature of gender construction in antebellum America and its effects on the female selfhood.

It is with the complexity of nineteenth-century female development that this thesis will attempt to grapple by focusing on three pieces of nineteenth-century literature by the already mentioned authors: Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, Susan Maria Cumm's *The Lamplighter*, and Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask*. Although these texts may resemble each other very little in terms of style and form, they are uniquely bound by the specific ways in which each text offers an approach to potential female development, one that not only critiques but runs counter to the nineteenth-century understanding of gender ideology in terms of female domesticity, education, and marriage.
Rather than presenting the way in which each text approaches these three issues, I have chosen to explore Fuller’s theory of potential female development presented in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as it relates to education and marriage within the context of nineteenth-century women’s fiction. Although they do not present the issue of female potential development in as sophisticated a manner as Fuller does, Susan Maria Cummins’ novel *The Lamplighter* and Louisa May Alcott’s novella *Behind a Mask* demonstrate the possibility of constructing a fully cultivated identity in their main characters, Gerty and Jean, by approaching female education based less on gender assumptions and more on individual capacity. The results these fully realized, self-reliant women achieve foster their relationships with others, including the possibility of an egalitarian marriage for both characters.

By applying Fuller’s specific theories of marriage and education expressed in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* to both *The Lamplighter* and *Behind a Mask*, the possibilities and implications of Fuller’s theory of female potential development is brought to light within the context of what female fiction writers can also envision for women of their time. The goal in doing so is to pose the following questions to Fuller’s text by way of application: Is it possible within the context of the nineteenth century for female writers to imagine the education of woman as non-domesticating and personally relevant to her future self-reliance? If so, how is this education undertaken in a non-gendering fashion? Once this education is accomplished, is it

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1 Nina Baym refers to “woman’s fiction” as formulaic novels of contemporary life “by and about American women published between 1820 and 1870” (*Woman’s Fiction*, i). Although the texts presented in this thesis are all published between these dates, only Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* fits Baym’s definition of a formulaic novel.
possible for these fully developed individuals to create an egalitarian marriage devoid of the social, cultural, and class pressures inherent in nineteenth-century gender ideology? In essence, is Fuller's theory of potential female development seen in Woman in the Nineteenth Century a true possibility or an impossible utopian vision?

The text itself is often elusive in answering its own questions as Woman in the Nineteenth Century, or WNC as it shall be referred to from this point, builds and circles back upon itself, wrestling with issues of education, identity as it relates to the self and society, and marriage as domestically confining and/or ultimately releasing. Above all, WNC reveals Fuller's keen awareness of the prejudices and social configurations that women face. Published in 1845, only a few years after the writing of Self-Definitions, WNC is Fuller's written quest to define and claim the female selfhood. By offering women a way into self-definition-making, WNC encourages not only the reevaluation of past and present female roles, but claims that positive potential selfhood is attainable by repositioning and defining woman both inside and outside of the context of nineteenth-century social, cultural, and gender norms. By refuting the socially rigid definitions of female education, the social institution of marriage, and the confines of domesticity, Fuller's text offers us a lens through which to examine both the inherent flaws and possibilities in approaching female selfhood outside conventional nineteenth-century ideologies of personhood.

As a whole, Fuller's greatest concern is offering woman a way to obtain her greatest potential by encouraging her to do as she is called: to pursue her ideal nature. In other words, it is only when woman seeks who she is at her deepest core and
engages herself in all areas of life, including those outside of her established "sphere," that she will ever reach her greatest potential as an individual. It is from this basic premise that Fuller's theory unfolds. First concentrating on the foundational issue of education, Fuller advocates the development of a competent, self-reliant woman in the personal prototype of Miranda, who refutes the stereotype of the highly domesticated woman. By encouraging women to challenge the assumptions of gendered abilities and inabilities within themselves, Fuller questions the idea that women and men are given limited, predetermined capacities from which they must learn and to which they must adhere.

Fuller extends her approach to female education by encompassing a complete redefinition of female identity. By deconstructing the ideology of the heart and heart dichotomy, in which the female/femininity/heart functions as a part of, not separate from, the male/masculinity/head, Fuller debunks the myth of distinct and separate spheres and forces both women and men to acknowledge the true reality of female potential. In a more radical approach, Fuller pushes the definition of potential identity further by redefining personhood, separating gender from the restrictive bonds of physical form by defining the selfhood as a "soul." Through an often-complex terminology, Fuller reconstructs femininity and masculinity as organic essences, exemplified in the metaphorical beings of Muse and Miranda, echoes of Greek mythological divinity. The result is a seemingly fluid understanding of identity, one that enables the cultivation of potential selfhood regardless of sex.
The effect of Fuller’s approach to female potential selfhood leads Fuller into a reconstruction of ideal marriage. Determined to alter the limiting domestication of women, Fuller applies her theory of potential selfhood to marriage, arguing that if woman is given the opportunity to develop to her fullest potential, she not only comes to her marriage partner a complete individual, but offers to the relationship her own full potential. The ideal result is what Fuller classifies as the marriage of “religious union,” an egalitarian marriage in which both partners are regarded as persons who stand outside of nineteenth-century gender and social conventions—both complete individuals within a collective relationship.

Whether Fuller’s vision of egalitarian marriage is attainable within the domestic and sentimental ideology of nineteenth-century culture is what the latter half of this thesis will discuss. By turning towards the fictional work of Cummins and Alcott, it is my goal to identify how these two authors mirror Fuller’s approach to female development within the context of domestic fiction, debunking the myth of the sentimental woman within their stories’ main characters Gerty and Jean.

Although much of The Lamplighter’s early popularity is attributed to its storyline, Cummins’ novel offers a seemingly less conventional understanding of female potential development than her contemporaries. Like a majority of American women’s fiction in the mid-nineteenth-century, The Lamplighter has a plot resembling the formula put forth in Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World, in which a young girl wanders through personal trials that shape her identity and eventually lead her to the obtainment of and confinement to a domestic marriage. A sort of
female bildungsroman, *The Lamplighter* traces the individual journey of Gertrude Flint, or Gerty, through a not-so sheltered childhood. Orphaned as a young child, Gerty is left at the mercy of Nan Grant, whose strong doses of verbal, emotional, and physical abuse leave Gerty a neglected and unruly child. Upon being thrown out of Nan Grant’s house, Gerty is taken in by Trueman Flint, the town lamplighter. A sort of adopted father, True raises the young Gerty, along with the help of his friend and neighbor Mrs. Sullivan and her son, Willie. Upon True’s death, Gerty is taken in by Emily Graham, a young, blind woman whose compassion and devotion to Gerty enable Gerty to obtain a formal education and a mature understanding of her selfhood. As Gerty grows into a young woman, she gains more than the respect of her peers; she is granted the fortune of finding her biological father (Philip Amory, Emily’s missing lover) and marrying her childhood friend, William Sullivan.

That *The Lamplighter* may adhere to highly conventional plot line does not negate its unique approach to the identity of its central female character. Rather, the construction of the novel reveals the direct ways in which Gerty’s potential transformation from a selfish child to a self-aware woman reiterates Fuller’s approach to a fluid genderless identity. In terms of education, Gerty is given the same opportunities as Fuller’s Miranda; the freedom to cultivate her intellectual capacity and develop a sense of personal and social responsibility which leads her to an understanding of duty that lies outside of approaches to conventional female roles. This internal understanding of duty is fostered by Gerty’s educators, always those she lives with, who refuse to “feminize” or “domesticate” her for predefined roles.
Consequently, education is sought for the sake of personal development rather than for the sake of social performance.

As a result, Cummins develops Gerty’s character into a woman who moves beyond social and cultural approaches to female virtue and enables Gerty to develop her own definition of duty to self; Gerty’s educational freedom to adhere to, in Fuller’s terms, the degendered essences of the Muse and Minerva, offers the freedom of potential development. Additionally, Gerty is able to develop and maintain relationships outside of socially gendered constructions. Duty towards others is cultivated by the balancing of her own strength and intuition which moves Gerty towards relationships with those who value her and do not place her within the context of gendered roles.

Despite Cummins’ ability to imagine the potential development of Gerty as fostered in a nondomesticating, nongendering fashion, Cummins is unable to imagine a fully degendered identity for Gerty’s husband, Willie. Although Willie is also able to attain a formal education, his potential development is confined by the reality of his role as a family provider, a role that takes him to India for the better part of the novel. Despite the separation of Willie and Gerty, Cummins does present Willie as a fully competent man who is able to recognize Gerty as an original woman unto herself. Unfortunately, Cummins is unable to fully imagine Fuller’s presentation of an egalitarian marriage, for *The Lamplighter* closes with little comment on life for Gerty and Willie beyond their wedding. In fact, Cummins only offers a glimmer of hope
that both Willie and Gerty will remain true to their own potential development and foster that development within each other.

Despite the obvious differences between the two stories in form and style, Alcott’s short novella *Behind a Mask* offers a somewhat similar picture of female potential selfhood as *The Lamplighter* in the character of Jean Muir. Like Gerty, Jean Muir is able to maintain power over her own self by remaining true to her own understanding of personal responsibility. But unlike Gerty, Jean is motivated by an entirely different set of desires and definitions of duty. In terms of both nineteenth-century gender conventions and Fuller’s theory of female potential development, Alcott creates a far more complex and unstable identity in Jean Muir than Cummins does in Gerty Flint. For unlike Gerty, Jean is forced to create her own identity out of the necessity to ensure her physical survival.

In terms of plot formation, *Behind a Mask* diverges significantly from the domestic fiction written by Alcott’s contemporaries, or even from Alcott’s most famous novel, *Little Women*. Classified as one of Alcott’s many thrillers, *Behind a Mask* focuses on the specific story of Jean Muir, who arrives at the Coventry estate to work as a governess for the single Coventry daughter, Bella. Unbeknownst to the Coventrys, Jean arrives under false pretenses, determined to play the role of governess while attempting to convince not one, but all three Coventry men to fall in love with her. But proclamations of love are not enough for Jean, who seeks a marriage pledge from Sir John, owner of the Coventry estate, in order to ensure her livelihood by obtaining a permanent and prominent position in society.
The significance of Jean's story lies in the specific ways she wins over the social, class, and gender biases of the hesitant Coventrys and how her actions speak to her own potential self formation. While playing the role of governess within the Coventry home, Jean continually masks and unmask multiple personas, including the domestically natured governess, the suffering orphan, the enraged and mistreated woman, and the conquering heroine. Jean's ability to mask and unmask multiple personas allows her to both reinforce and subvert social concepts of femininity, manipulating the Coventry bias. In Fuller's terms, Jean's natural ability to adhere to degendered organic traits of being simply reiterates the reality that innate gendered traits are social constructions. In other words, Jean's ability to enact both feminine and masculine selfhoods proves the flaw in nineteenth-century ideology: if Jean can act the part, how can she authentically be the part? The truth is she exists outside of or above her part.

Like Gerty, Jean obtains the ultimate prize of domestic fiction—the security of marriage. But unlike Cummins, Alcott does not present this achievement as the much-needed male companion that ties up the loose ends of Gerty's life. Rather, Behind a Mask offers the marriage of Jean and Sir John as the ultimate redemption for a woman who stands outside of conventional approaches to gender roles. Sir John's absolute refusal to acknowledge Jean as anything other than the sentimental masks she presents to him echoes the equally damaging sentimental homage Fuller argues that men offer up to those few women who operate outside of nineteenth-century gender ideology. Sir John happily remains ignorant as Jean steps into the role
of Lady Coventry, thus fulfilling her plot and ensuring the survival of her essential selfhood despite the common knowledge of her assumed identity.

Despite their differences, The Lamplighter and Behind a Mask both conclude with loose ends. Just as the reader is left to hypothesize as to whether Gerty and Willie will achieve an egalitarian marriage, so, too, is the reader left to guess whether Jean’s marriage to Sir John can possibly achieve Fuller’s utopian vision of a religious union, for the novella closes upon the first hours of Jean’s marriage to Sir John and leaves the story as masked as its main character remains to her husband.

Women’s Rhetorical Reform

Before delving into the specific ways in which Fuller, Cummins, and Alcott present the possibility of female potential development, an overview of how each of these texts operates within the context of nineteenth-century thought will clarify the approaches taken by each author. The subsequent remarks will cover the specific ways in which the various political and social reform movements of the nineteenth century embraced the dominant approach to domesticating women rather than the liberating approach taken by Fuller. In addition, the subsequent section will examine the complexity of contextualizing nineteenth-century women under domestic or “sentimental” terms, and the difficulty in approaching nineteenth-century women’s literature within shifting twenty- and twenty-first century criticism.

As a rhetorical text, WNC reflects Margaret Fuller’s major shift in focus from the reform of women’s self-culture to the social and political reform necessary to alter
women's place in society. The significance of WNC appearing mid-century manifests itself in the multiplicity of Fuller's far-reaching agenda. Determined to deliberately alter the position of women in American society, Fuller urgently addresses the harmful social and political implications of limiting female development. But unlike the reform writers who also sought to reveal the damaging effects of the lack of educational and political access for women, Fuller seeks to undomesticate women by claiming authentic selfhood outside of domestic roles. In part, WNC reveals Fuller's movement from the internalized thought that echoes through her earlier writing to public criticism, or her "awakening to ideology" (Garvey 116). This awakening pushes Fuller to focus explicitly on woman's culture as a developing force and demands that she confront and challenge the social and political ideology of women's roles in antebellum America.

The significance of how Fuller constructs female identity in WNC is revealed partially by looking back at her earlier endeavors. Her Boston Conversations, beginning in 1844, reveal her intent to reshape the way in which women's education was forming during the antebellum period. By insisting that women read and discuss not only traditional classics but also empirical inquiry and Enlightenment logic, Fuller develops an idea of female thought and culture that applied a completely new notion of intellectual development to women. The reality that women, even educated women, were never called upon to use their intellect except for purposes of display was of great concern and irritation to Fuller. Charles Capper points out in "Margaret Fuller as Cultural Reformer: The Conversations in Boston," that Fuller's deep
concern with women’s intellectual and spiritual character is what moves her to apply
the transcendentalist claims of intellectual activity to women. By insisting that
intellectual activity is a practically and emotionally satisfying occupation to women,
Fuller hopes that women might achieve “some of the same intellectual benefits that
the sphere of public activity denied to them” (515).

As Fuller’s continued focus on women’s intellectual activity vaulted her
Boston Conversations into the public light, her attention shifted to the reality that the
most basic rights to family and property were continuously denied to women,
regardless of their educational or economic situation or married status. It is Fuller’s
own understanding of and frustration with this subjection of women and children to
economic, physical, and psychological dangers at the hands of abusive and neglectful
men that Fuller refers to as “atrocious instances” (258) that push her towards a more
definitive line of social and political reasoning. Her awareness that political
inequalities ground women in a state of dependence upon men leads her to the
gradual recognition of the need for social reform in the approach to women’s culture.
Capper notes this gradual shift in Fuller’s approach to woman’s culture. In the late
1930s, her Boston Conversations operate as a type of forum for women to develop
their mental capacity, a collective learning group through which women are
encouraged to explore their own intellectual energy and pursue mental realms not
previously open to them. The success of the Boston Conversations lay in Fuller’s
ability to motivate and cultivate women’s mental abilities. Yet it is not until Fuller
moves into the mid-1840s that she begins to apply the implications of these
discoveries to political reform, moving from what Capper calls a position of activism “of the mind” to an activism of the “social mind” (523).

As evidence mounted about the conditions of women working in factories and mills, books like Harriet Robinsons’ *Loom and Spindle* and Lucy Larcom’s *A New England Girlhood* reveal the damaging repercussions of creating a nation of economically dependent women, including decreased educational opportunity for young women and mothers. This increased awareness brought mass organizational reform for women’s rights. Much in step with the mounting abolition movement, reform dialogue within antebellum political culture began to formulate the increased awareness of the need to advance women’s rights. The perspective this dialogue took towards political access is centered on the differing approaches to the role of the American woman, specifically in terms of domesticity and education. These differing perspectives offer an important context for Fuller’s analysis of education, Cummins’ representation of domesticity, and Alcott’s discussion of labor and class.

Evidence of this shift in perspectives about female roles and social positions is seen in Fuller’s directly addressing political interpretation at the beginning of *WNC*. Arguing for the political rights of women, she makes a linguistic claim against the standard interpretation of the Declaration of Independence by insisting that “men” in “all men are born free and equal” (254) be understood to reference the inclusion of women. Fuller’s inclusive interpretation shifts woman’s role from an invisible dependent to one of an active and responsible agent, a view that pushes the boundaries of political interpretation in an attempt to view law as universal. It is
Fuller's inclusive interpretation that lays the integral groundwork for Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who would later claim that *WN* fostered the rise of the Women's Rights Movement which erupted just years later in Seneca Falls, New York and put into action the signing of the Declaration of Sentiments, written only four years after the first publication of *WN*.

In addition, Fuller's "rhetoric of reform" echoes the growing recognition of the similarities between "oppressed" women and "enslaved" blacks in American society (Garvey 113). The limited ability of women to gain any political access heightens concern in an already growing abolitionist movement as women find themselves in the position of defending the rights of slaves. The result is an explosion of highly contentious discussions about liberty, equality, and freedom for blacks and women in the decade preceding the war.

Interestingly, Fuller's approach to political rights through the reinterpretation of the law is more a matter of individual realization than complete public apprehension. For Fuller, the reinterpretation of the law is a matter of common sense; "that which has once been clearly conceived in the intelligence cannot fail sooner or later to be acted out" (254). That she believed this reinterpretation of law as gender-equal "cannot fail of universal recognition" (254) reflects Fuller's own development as a social reformer; just as Fuller's realization of the necessity of political rights for women developed gradually, only the gradual recognition by the American public of women's condition will alter the political framework that seeks to silence their concerns, and therefore, their access to self-definition-making.
Despite the reality that numerous female reform writers agree with Fuller's recognition that there exists a "tone of feeling toward women as towards slaves," (258) there is no complete consensus as to what is to be done about it. In terms of the essential connection between women, the home, and political identity, Fuller's perspective in *WNC* stands in direct opposition to many reform and antebellum writers who insist on the unique and essential connection between women and domesticity. Even before women's reform writing was on the rise, the publication of books such as *Young Lady's Own Book: A Manual of Intellectual Improvement and Moral Development* and John Armstrong's *The Young Woman's Guide to Virtue, Economy, and Happiness* reflect the dominant approach to women as contributors to American society by their devotion to the home and to the interests of those in the domestic sphere. Written as reference guides for women, these books demonstrate a consistent type of gender definition-making that sought to establish women's roles as dependent upon men, urging women to fulfill their definitive roles as domestic peacemakers by, as *Young Lady's Own Book* states, making "a man's home delightful" by constantly sympathizing with the feelings of her husband and children (13, emphasis mine). What such guides reinforce is the shaping of woman's role as tied to the hearth, and the establishment of an essential connection of women to the home as central to the harmony and productivity of the social sphere. In terms of the family nucleus, the woman is charged with increasing her husband's "motives for virtuous exertion" (13) and remain dedicated only by the good of her family at the cost of her own identity; "Where want of congeniality impairs domestic comfort, the
fault is generally chargeable on the female side, for it is for woman, not for man, to
make the sacrifice, especially in indifferent matters. She must, in a certain degree, be
plastic herself if she would mold others” (13). By extension, a woman’s immediate
family are not the only individuals to feel her influence. As the *Young Lady’s Own
Book* goes on to state:

Domestic life is a woman’s sphere, and it is here that she is most
usefully as well as most appropriately employed. But society, too,
feels her influence, and owes to her, in great measure, its balance and
its tone. She may be here a corrective of what is wrong, a moderator of
what is unruly, and a restraint on what is indecorous. Her presence
may be a pledge against impropriety and excess, a check on vice, and a
protection to virtue. (13-15)

This explicit focus on woman confined to promoting the happiness of others within
the domestic sphere presents the way in which women were educated to act and think
about themselves and it encouraged them to foster a type of devotion towards their
husbands which, Fuller argues, boarders on idolatry and threatens not only woman’s
ability to foster her own potential abilities, but the ability of society to function in the
most productive way.

Fuller’s approach to female education and Cummins’ novelistic response to it
pushes the boundaries of antebellum femininity. In terms of contextualizing female
educational reform during the mid-nineteenth century, there is little dispute among
female reform writers as to the fact that female self-formation requires a major shift
in terms of education both within and outside of the domestic realm. Urging a more formal and justifiable education for women, Sarah Grimké's *Letters on Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* claims women's education was "miserably deficient" (46). The reality that women are taught to regard marriage as the "one thing needful" (46) and "only avenue to distinction," (48) rather than the development of their minds, frustrates Grimké, who insists that women be given more educational advantages in order to gain an understanding of themselves as individuals who are not required to depend upon men for their mental livelihood. Perhaps most famously Catherine Beecher's extensive work towards improving female education represents the centrality of the issue and the essential need to educate women within the home to foster a virtuous society, which will be discussed in chapter one.

Although Sarah Grimké's and Catherine Beecher's works reflect a significant shift in the viewing of women's education in the antebellum period, it is important to note that there were vast differences in opinion as to the exact definition of what female education was and what it entailed. In her book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, Frances Cogan examines the multiple dimensions of women's education during the pre- and post-Civil War years. The multiplicity of definitions of "education" in the mid-nineteenth century varied so greatly as to call into question the very basis of its purpose. Cogan asks, is it enough to call a female education "home study," (67) which was completed outside of a formal schooling, or is female education a sort of vocational training, or even academic training on a somewhat minor intellectual level? In terms of Fuller's
differing approach to female scholarship, what is central to the discussion of female education is what Cogan stresses is the reality that an “academic” education, including the study of classics, literature, history, languages, philosophy, mathematics, and physical sciences is the most “visibly absent” in female education during the mid-nineteenth century (67). Cogan regards this lack of academic higher learning as a matter of cultural ideology, centralized around the debate over whether “woman’s mind was equal to that of man and whether [woman’s mind] was capable of being educated in the same way (method) or in the same disciplines (subject) as men’s” (68). It is upon this essential debate that Fuller enters the arena; by seeking to establish the opportunity for women to receive an academically driven education, Fuller creates the ability for women to enter into the context of the social and political mind, one in which both women and men are given the same opportunity and access to find, develop, and use their mental capacities.

*Sentimental Contexts*

It is virtually impossible to discuss the issue of female education and political access in the nineteenth century without addressing the deep effects that “sentimental” approaches to identity had in defining women’s position and understanding of themselves in both the private and public sector. As mentioned, the role of domesticity as it related to women’s roles dominated the women’s guides of the mid-nineteenth century, as well as to the rise of women’s fiction throughout the antebellum period and up to the latter half of the nineteenth century, of which both Cummins and Alcott are of central importance.
What complicates the examination and interpretation of this literature is that despite the reality that nineteenth-century women’s fiction brought with it an increased focus on women’s issues, specifically women as producers, consumers, and subjects of writing, it has all too often been examined within the widely classified context of “sentimental” or “domestic” fiction. The consistent infusion of the two terms, “sentimental” and “domestic,” make the examination of women’s fiction challenging in that twenty- and twenty-first century working definitions offer seemingly complex and sometimes confusing applications of these terms. What is certain is the necessity to contextualize the wide variety of approaches to women’s fiction of the nineteenth century, specifically the ways in which *The Lamplighter* and *Behind A Mask* offer up their version of non-domesticated womanhood.

Often defined as “sentimentalists” or “literary domestics” for their focus on female self-formation as it relates to and grows out of the domestic sphere, novelists like Cummins, including Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Augusta Jane Evans, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Maria Cummins, Susan Warner and Fanny Fern gained immense popularity throughout the nineteenth century for their fictional depiction of the female selfhood. Novels like *Hope Leslie* and *The Wide, Wide World*, although immensely popular initially, have only recently enjoyed republication as the rise of feminist literary and cultural studies have sought a reanalysis of early American women’s writing. With this renewed interest in women’s fiction from the nineteenth century has come an intense debate over the nature, meaning, and consequences of the general lumping together of such a large number of female authors, exemplified in the
classification of these fictional works in multiple terms, including but not limited to “sentimental romance,” “fiction of sensibility,” “domestic novel,” and “sentimental fiction” (McFarland 36).

In essence, it appears that the terminology and classification of women’s nineteenth-century fiction is rhetorical in nature; that the definitions of these terms, specifically “domestic” and “sentimental,” have remained unfixed and critically challenged from all sides of social, cultural, political, class, and gender perspectives proves the seriousness of combining “domestic” and “sentimental” fiction into the heap of women’s writing as a whole. More importantly, the early definitions of these terms have only encouraged the dismissal of novels like *The Lamplighter* from any sort of serious critical analysis. Critics like Joanne Dobson have argued that this unfixed perspective of domestic and sentimental fiction gained momentum as the twentieth-century modernist standards that valued irony, fragmentation, and a type of inaccessibility came into fashion, labeling what is considered the less complex women’s fiction as “lowbrow” in terms of literary vogue. In her article “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” Dobson argues that this led to a diversity in criticism of women’s fiction over the last three decades; “With the accelerating recovery of nineteenth-century women’s writing, sentimentalism has been approached as a subliterature, [and] as moral philosophy, as a hegemonic cultural discourse” (264).

Interestingly, this diversity includes both highly positive and negative approaches to sentimental and domestic fiction that have become increasingly focused over the last three decades. In large part, this is due to the reevaluation of past
criticism and the perspectives presented in the late seventies that often weighed in on the pejorative side of literary classification. In other words, the negative perspective of how sentimentalism operated within women's fiction pushed these rediscovered novels into a corner with other works considered to bolster the confining and stereotypical roles women were forced to play in nineteenth-century society and culture.

In part, this is due to the equation of domestic fiction with the sentimental mode of the seduction novels of the late eighteenth century. Works like Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* focused on the construction of an extravagantly emotional or "sentimental" heroine who comes to ruin at the hands of a relentless and devious suitor. Although somewhat similar in plot formation, women's novels of the nineteenth century also focus on a female heroine who manages to suffer through a series of crisis-laden episodes before she obtains the ultimate success of becoming a wife and mother. The important difference between the two lies in their conclusions; whereas the seduction novel brings the woman to ruin, the domestic novel celebrates the heroine's success defined by her domestication.

That the highly irrational approach to the female self is, in a sense, suffocated by her sentimental sufferings is not lost on critics of the late 1970s and 80s. In her book *The Feminization of American Culture*, published in 1977, Ann Douglas defines sentimentalism as a cluster of "ostensibly private feelings which always attains public and conspicuous expression" (254) for the sake of titillation. Despite the fact that
Douglas's approach focuses on the loss of Calvinist patriarchal structures within American society and its effect on fiction, her pejorative perspective on sentimentalism echoes the skepticism of the feminist critical approach to nineteenth-century women's novels as motivated by what Douglas terms the "feminine need of self-justification, for which literature provided the best vehicle" (62). Situating the domestic novel as the producer of literary consuming women, Douglas writes, "Indeed, this literature seems today both ludicrous and painful in the evidence it offers of the enormous need of its authors and readers for uncritical confirmation of themselves and instantaneous satisfaction of their appetites" (62-3, emphasis mine). Hence, domestic novels are written and consumed without a proper lens and foster a highly emotive, irrational approach to femininity and female identity.

Understandably, perspectives like Douglas's have come under great attack. That all women's fiction would be considered as taking an "uncritical" approach to female identity is to ignore the depth to which many women, including Cummins and by extension Alcott, were writing. It is of no surprise that many have come to the aid of nineteenth-century women's fiction with a new critical lens. But even new literary criticism maintains a certain level of inconsistency, or at least refusal to distinguish definitions of domesticity and sentimentality as they relate to female roles.

A notable shift in working definitions of sentimentalism is evidenced in the numerous approaches to women's fiction as a product of a capitalistic ideology as it pertains to the emerging concept of individualism. Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism* equates the rise of sentimental literature with that of the industrial
marketplace. In doing so, she argues that sentimentalism creates and operates as a subculture of women who which is by the ethos of sympathy based on collectivity and self-denial. In Brown’s terms, this female subculture both “claim[s] and typif[ies] an anti-market (if not anti-masculine) individualism by simultaneously adhering to unique and distinct sets of identity formation within the domestic realm” (1). In other words, the female sphere of a sentimental mode of identity reflects a selfhood that is “under construction, or at least renovation” (1) within the private sphere of domesticity.

The implications of Brown’s perspective lean dangerously towards the binary present in gendered roles. Like Fuller’s head/heart dichotomy, the female position continues to be limited to a domestic realm that is encased in a subservient role to (male) capitalist systems. Despite the desire to emancipate the self by claiming equal footing, albeit in capitalistic terms, Brown’s approach is limiting in its application to women’s fiction because it ignores the ever-shifting differences between “domesticity” and “sentimentality” as they operate within women’s literature. New scholarly critical interpretation is revealing the serious implications of the narrow definitions Douglas’s approach imposes upon women’s fiction of the nineteenth century, proving what Nina Baym calls in her article “Woman’s Novels and Women’s Minds,” the “extreme slipperiness of the concept of sentimental,” fostering claims that women’s domestic novels are perhaps “less sentimental than we have supposed” (336).
A plethora of new studies on nineteenth-century women’s fiction give clearer insight into approaches to nineteenth-century women’s fiction. Books such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s *Disorderly Conduct* attempt to chart the historical approach to women in history, particularly the feminist debates challenging the position of women in society, while Susan K. Harris’s book, *19th-Century American Women’s Novels: Interpretive Strategies*, attempts to give novels a second read by differentiating between nineteenth-century readers and twentieth-century readers and the dominant cultural assumptions inherent in both discourses. Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs* argues for a “positive value of stereotyped characters and sensational, formulaic plots” by altering the conception of the literature, seeing the texts as “agents of cultural formation rather than as objects of interpretation and appraisal” (xvii, xviii).

Although relatively new approaches to nineteenth-century women’s literature, these texts and criticisms of them continue to be challenged, pushing the definitions of the sentimental and domestic realm further away from its white middle-class basis. These expanded definitions are reflected in the focus on the roles of gender, race, and citizenship found in Bruce Burgett’s *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* and Lora Romero’s *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States*. Arguing against the claim made by critics like Tompkins, Romero pointedly attempts to challenge the assumptions of the industrial-commercial economy through third-world feminist criticism and theory bringing attention to the class and race “impelled subtexts” (Wexler 15) of Anglo-American domesticity in which sentimentalism intends to control race and class
relations, not white, middle-class readers. Reaching even further into the role of
domestic policy, Amy Kaplan, in her article “Manifest Domesticity,” argues that
scholars have overlooked the relationship between domesticity, nationalism, and
imperialism within nineteenth-century women’s writing, urging for a “more mobile
and less stabilizing” understanding of sentimentalism within women’s fiction (583).

As these critical works demonstrate the fluid nature of the terms
“sentimentalism” and “domesticity,” it is important also to acknowledge June
Howard’s warning that no “account of the form [can] end discussion and produce a
consensus for a single definition of sentimentality” (76). Therefore, for purposes of
the current discussion, sentimentalism and domesticity will not be used as
interchangeable terms, but will adhere to the broader definitions put forth by Nina
Baym, Rosemarie Thomson, and Elizabeth Barnes. In her introduction to the second
edition of Woman’s Fiction, Baym explains the two divergent meanings of
sentimentalism: one “denotes private, excessive, undisciplined, self-centered
emotionality;” and the other “denotes public sympathy and benevolent fellow-
feeling” (21-22). It is the later sense of the term sentimentalism on which this thesis
will focus, one that is considered positive in that it fosters a sense of social cohesion,
or in Baym’s terms, a discourse “constructed not as evasive self-absorption but as a
practical philosophy of community designed to operate in a variety of social contexts
to complement or modify social interactions that are otherwise calculating and
instrumental” (22).
In application, this definition of sentimentalism allows the main characters of *The Lamplighter* and *Behind A Mask* to offer what Baym calls a "sentimentality grounded in their sense of self" (23). Although Baym argues that this sense of self is a product of a gendered education in domestic privacy, it is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate the way in which Gerty Flint and Jean Muir diverge significantly from gendered constructions of identity formation. For Gerty that means reevaluating the motivations of her educators and Gerty's own interpretation of piety, duty, and Christian feminine virtue that stands outside of nineteenth-century expectations of female capacity. Conversely, Alcott's approach to the selfhood of Jean Muir insists on a complex layering of female identity as it relates to, and conflicts with, the stereotypical sentimental woman as an authentic selfhood; this is achieved through the masking and unmasking of Jean's persona and the unique ways in which Jean's seemingly fluid nature works to positively contribute to the fostering of potential selfhoods in those individuals she interacts with.

Like sentimentalism, domesticity also suffers from extensive redefining. Domestic ideology in the early nineteenth century exalted the position of the Victorian mother and homemaker. Blythe Forcey notes that as "angels of the home, middleclass women could combine their faith in God with their 'natural purity and goodness' to create a potent redeeming and reforming environment" (254) within the context of the woman's sphere or home. The ultimate hope of domestic ideology was that the force of feminine love and virtue would eradicate male vice and aggression in both the private and public sphere.
The implications of domesticity are both positive and negative. In “Crippled Girls and Lame Old Women: Sentimental Spectacles of Sympathy in Nineteenth Century American Women’s Writing,” Rosemarie Thomson states that domesticity “held that the home was the site of differentiation where women enacted a femininity that was antithetical and complementary to masculinity as well competitive with it” (128). Therefore, in its broadest sense, domesticity redefined woman as fundamentally different from and opposed to men. Thomson notes both the strength and limitations of this belief:

The strength of this belief was that it empowered women by offering them a potentially separate but equal, even superior, rendering of themselves. Its limitations, however, were the inevitable restrictions of segregation and differentiation in a society that privileges men in its unequal distribution of wealth, power, and status. In other words, women were both trapped and valorized by the notion of domesticity and its script for femininity. (128-9)

It is with awareness of the implications of domesticity’s “script of femininity” that this thesis approaches the domestic nature of Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* and Alcott’s *Behind A Mask*. Understanding that domesticity casts women as professionals in the home, the roles that both Gerty and Jean are and are not expected to fulfill speak to the definitions of femininity adhered to within each story. The implications of domestic goals in *The Lamplighter* require that Gerty adhere to the non-gendered expectations of her adopted family, thereby requiring her to refute the arbitrary power
of male authority in Mr. Graham, by remaining true to her own understanding of self and how this may step outside of conventional approaches to feminine and domestic duty.

So, too, does Jean challenge the script of femininity by casting herself simultaneously in and outside of domestic duty, the implications of which Alcott further complicates by Jean’s marriage to Sir John. In fact, both Alcott and Cummins acknowledge the complications marriage presents in the text, and yet, each leaves questions unanswered: Ultimately, is the domestication of Gerty and Jean unavoidable within their prospective marriages? Or does each character so subvert the domestic and sentimental script of femininity that both are able to live outside of domesticity’s rigid approaches to potential selfhood?
Fostering Female Capacity

Advocating Female Education

Although many women reformers were arguing for a better education for women during the mid-nineteenth century, few were advocating for the highly intellectually driven education Fuller encourages in her Boston Conversations. Numerous reform writers relied upon a narrow framework of reasoning that refused to acknowledge woman’s mental ability as equal to man’s. Consequently, the sole purpose for a woman to cultivate her intellect is for the betterment of the male children she produces and will send out of a domestic haven and into the public arena. In other words, the formation of the female identity depends upon a distinct separation of male and female spheres, in which the woman’s intellectual capacity is only essential in providing and securing her relationship to her husband and children.

In part, Fuller’s reforming approach to woman’s potential capacity or need for formal education is challenged by the nineteenth-century ideologies inherent in the Cult of True Womanhood. The Cult of True Womanhood, as named by Barbara Welter in her influential essay of the same title, privileged the attributes of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity and held that woman obtains her greatest fulfillment in her ability to rear children and operate as a domestic provider and comforter. This role put forth a distinct separation between female and male roles in society, one that led to an outpouring of reform writing challenging the limiting nature of True Womanhood on female development.
Published only two years before WNC, A. J. Grave's Woman in America: An Examination into the Moral and Intellectual Condition of American Female Society reflects the urgent need for female education. For Graves, female education is essential for communication between the sexes, specifically in nineteenth-century marriages in which individuals possess highly specialized concerns due to their distinct spheres of duty. But unlike Fuller, Graves' approach to female education is far less academic than the Boston Conversations. Rather, Graves advocates the sharing in "fireside conversation" between the sexes in order for women to learn about the moral and intellectual concerns of her husband without pushing her into the public or political realm (63). Graves' approach offers women the role of an active listener and supporter, encouraging wives to give their own insights and share their own domestic trials in order to create a type of "common ground on which both [husband and wife] may meet with equal pleasure and advantage to themselves and their offspring" (66).

In addition, Graves encourages women to cultivate the "intellectual tastes" in children through the reading of current literature and "progress of science" (69). By combining this new knowledge with her "richly stored wisdom of the past," woman educates both herself and her children and allows her husband to "forget his business and his politics, and to devote the few hours he spends at home to those higher pleasures of the mind, which will not only yield a delightful refreshment at the time, but enable him to return with renewed vigor to the routine of his daily labors" (67). Regardless of how one interprets woman's "richly stored wisdom of the past" as
experience or possible academic training, it is clear that as a reformer, Graves advocates female education as dependent upon domestic ability and obligation. In all, Graves supports the popular image of the home as a haven and refuge out of which emerges a type of newly enlightened domestic woman whose power is to shape the learning of her children while providing what little insights she has to her husband in his world of commerce.

By far the most famous advocate of female education in the nineteenth century is Catherine Beecher. Often considered radical for her views, Beecher’s educational reforms focused on an increased diversity of curriculum for women, including the provision of the same classical education as men. *The Evils Suffered by American Woman and American Children: The Causes and the Remedy*, published in 1846, reflects Beecher’s deep desire that women be taught to develop their own mental abilities. But like Graves, Beecher’s methods depend upon a partial segregation of the sexes, played out in what she and her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, referred to as training women in domestic economy and the rational skills for running the home. Similar to Graves’ fireside chat approach, Beecher sees woman’s education as foundational to the progress of nation-building, or in her words, in order for the “destitute American children” to rise to the acclamation of the American nation they must be educated “by the agency of American women” (5). This aim, Beecher claims, is the “humble way” on a “small scale” through which the present American nation will influence the rising generation of children (5).
Although Beecher remained a strong advocate of women teaching in the home, unlike Graves she promotes a somewhat professional level of female education as a vocation, advocating women teachers in classrooms throughout the country. Part of this aim comes from Beecher’s desire for women to work in the “safer” environment of a scholastic sphere rather than suffer the abuses facing thousands of women working in factories and mills, jobs that Beecher would rather leave to men.

It is an important distinction that Beecher’s *Evils Suffered* reflects both a concern for women in the professional workplace and a desire for them to obtain some level of professionalism in teaching. Although she advocates for a more advanced recognition of women’s intellectual powers, she does so within a framework of hierarchical positioning. Aware of the rising interest in women’s equality in all “social and civil concerns,” Beecher speaks out in *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* against the full political rights of women voting and “administering laws” (36). For Beecher, the differences between the sexes require women to take subordinate positions to men, not necessarily due to the physical makeup of males and females but in order to maintain a sense of semblance within society. Beecher reinforces the instituted and sustained social construction of gender in order to promote society as a “harmonious” construct through which the greatest possible gain is manifested (26).

What concerns the present discussion is not necessarily whether Beecher advocates this harmonious ideal of society as a continuous need or an immediate structure which she deems necessary in the years leading up to the civil war. Rather,
the significance of Beecher's approach to female education lies in the possible limitations it places on women, limitations dominated by the Cult of True Womanhood. As a reformer, Beecher's approach provides an excellent context within which to place Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*.

*WNC* reflects the struggle to release women from the binds of nineteenth-century gender ideology, specifically the binding of female development to the domestic sphere. Fuller recognizes the divisional implications inherent in a structuralist approach that reinforced the extreme differences between the sexes, requiring females and males to play distinct and "natural" roles and to adhere to separate spheres of society. *WNC* challenges the unmoving interpretation and application of the binary that lies at the center of the Cult of True Womanhood and Beecher's approach to domestic economy by deconstructing what Fuller deems the underlying ideology that seeks to limit the education and intellectual freedom of American women: the metaphorical head/heart dichotomy.

This metaphorical dichotomy creates a distinct separation between the male and female sexes as separate aspects of physical being, each fulfilling their roles as opposing sides of a physical existence that are intended to work in correlation for the betterment of the natural roles each fulfills. The male side of the dichotomy reflects the dominant approach to male mental capacity, defining him as the "head," or the mental and rational side of humanity. The obvious implications of the role as "head" require that the man understand himself as the provider and protector of women, including his wife, mother, or daughter, as deemed possible through his seemingly
elevated ability to rationalize and think to a level above that of a woman’s ability and comprehension.

The female aspect of the head/heart dichotomy is the “heart.” Her role is defined by her emotive strength, nurturing senses, and submissive virtue which was supposed to be prevalent in the female sex, all traits considered unequal to male rationality and therefore subordinate to it. The implications of these separate spheres for female education and potential development are far-reaching. Notably, Fuller argues in the onset of WNC that the harmful nature of this gender distinction is the attitude taken towards them, first noted in the voice of the irritated trader who is determined to claim gender attributes as separate and distinct aspects bound to sex. Echoing the assumptions present in these gendered roles, Fuller presents a conversation between herself and the dominant perspective on nineteenth-century culture in the voice of the irritated trader, who argues against the rights of his wife, and women in general, as well as for his rights as “the head of [his] home” (256). Railing against any female desire for political and societal liberation, the irritated trader lashes out against the possibilities of future freedoms for women:

Is it not enough [...] that you have done all you could to break up the national union, and thus destroy the prosperity of our country, but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen hearth to vote at polls, and preach from the pulpit? (255)
Here the trader’s anger is formed out of the perspective of ideal domestic protection; rights granted to women does more than affect national policy—they reach into and damage the family unit. The family unit, upon which Graves and Beecher grounded the virtue of womanhood and the morality of the nation, relies on the fusion of distinct sets of gendered roles. Only when this structure is in place does the assumed natural union of individual aspects, the head and the heart, create one whole.

But the “whole” is not an individual person, but the “whole” of a relationship, exemplified in the marital union. In the trader’s perspective, there is no separation of individuality for women. Rather, women and men have an obligation to manage and remain in spheres separate from each other. Stepping beyond the “natural” bounds of domesticity will disable a woman to “attend to those of her own sphere” (255-6). It is this obligation, or need to attend to those matters of the domestic sphere, that binds woman to the centrality of the home, exemplified in the perspectives of Beecher and Graves.

The significance of Fuller’s approach to the domestication of women lies in her awareness that the dominant perspective of women keeps them in a position that not only defines woman’s selfhood, but the selfhood of man. The slave trader’s frustration stems directly from his acknowledgement that a woman’s desire to change her position, or step out of her “sphere,” will have a profound effect on his own sense of identify and ease. If a woman were to leave her family fold to vote, hold office, or to preach, she would be deserting those she needs to attend to who are also a part of
this sphere. If the trader’s home is disrupted, then the roles that each sex fulfills will no longer stand, and the male role of “head” will be disrupted as well.

Fuller’s approach to the strict fashioning of the head/heart dichotomy takes a very personal form. Pointing out the obvious ways in which women fulfill more than the emotional and nurturing role of the “heart,” Fuller argues for the acknowledgement of the physical aspects of domestic life, including the “drudgery” that comes with maintaining a household (259). For Fuller, it is precisely these physical experiences that make women fit for roles outside of the domestic realm. According to Fuller, those “who think the physical circumstances of woman would make a part in the affairs of national government unsuitable,” (259) attempt to bind woman by her physical body, acknowledging her as only fit to fulfill roles deemed suitable for her physical form, including the ability to reproduce and nurture children.

In her book Uneven Developments, Mary Poovey pointedly notes that this physical definition keeps women bound: “if women were governed not by reason (like men), but by something else, then they could hardly be expected (or allowed) to participate in the economic and political fray” (11). This assumption of physical inequality not only limits access and potential development, but ensures woman what Cynthia Davis calls a “stifling domestication” of self (Body and Soul 40). Fuller argues that this domestication is not only embraced but also enforced by men and husbands who refuse to acknowledge a woman’s or wife’s possible desire for self-development outside of his own projection of her desire. As depicted in the voice of the trader, “She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have, every
means of improvement, every indulgence” (256). Again, the home is reinforced as a
haven, even a possible holiday in which a woman’s happiness finds itself in the ease
and enjoyment of comforting others.

In an explanatory note to Fuller’s text, Jeffrey Steele notes the significance of
Fuller’s use of the word “indulgence” (454). Operating as a type of religious
reference that reveals the trader’s sense of relational hierarchy, the term “indulgence”
exposes the trader’s approach to his wife as akin to that of the Catholic tradition of
issuing pardons to sinners. Woman is regarded as one who is pardoned by man for her
“natural” state and is therefore expected to worship him. This hierarchical positioning
sets up the expectation of consent in the relationship between the
man/husband/pardoner and the woman/wife/pardoned. In essence, the voice of the
irritated trader captures the desire to define a woman’s position as subordinate to his
own. Therefore, the woman is expected to depend upon the man to define her
happiness and contentment and consent to his definitions thereof.

It is not only the husband/trader’s attempt to define a woman’s happiness that
angers Fuller, but the refusal of the husband to even entertain a viewpoint that might
upset his own sense of domestic comfort. The wife, defined by the husband as too
“amiable” to make her husband unhappy and “too judicious” to wish to step beyond
the “sphere of her sex,” is denied any sense of self-proclamation at the husband’s
refusal to “consent” to have their peace disturbed by such a discussion (256). Intent
on deconstructing the head/heart dichotomy, Fuller questions the social assumption
inherent in the trader’s assuredness that his wife is content and fulfilled with her
present situation. Responding to the irritated trader’s insistence that he would “never consent” to even address his wife’s perspective, Fuller argues that “it is not consent from you that is in question, it is assent from your wife” (256). At the suggestion of “assent,” the irritated trader attempts to reiterate the division of roles in the head/heart dichotomy; “Am not I the head of my house?” he responds (256). Fuller’s reaction to the trader’s question lays the foundational framework for the rest of her text; she replies, “You are not the head of your wife. God has given her a mind of her own” (256). For Fuller, the central focus of the head/heart dichotomy is the insistence that it grows out of a physically inherent, in-born presence of gendered traits. By distinguishing between the male given definition of female selfhood and what Fuller argues is the right and natural one, Fuller deviates from the dichotomy’s model in terms of gender distinction. She argues that both sexes possess the characteristics of the “head” and “heart” within their individual selfhoods. The recognition of this duality as present in every individual refutes the socially constructed concept that relationships depend upon the separation of gendered traits in order to coexist in their most “natural” forms. Fuller presents a relationship that does not rely or even deal with the issue of consent on any level, insisting that if each individual is treated as a complete unit unto herself, rather than the fulfillment of specific predetermined roles, then unions between individuals will naturally fall into place.

Perhaps more significant than Fuller’s approach to the issue of consent is her questioning of a woman’s assent to defend her husband’s authority on the issue of
their "natural" states within their relationship. Questioning why assent would even be present, she writes:

If the head represses no natural pulse of the heart, there can be no question as to your giving your consent. Both will be of one accord, and there needs but to present any question to get a full and true answer. There is no need of precaution, of indulgence, or consent. But our doubt is whether the heart does consent with the head, or only obeys its decrees with a passiveness that precludes the exercise of its natural powers, or a repugnance that turns sweet qualities to bitter, or a doubt that lays waste the fair occasions of life. (256)

Fuller's concern lies with the woman who assents to her husband's limiting perspective out of obedience to his will. The reality that the woman, and the woman alone, is subject to such a position raises important issues that hearken back to the upholding and interpretation of American law and the concept of representation. If women do not have, or are not given, the right to refute the rigid nature of gendered roles in the head/heart dichotomy publicly, who will challenge these distinctions? If women are to discover and develop to their fullest potential intellectually, how will they step beyond the boundaries placed on them by the rigid nature of the nineteenth-century gender ideology put forth by reform writers like Graves and Beecher and determined men intent on protecting their right to domestic peace?

For Fuller, the reality that these challenging questions are "vaguely" proposed and discussed between men and women is less important than the reality that they are
being “proposed at all” (256). That women are considering within themselves “what they need that they have not, and what they can have, if they find they need it” (256) heightens the urgent need to address gender distinctions. The desire of a woman to question her position as a “consenting heart” forces man to determine whether women need more, if they are “capable of being and having more than they are and have” and if so, if it is “best to consent to improvement in their condition” (256).

At best, Fuller herself embodies both the questions and possible solutions to these issues in her writing of *WNC*. In order to free woman to pursue the development of her potential selfhood, Fuller proposes to give woman “liberated measures” (256) through which she is free to develop her own selfhood outside the confined expectations and definitions placed on her by a patriarchal society and culture. By urging that the barriers be removed in order that woman may be free to develop to her fullest potential, Fuller sets up a test in which the assumptions of inherent gendered roles are tested. In order to “ascertain the truth,” Fuller demands that doors be thrown open to women, and then the truth about the adherence to “spheres” will proclaim itself (256). If a woman’s sphere is in the home, or outside of it, this will be revealed, but only if and when the concepts inherent in this gendered construction are tested and challenged by offering women access outside of the domestic realm.

This access finds its center in self-definition-making, made possible by a non-confining education and the tools to open up woman’s life outside of the domestic sphere. For Fuller, self-formation is the universal “unceasing revelation” (250) that binds each individual to another. Each and every person seeks to formulate her or his
self-hood because it is the “highest ideal man can form of his own powers, …that which he is destined to attain” (249). Ultimately, WNC is a call for action, a call for woman to have her turn in discovering her deepest and fullest potential. The ideal man, “however imperfectly brought out, has been far more so than that of woman” (252). She, “the other half of the same thought, the other chamber of the heart of life” needs now to “take her turn in the full pulsation” of life (252). In order to discover this “true destiny of woman,” (258) Fuller argues that women alone must publicly represent themselves, despite the dominant male attitude that insists that men represent women in the public sphere. To Fuller, any argument that the “beauty of the home would be destroyed” (259) if woman stepped out into the public sphere can only be broken by woman’s determination to do so. By advocating for her own advancement, woman will debunk the myth that the possibility of any “loss of physical grace and beauty” (259) to the society at large is less important than the grace and beauty a woman will gain by reaching her fullest potential on all levels, specifically through freedom outside of domestic obligation.

Despite the number of women reformers who proclaim the beauty or necessity of the female domestic sphere, there are a few advocates of women’s education in line with Fuller’s approach to self-cultivation. One such writer is Sarah C. Edgerton, who’s “Female Culture;” published in 1843, advocates education for women in the context of her domestic position; the emphasis is placed on the ability of a woman to share both her heart and her mind for a fuller relationship with her husband without subtracting in the “minutest degree from those qualities which render her lovely in
domestic life" (95). Edgarton’s proposal that woman think of herself less as a dependent rather than an independent woman is directly in line with Fuller’s approach to the cultivation of the female self and woman’s happiness. Framing the wide range of prevalent approaches to woman’s private and public sphere, Edgarton writes:

I think these contending advocates for the sex are both at fault in making exterior condition the source of female influence and happiness. If woman’s mind and heart are right it is not of essential importance whether her operations are in private, and upon her household, or whether they take a more open and blustering sphere of duty. The most she wants is not a character, a power and independence which erects “liberty poles,” and shouts “freedom” from the forum; but the calm, still, holy consciousness of mental and moral power, the elevation and strength which is born of knowledge, of thought and of self-reliance (95).

Edgarton’s focus reflects Fuller’s awareness that the social approach to women will only shift if women are given access to the development of intellectual, spiritual, and physical freedoms. The natural result will not only evidence itself in woman’s thought and self-reliance, but enable her to give back to her society in profound ways:

What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home. If fewer talents were given her, yet if allowed the free and full
employment of these, so that she may render back to the giver his own
usury she will not complain; nay I dare say she will bless and rejoice
in her early birth-place, her earthly lot. (WNC 261)

Fuller's admonition requires a complete recharacterization of the female identity, best
presented in the text as the alternative to the socially acceptable domesticated woman,
the veiled alter ego of "Miranda," who is an exemplification of the intellectual
element of the female selfhood and a model of female education. Closely based on
Fuller's own upbringing, Miranda offers a type of case-study through which Fuller
presents both the social stereotypes of the educated woman and the possible freedom
of an unimpeded lifestyle. Miranda is presented in the text through a series of
dialogues between herself and Fuller, operating as a type of engaging self-taught
intellectual.

The similarities between Fuller and Miranda are immediate, particularly the
way in which Miranda's upbringing reflects that of Fuller's own father, Timothy
Fuller, who advocated the intense education of his eldest daughter which enabled
Fuller at an early age to recognize her own intellectual capacities. Given her "father's
eyear trust" to begin her own studies, Miranda takes a "course of her own" making,
(262) embarking on an extensive early education with the support and confidence of
the men and women who believe in her mental abilities. Given the privilege to seek
and study as she willed, Miranda is taught to respect both her own abilities and the
freedom to cultivate them to her highest capacity. Having grown up in "the world of
mind," (261) she gains a strong self-dependence that is reflected in her ability to
foster relationships with those around her without a sense of timidity or inferiority (261). This strong self-dependence is one that Miranda advocates for women, insisting that if women could determine what they want, a characteristic often dreaded as original thought, than women would reach the point where they naturally develop “self-respect, and learn self-help” (263).

The fear of this ability of women to “naturally” develop their own independence is what classifies Miranda’s identity as “other” in terms of definitions of intellectual ability. Considered a “manly” woman, Miranda is defined as intellectually bright only in the sense that she is a rare specimen of female capacity. Fuller claims this attempt to subvert woman’s mental abilities by defining a woman’s mind as “masculine” is a reflection of man’s evident desire to keep woman in a position of inferiority. Fuller argues that this, in part, is due to man’s own desire for intellectual power and his inability to deem woman as worthy of being anything more than a toy, stating that “not only is man vain and fond of power, but the same want to development, which thus affects him morally, prevents his intellectually discerning the destiny of woman. The boy wants no woman, but only a girl to play ball with him, and mark his pocket handkerchief” (264).

Historically, this desire to keep woman as a playmate or ornament has kept men from developing anything other than a sentimental view of female accomplishment. Skeptical that woman can or could accomplish any feat of mental or physical power, men demand proof. When proof that women have accomplished the same feats as man is offered, all too quickly sentimentality steps in. At the sign of
female accomplishment, man's "eyes glisten, and he offers not merely approval, but homage" (266). Fuller notes that this sentimental perspective of women in history heralds women of accomplishment as celebrities of the age, not "common occurrences" (267). The lack of women as empowered and empowering outside of the domestic sphere is ignored by the society at large, which, like the irritated trader, defines the role as wife and mother as women's most purposeful position.

Miranda, whose intellectual discernment is characterized as "above her sex," (263) demonstrates confidence in her abilities to change the current of skepticism in nineteenth-century society. By insisting that the divisions between female and male roles be removed or weakened, Miranda opens the door for all women to find the freedom to cultivate the selfhood they so desire. The respect for domestic duties, for "those who cook something good, who create and preserve fair order in houses, and prepare therein the shining raiment for worthy inmates, worthy guests" is held in high regard, but only in so much as these "functions" are not "drudgery, or enforced necessity, but a part of life" (265). In this regard, woman's domestic role is less an obligation and more a desire of those who choose it of their own free will.

Certainly, Fuller is aware that most women are not economically able to step away from domestic duties. But she does not demand less from those women with the means, nor any woman, but to read good books and think while they go about their domestic lives (306). Speaking to those women who are of the economic means equated with leisure time, Fuller focuses in on those women who limit themselves to vain thoughts of beauty and the capturing of a husband rather than the fostering of
their intellects. Encouraging women to clear their souls from “the taint of vanity” and the relentless pursuit of flirtation with men, Fuller warns them not to “rejoice in conquests,” either in the power to allure so that other women may notice, or in the “pleasure of rousing passionate feelings that gratify…love of excitement” (325).

Aware that such actions make women dependent upon outward appearance to gain status and relationships, Fuller warns that desire to excite a man when a woman does not wish to reciprocate is often done “half consciously” with the shrouded attempt to flatter the self (WNC 325).

In a culture that pushes both woman and man into marriage, Fuller recognizes the need of both sexes to remain aware of potential disaster. Consequently, the fault falls in the laps of both sexes. The idea of calling on both women and men to recognize that the development of their fullest potential lies, in part, in their own hands, is echoed in the original title for Woman in the Nineteenth Century: The Great Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women. The positioning of each sex against herself or himself allows Fuller to cultivate her point; instead of placing the sexes against each other, Fuller places the individual against his/her ideal nature, arguing that the deepest failure has been “that of individual men to their better selves and correspondingly, of individual women to their potential achievements” (Robinson 86). This “ideal nature” requires a vast amount of freedom to grow and move, which, Fuller argues, is often stifled by the one institution that socially constructs the dichotomy of individuals in relationship: marriage.
The Marriage Union

What remains central to the concern of most women reformers in the nineteenth century is the reality that domestic roles within families are burdensome to many women. Even Fuller, who was a severe critic of marriage, recognizes the central role domestic duty played in limiting potential growth in women. A journal fragment written during the 1830s reveals her awareness that being alone can feel like a “great privilege,” one that offers the freedom to cultivate personal development outside the pressures of husband and children (Self-Definitions 7).

Regardless of Fuller’s unmarried status, WNC reflects her awareness that potential development in women was not only limited by educational access, but by the very relationships that tied her to the opposite sex. Underlying Fuller’s proposal for woman’s liberation is not only a call for woman’s individual self-betterment but for the betterment of relationships existing between and among the sexes. Rather than a solely individual call, it is a communal call to each individual to allow women the freedom of thought, expression, and cultivation of selfhood:

If principles could be established, particulars would adjust themselves aright. Ascertain the true destiny of woman, give her legitimate hopes, and a standard within herself; marriage and all other relations would by degrees be harmonized with these (258).

Much of Fuller’s argument in WNC revolves around the relationship between man and woman as one that binds both the sexes collectively and individually. The institution of marriage plays a pivotal role in Fuller’s reconstruction of female
identity because marriage is socially constructed to ignore women as individuals. In a culture that places great emphasis on the preparation of women for marriage, women were encouraged to respect the seriousness of the marriage bond. Many reformers, including Fuller, spoke of the difficulty of obtaining a divorce, which increased the urgency to educate women about marriage and the marriage choice. Many women writing for female educational reform were also advocating a type of marriage reform. Although some women saw marriage and the home as women’s highest achievement, women like Catherine Beecher desired women to make their own choices about when and whom they married. Stating that no woman is “obligated to take a husband, if she prefers to remain single” (Treatise 26). Beecher argues that a woman “ought never to be led to married life except under the promptings of pure affection. To marry for an establishment, for a position, or for something to do, is a deplorable wrong” (Evils Suffered 10). Ultimately, women such as Beecher were greatly distressed by the practice of encouraging women to pursue marriage over education. Defining her own understanding of marriage and education, Fuller writes that a house is “no home unless it contain food and fire for the mind as well as for the body” (260), reiterating her idea that too often women entered marriage with no real awareness that domesticity might stifle their mental pursuits.

Consequently, it is difficult to contextualize Fuller’s approach to marriage in WNC without first mentioning the approach to marriage of her Transcendentalist contemporaries and their understanding of marriage as an institution. In Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850, Anne Rose describes the
Transcendentalist approach to marriage as one that idealistically treated women as equals. She describes the gradual shift in focus in the search for ethical social relationships, maintaining that women, both single and married, would be treated more easily as equals. In part, this is due to Transcendentalists refusing to align themselves with a more issue-oriented movement such as antislavery, shifting the focus instead to the immediacy of the family and home. Yet the refusal to engage in public agitation, as well as the isolation of the Brook Farm and Fruitlands experiments, only brought the Transcendentalists further away from the reform women like Fuller were beginning to advocate. In a sense, the movement’s forced uprooting of individual lives only brought the idea of the “home” to a more conservative, emotional stability; in effect, Rose argues, “domesticating the movement as a whole” (162-3). Despite the earnest desire to protect the family from the negative effects of the free-market, it is difficult to determine whether the Transcendentalist movement challenged the cult of domesticity or simply reaffirmed it in the extreme conditions of their utopian societies.

If Emerson’s approach to marriage is any clue, it proves that even individual movements seeking ethical change may do little to break the resilience of marriage as an institution. A very close friend of Fuller’s, Emerson was married twice and, like Fuller, his own conclusions about the marriage union evolved gradually. More often than not, Emerson’s approach to marriage borders on the sentimental, envisioning the union as one of traditional roles:
Man represents Intellect whose object is Truth, Woman Love whose object is goodness. Man loves Reality, woman order; man power, woman grace. Man goes abroad into the world and works and acquires. Woman stays at home and makes the house beautiful. ("Nature" 62)

This passage from one of his early lectures exemplifies Emerson’s premise that marriage is a union of individuals who naturally compliment each other. It cannot be ignored that Emerson couches the complimentary natures of women and men in culturally and socially acceptable roles. In a sense, Emerson’s dualistic perspective on marriage echoes what Rose calls his inability to “envision the individuality of a woman” (166). Emerson’s approach to marriage encases what Fuller classifies as the marriage of “household partnership” in which the marriage operates as more of a business relationship than an intimacy. Each individual is cast in his or her own role; the man is the breadwinner who furnishes the home and the woman is the one who regulates the running and organization of it. It is a very simplistic marriage based on economic partnership that ensures the physical comfort of each individual. Certainly Emerson would not have considered his approach to marriage as limiting to women, despite the fact that his early lecture casts women and men in individualist roles of “great provider” and “capital housekeeper.” At its best, the marriage of household partnership, focused on “mutual esteem” and “practical kindness,” (282) is one based on the head/heart dichotomy and the necessity and simplicity of socially constructed
gender roles; there are no deviations and no question as to how those roles will be maintained.

Perhaps a more significant impact on how Fuller comes to see marriage outside of Emerson's perspective is the engagement of her close friend Anna Barker to Samuel Ward during the summer of 1840. Close friends of Fuller's, the ensuing marriage of Barker and Ward distressed Fuller, who had forged deep relationships with both individuals and was unwilling to imagine her future relationships with them as solely friendships and not intimacies.

Much has been made of Fuller's relationship to her close friend Anna Baker which at times almost appears to boarder on the erotic, at least on Fuller's side. The close-knit female friendship was juxtaposed with Fuller's seemingly platonic, yet again, passionate (at least to Fuller) relationship with Samuel Ward. In a sense, Fuller's reaction to her friends' marriage is one of both personal and cultural betrayal; personal in her own loss, or possible feelings of rejection, and cultural in her inability to grasp their willingness to bend to the social institution of marriage. Even Emerson is surprised by the supposed lapse into conventional marriage, feeling assured that the Barker/Ward union would alter intimate friendships the group had formed.

This reaction speaks to Fuller's unique classification of the marriage relationship that she formulates only years later in \textit{WNC}. As Charles Capper notes in \textit{The Private Years}, her intense feelings of betrayal that are so personally and culturally defined that they are almost "impossible to disentangle" (284), speaks to her fears of the socially constructed institution so many woman fall into or find
themselves following. It cannot be avoided that Fuller's classification of marriage, specifically the marriage of "mutual idolatry" and "intellectual companionship," developed out of her awareness of the limiting nature of marriage for females. The marriages of mutual idolatry and intellectual companionship speak directly to what critics can only assume are Fuller's fears as they relate to the Barker/Ward marriage. On a personal level, Fuller's well-documented devotion to these friendships calls into question her own understanding of "mutual idolatry." Capper writes extensively about Fuller's relationships with Anna Barker and Samuel Ward as deeply devoted and even intense. Her awareness that marriage can lead to a closed, self-contained formation speaks to her fear of being shut out, as couples "lock the gates against all glories of the universe, that they may live in a cell together" (WNC 283).

Although Fuller's own personal concerns about neglect certainly play into her understanding of marriage, it cannot be determined if the Barker/Ward marriage was one of dependent isolation. Fuller's depiction of the marriage of "mutual idolatry" in WNC is one in which marriage is perceived as infatuation, in which the woman, the "unlovely Siren" beckons the man to her will, and the man, an "effeminate boy," follows her lead (283). It appears that Fuller's understanding of the Barker/Ward marriage is not simply one based on personal rejection or fear. Rather, the significance lies in how the Barker/Ward marriage might possibly reveal Fuller's greatest fear; that the marriage would keep both Anna and Samuel from their own individual potential developments. Capper notes Fuller's expression of deep concern that Ward's marriage to Barker would limit his intellectual and artistic pursuits,
particularly his writing and painting. Barker’s father insists that Ward work as a merchant. Fuller’s reaction to this requirement is a sense of immense loss, knowing that the marriage requires Ward to follow different economic pursuits (Private Years 284-285). During this time, Fuller is struggling to determine her own understanding of woman’s role both in and outside of marriage. Her heightened awareness of how marriage limits one’s intellectual pursuits leaves cause for great concern over her friends and her understanding of herself as a woman.

The explanation of the third form of marriage that Fuller presents in WNC reflects this deep concern for intellectual compatibility and loss. The marriage of “intellectual companionship” is one that Fuller affirms is the most common form of marriage during the mid-nineteenth century. It is one in which men are actively engaged in public life, as well as working as writers and artists. As publicly engaged men, they find in their wives “companions and confidants in thought no less in feeling” (283). The relationship fosters the intellectual development of the woman, which often expands to the point where the couple shares the same employment as socially engaged workers. Fuller depicts the marriage of intellectual companionship as one where “the parties meet mind to mind, and a mutual trust is produced, which can buckler them against millions. They work together for a common purpose, and, in all these instances, with the same implement, the pen” (287). The focus of this marriage is one bent on the common goal of production, often in the form of writing, in which each partner is working towards the same ideals, a close example of Fuller’s own experience of marriage inside the Transcendentalist movement.
It would appear at first that the marriage of intellectual companionship is one of ideal purpose—each person is bound to his or her perspective goals. But Fuller interrupts this image with one concern: that the marriage depends too much on the similarities between the two partners and not on their individual interests and needs. The intellectual companionship fosters the idea that the woman in the relationship is spurred on by her husband and gradually finds herself working towards her husband’s goals. Fuller questions this tendency towards similarity as hindering the true essence of harmony, in that “harmony exists in difference, no less than in likeness, if only the same key-note govern both parts” (288). The balance Fuller longs to achieve is interrupted by the divisional nature of the relationship; rather than functioning in fluid form, the husband and wife only fall into what binds them in similarities:

Woman the poem, men the poet! Woman the heart, man the head!

Such divisions are only important when they are never to be transcended. If nature is never bound down, nor the voice of inspiration stifled, that is enough. We are pleased that women should write and speak, if they feel the need of it, from having something to tell; but silence for ages would be no misfortune, if that silence be from divine command, and not from man’s tradition. (288)

The marriage of intellectual companionship too often requires women to fit themselves into roles that reflect their husband’s interest. Regardless of the woman’s ability to self-proclaim, the marriage of intellectual companionship is still stifled by lack of variation.
Although higher in the scale of relationship development than the marriages of household partnership and mutual idolatry, the marriage of intellectual companionship is still not the highest standard of Fuller’s ideal marriage, and therefore, not the most freeing of relationships in which women and men are able to cultivate their separate identities. A step higher is where Fuller comes to what Capper calls her “woman of genius” analysis, in which Fuller finds herself too intellectually driven to limit herself to the confines of any individual because of the chance that marriage would only stifle her abilities or shift her focus away from her own concerns and thoughts (*Private Years* 289).

Despite Fuller’s great concern over the limitations of marriage, her final analysis moves towards a positive approach to female and male relationships. Unlike Emerson, whose defense of marriage moves toward one in an “ideal world as a possibility” to an “impossibility” (*Zwarg* 152), Fuller’s approach to marriage remains full of ideal intentions. In part, the distance in approaches between the two friends lies in Emerson’s refusal and Fuller’s insistence on seeing women as individuals with greater potential. In his essay “Experience,” Emerson moves towards a more pejorative understanding of all kinds of relationships, one that, even in the “spiritual world” is “impossible, because of the inequality between every subject and every object” (322). Hence, relationships for Emerson operate on an uneven level in which two persons in a relationship are “like globs, which can touch only in a point” (322-3). For Fuller, the point on which these two persons meet is what allows her to move into her final and highest form of marriage relationship, one in which all of her
former concerns form the basis of an ideal marriage, one in which there is no limiting of intellectual and artistic powers and pursuits—what Fuller titles the marriage of “religious union.”

The marriage of “religious union” is defined as the marriage of ultimate realization. It is based on each individual’s innate desire to move towards the cultivation of their selfhoods through a “pilgrimage towards a common shrine” (289). The “highest grade of marriage union” includes part of the other three marriages, encompassing “home sympathies and household wisdom” and “intellectual communion” as necessary for each “pilgrim” to assist each other and communicate with each other his or her “thoughts and aspirations” (289).

The idea of individuals moving collectively towards a common goal is reflected in Fuller’s example of the marriage of Count Zinzendorf and his countess. The Countess, an idealized wife, is equal to the Count in all accounts of wisdom and discretion. What is significant about the Countess is that she is not “made to be a copy” of her husband (289). Rather, she thinks and does according to how her intelligence dictates and is therefore honored as wife, friend, and sister on all accounts by the Count. This is echoed in the perspective of the observer of this marriage:

We may, in many marriages, regard it as the best arrangement, if the man has so much advantage over his wife, that she can, without much thought of her own, be, by him, led and directed as by a father. But it was not so with the Count and his consort. She was not made to be a
copy; she was an original; and while she loved and honored him, she thought for herself, on all subjects, with so much intelligence, that he could and did look on her as sister and friend also (290).

The marriage of religious union depends solely on the concept of the woman being an original individual unto herself. As a woman, she does not exist to fulfill a role of wife or mother or to be similar in capacity to her husband. Contrary to reformers of her time, Fuller deviates from the culturally acceptable approach to marriage by redefining its very essence. Rather than an obligation or requirement, Fuller writes ideally about marriage in *WNC* as a potentially positive relationship that allows individuals the freedom to express and obtain their greatest possible selfhoods.

Greg Garvey notes that Fuller’s ideal marriage is an effort to define a Platonic image that reflects both her analysis of community and her analysis of marriage in that both demonstrate “parallel processes of imagining social improvement. Marriage in the nineteenth century is Fuller’s symbol of ideological institutional restraints on womanhood, and the perfectly egalitarian marriage represents the elimination of these restraints” (119). The marriage of religious union removes these restraints, at least within the private sphere, by offering women the freedom to express and cultivate their own interests, including their intellectual capacities.

Yet, Fuller recognizes that an egalitarian marriage alone will not completely alter the way in which women are understood in nineteenth-century culture. For despite a woman’s ability to cultivate her potential selfhood within the private realm, the public arena is far less open to nongendered definitions of women. Ultimately
Fuller's conception of true female identity is still hindered by the concept of physical form. Each woman is still penalized for her body, forced to classify herself and her characteristics as "female" in nature. Ultimately, Fuller's desire to free woman from the social, political, and cultural binds that limit her requires more than a reconceptionalization of marriage as an egalitarian freedom. Fuller takes her approach to female development further by reconstructing gender identity for both women and men.
Degendering the Soul

Although Fuller’s reconstruction of marriage reflects her desire to alter the ways in which social institutions fashion relationships between women and men, *WNC* presents an even greater awareness of the concern that marriage alone will not free women from the fierce social ideologies that limit the development of their potential selfhoods. Moving into an even greater critical theory of identity formation, Fuller presents a reconstruction of femininity and masculinity—one that redefines the self outside of social constructions of gender and gender roles.

The importance of Fuller’s movement into the reconstruction of gender demonstrates her desire to help women define themselves in a social and cultural context that not only rejects their right to do so, but also severely limits opportunities for dissent. As was mentioned in chapter one, Fuller’s Boston Conversations encourages women to foster their own intellectual capacity and their ability to understand themselves as capable people with active minds. Annette Kolodny notes that Fuller’s continuous drive to foster female growth evidences itself in her teaching at Bronson Alcott’s Temple School in Boston, where Fuller insists that her female students study rhetoric in order to “overcome the restraints of feminine modesty and provide each student practical tools with which to communicate clearly” (361) what each of them think. The awareness that women lack the tools with which to speak about their own experiences, and even more so, that the dominant culture did not listen when they do, requires Fuller to direct her focus on the way in which women could define themselves as separate from domestic terminology. By encouraging
women to challenge the self-definitions handed to them by the dominant culture, Fuller opens a new path through which women can move into personal forms of self-definition.

Although much of Fuller’s early writings reflect a sense of New England culture, *WNC* deviates significantly in terms of focus by including the experiences of women outside of the social standing Fuller herself held. On a rhetorical level, Fuller’s approach shifted significantly after a trip west in which she visited Native American cultures. Christina Zwarg notes that Fuller’s heightened awareness of the historical context of antebellum society was a major force in altering the title of her work, adding new value to the phrase “woman in the nineteenth century” (171). In part, *WNC* reflects an expanding realization that the experiences of women at the present time in America were shifting, and Fuller’s recognition of the need to explain these experiences and to offer a way into history and self-definition exemplifies itself in the specific way she approaches female identity and identity as a whole.

Close in line with Fuller’s process of self-definition making is the Transcendental approach to personhood. Like Emerson, Fuller is intensely focused on the concept of self-discovery through the casting off of the social pressures and influences that hinder potential self-development. For Emerson, this ability came through self-reliance, in which the tapping of internal divine power allowed individuals to reach a type of transcendent ground. By urging individuals to “conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions,” (“Nature” 39) Emerson encourages individuals to foster self-development through
internal analysis. Although Emerson’s self-reliant exhortations echo through \textit{WNC}, Fuller recognizes that women lay outside of this urgent call. As was demonstrated in chapter one, Fuller’s realization that American women had, as Jeffrey Steele says, “short-circuited the exploration of their own creative and spiritual potential” reveals how women were impeded from acclimating to Emerson’s inspiring words (\textit{Transfiguring 7}). \textit{WNC} reflects Fuller’s determination to advocate a different approach to personal self-definition by altering the way in which women understand their internal selves. She does this by giving them a way into how to define who they are as essential beings.

The foundational aspect of Fuller’s conception of identity is that the soul is the basis of each individual being; it is the central ideal essence within each individual, the “law of growth that speaks in us, and demands the perfection of each being in its kind” (347). Like Emerson’s approach to self-formation, the soul operates as a type of divine energy that, by its nature, yearns to seek and grow. But as Jeffrey Steele points out in \textit{Emerson, Fuller, and Woman’s Rights: The Limits of Political Sympathy}, Fuller and Emerson deviate significantly from each other in the cultivation and manifestation of the potential selfhood, so much so that an examination of both approaches reveals the presence of gender-bias in the Transcendentalist movement of which Fuller was a member.

Steele’s article concentrates on the ways in which Emerson’s model of self-reliance was inherently flawed in terms of gender politics. As he demonstrates in “Nature” and “Self-Reliance,” Emerson depends heavily on a mode of inner
expression that is bound by gendered aspects of essential selfhood. For example, Steele argues that Emerson constructs a type of "universal soul" that depends highly on a masculine form of expression; Emerson was unable to avoid a dualistic ontology in which "masculine power and will was given priority over a feminized region of material reality" (121). Certainly, as will be evident in the construction of the female selfhood presented in \textit{WNC}, Fuller also had a difficult time escaping a type of dichotomy that created gendered selfhoods, but Fuller's difficulty appears far more linguistic in nature than Emerson's. As Steele notes, for Emerson, the move outside of the world ruled "by God the Father and His male representatives on earth" was not an easy one (132). Despite Emerson's ability to recognize the stifling influences and pressures of social and religious institutions, his inability to fully appreciate the effects of the same stifling influences on women was of great concern to Fuller. Her need to find a Transcendentalist mode of expression for women is what forces Fuller to define women outside of physical form. In other words, Fuller recognizes the need to give women the ability to define themselves separately from the socialistic forms of femininity that bind them and keep them from being self-reliant individuals "able to apprehend truth" (Thompson 54).

What is unique about Fuller's construction of individual development is its communal aspect; unlike Emerson, who cultivates the soul by isolating the individual, Fuller cultivates the soul as it pertains to and within relationship. The soul's quest, or "pilgrimage towards a common shrine" operates as a communal "birthright" in which each soul desires "religious, and intelligent freedom of the universe" and the ability to
"use its means; to learn its secret as far as nature has enabled [it], with God alone for [its] guide and [its] judge" (WNC 276). The soul, therefore, desires formation within the context of community. Hence, Fuller's main issue in WNC; American women are not given part in the communal aspect of self development, and their absence only disrupts the whole, allowing for only a partial sense of community and selfhood. When women are left out of the "quest for the common shrine," then the ability of the individuals existing in relationship to one another decreases, for:

only a fraction of this purpose is accomplished in the life of any one man. Its entire accomplishment is to be hoped only from the sum of the lives of men, or man considered as a whole. As this whole has one soul and one body, any injury or obstruction to a part, or to the meanest member, affects the whole. (342)

The place of women in the quest for complete development goes missing in the common Transcendental approach to the cultivation of the soul. By ignoring women as possessors of souls, "born for Truth and Love," Transcendentalism forces Fuller to confront the inevitable, that of the "transcendental ideal of self-culture coming face to face with the social reality of the oppression of women" (Robinson 91). Therefore, Fuller's definition of selfhood on the basis of soul possession moves into an even deeper analysis of gender politics, one that shifts the dominant approach to women as physically embodying aspects of their supposed natures: "only part of man, bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh, born that men might not be lonely," themselves "possessors of and possessed by immortal souls" (273).
Jeffrey Steele argues that Fuller’s urgent application of soul-recognition for woman is driven not by an “individual quest for expression but the function of his or her relationships with others” (*Transforming America* 44). In order that relationships come into balance, and are restored as positive influences on the development of woman’s potential, the soul must be free in its own course; “let the organization, both of body and mind, be freely developed, and the being will be fit for any and every relation to which it may be called” (*WNC* 298). Fuller’s approach to female identity determines that self-definitions do not only affect women alone. The ability of American women and men to recognize this returns Fuller to her focus on relationships, particularly marriage as a unified quest. If men recognized women as they do themselves, they would not take entering into the union so lightly. Rather, marriage would be viewed as a union of soul to soul, eternally affecting man’s own growth as well as the individual woman united with him.

Although one of Fuller’s purposes in writing *WNC* is to offer women a way obtain their fullest potentials, she does so with the recognition that, regardless of marital status, woman must be redefined as soul, and that soul must be free to move towards that universal “unceasing revelation” (249) that binds each person together. Fuller’s reasoning is essentialist, in that, like her approach to the intellect, the soul “must be brought out towards perfection” because of its “mere existence” (297-8). That women’s development depends upon this fact requires Fuller to reexamine the way in which potential cultivation is defined, particularly against the Transcendental/Emersonian way of defining self-reliance and self-culture. The need
to validate the process of self-reliance found in Emerson’s works requires that Fuller step beyond the seemingly masculine mode of thinking that grounds Emerson’s writing. Even though Fuller attempts to present a portrait of a self-reliant woman in the character of Miranda, the intellectually balanced qualities of Miranda’s persona remain culturally defined as “masculine” in nature. How, then, will woman step beyond the gendered realm of cultural and social constructions of identity? In the most basic sense, Fuller is required to redefine how “masculinity” and “femininity” operate within an individual, and therefore, within the relationship structures in which both sexes participate.

Fuller’s reconstruction of female identity beyond the character of Miranda is found in the mythic construction of Muse and Minerva. Directly tied to the female mythic allusions and illustrations located in much of Fuller’s work, Muse and Minerva present women with a unique path to understanding their identities. On the most elementary level, Muse and Minerva operate as dualistic sides of the binary of femininity and masculinity. But a closer look at the way in which Fuller presents them in the text reveals just how Fuller was attempting to reconstruct the social and cultural definitions of essentialist gendered nature; in other words, Muse and Minerva operate as more than possible reflections of a gender binary but actually challenge the approach and validity of a gendered dichotomy within individuals.

Mythically, Minerva exemplifies the intellectual element of the universe, an echo of the classical goddess Athena. Minerva holds the traits women in the nineteenth century are denied, including will, intelligence, and strength. Minerva is
defined as “execution—practical ability—she springs armed from the head of Intelligent Creative Power” (312).

Muse embodies a sort of electrical and magnetic element, defined as having the “clearness of the intuitive powers which a perfectly truthful adherence to every admonition of the higher instincts would bring to a finely organized human being” (310). In simpler terms, the Muse is a sort of intuitive power, or spiritual essence that possesses a sort of primitive notion about truth. These two elements, operating together, are Fuller’s attempt to explain the traits that women and men adhere to in the process of self-cultivation. Even though they have a strong resemblance to cultural constructions of gendered identity, the way in which they operate is what reveals the differing approach Fuller takes toward female identity.

It is difficult to separate the way in which Fuller defines Muse from cultural assumptions about female identity. The Muse’s emotive strength echoes the type of passivity that nineteenth-century women assume to possess naturally. And yet, although Fuller argues that “the especial genius of woman” is “electrical in movement, intuitive in function, spiritual in tendency,” (309) she does not intend to use these definitions pejoratively. Rather, the recognition that woman possesses a higher electrical movement speaks more to the conditioned imbalance of gender traits. That woman appears to possess the Muse, or the “especially feminine element spoken as Femality” does not mean she must adhere only to this element (310). The cultural perception that evidence of “energy” or “creative genius” in woman is negative opposes what Fuller believes is absolutely essential to the formation of
female identity. Muse establishes what Fuller considers a positive element of woman's being, a type of energy that makes women capable of a specific type of awareness.

In her essay "Margaret Fuller, Perceiving Science," Mary-Jo Haronian argues that Fuller's understanding of "energy" is one that radically challenges perceptions of gender relations and women. Before "electricity" became a commonly understood phenomenon, it was referred to as "vital energy," energy that was considered a "corporeal force, or level of that force;" it was understood not as "attainable or dissipative power" but as a "constant force always present everywhere, whether it is being 'used' or not" (131). Fuller's referring to women as "electrical in nature" takes on an empowering aspect of female identity, "assigning to women this constant, storable, real, limitless power," even on a metaphorical level in the Muse, suggesting that "real power" is an analogue to women's power (Haronian 132). Hence, the energy of the Muse assigns women a constant, real, and limitless power that is culturally ignored or at least stifled.

In another way, Minerva is also assigned a type of power in the positive characteristics of intelligence and strength, challenging the cultural assumptions of the passive and sentimental woman. In his reading of Fuller's Muse and Minerva, Steele notes that Fuller's use of the "warlike Minerva as an emblem of female self-reliance" was considered threatening to nineteenth-century culture, and evoked anger and fear with such a powerful model of female being (Transforming 133). This conception of "female self-reliance" certainly holds significant value in the
interpretation of Muse and Minerva. By contrasting Fuller’s approach to the core of individual energy with Emerson’s understanding of internal realization, Steele presents Fuller’s approach to female potential selfhood as one that depends on the discovery and expression of a female energy. For Steele, Muse and Minerva are essentially feminine in nature, operating as dualistic forms of energy within the female individual that Fuller attempts to name and therefore validate for women. Fuller’s construction juxtaposes Emerson’s essentially masculine form of essential nature by creating a form of female core energy, one that enables women to seek deeper cultivation of their souls by balancing the two metaphoric natures of Muse and Minerva within.

Although Fuller’s approach to gender identity through Muse and Minerva is certainly an empowering force for women, Steele’s interpretation still requires that women see themselves in gendered terms, terms that lay dangerously close to nineteenth-century social understandings of female nature. Certainly, as Steele interprets it, Muse and Minerva subvert the way in which nineteenth-century culture understand female power, but the way in which Muse and Minerva operate as essences within the text requires an even deeper deconstruction of gender norms. Fuller’s recognition of the limiting nature of language evidences her own frustration in attempting to define how it is that Muse and Minerva operate as spheres of identity. By approaching the concept of femininity and masculinity as binary traits of each individual person, Fuller argues that the potential “growth of man is two-fold, masculine and feminine,” (343) in other words, a balance of both must be present and
cultivated with each person. Muse and Minerva echo this balance, although Fuller’s linguistic structures and tendencies require a careful examination of her text, for it is far too easy to simply interpret Fuller’s Muse and Minerva as only metaphors for what nineteenth-century culture claims is simply the feminine and masculine natures.

Certainly Fuller’s presentation in Muse and Minerva must be taken with hesitancy; her emphasis on the intuitive ability that women are “especially capable” (311) of borders on the stereotypical, social definitions of female passivity that she is trying to negate. To take the metaphorical principles as straightforward reflections of female/femininity/Muse and male/masculinity/Minerva is to walk the line of “expressive description and repression definition” (Robinson 93). Structurally, Miranda is socially constructed as an essentially masculine trait in its cold hardness of intellect. Similarly, Muse is socially defined as an essentially feminine trait in its emotive strength. These linguistic structures of Fuller’s argument play a frustrating role in her construction of the metaphorical Muse and Miranda. The difficulty of Fuller’s approach is highly linguistic in nature, for she is writing out of a language that keeps her somewhat limited to the terms of “femininity” and “masculinity.” Just like the twenty- and twenty-first century rhetorical theorists, Fuller’s language is certainly not one that is resolved within the text. Nancy Armstrong argues that the terms “male” and “female” are so basic to the “semiotics of modern life that no one can use them without to some degree performing the very reifying gesture whose operations we need to understand and whose power we want to historicize” (1330).
Like Fuller's inability to escape a type of gendering language, her inability to move beyond definition requires a serious examination of metaphorical interpretation.

As gendered essences, Muse and Minerva reflect a socially constructed understanding of femininity and masculinity in their adherence to the body. Operating as gendered faculties, the characteristics of each are given greater weight according to their "corresponding" sex. Fuller writes:

These two sides are supposed to be expressed in man and woman, that is, as the more or less, for the faculties have not been given pure to either, but only in preponderance. There are also exceptions in great number, such as men of far more beauty than power, and the reverse. But as a general rule, it seems to have been the intention to give a preponderance on the one side, that is called masculine, and on the other, one that is called feminine. (343)

As has already been established, Fuller is attempting to break down the rigidness of cultural approaches to female identity. She qualifies her statement by insisting that nineteenth-century understandings of femininity and masculinity are not necessarily held to either sex, but are only given greater weight on a smaller scale. Additionally, Fuller's reference to the "exceptions in great number" echoes her earlier comments to the irritated slaveholder, who refuses to consent to thinking outside of the head/heart dichotomy that rigidly defines gender roles and ensures his own sense of comfort. But what is to be made of Fuller's application of the "general rule" which
gives in preponderance the traits of “feminine” to females and “masculine” to males? Is it necessarily important to define these as “traits” or as “essences”? Perhaps what is of most importance is the way in which Fuller approaches the function of these socially gendered traits. Certainly it would be easy to interpret Fuller’s statement as a reinforcement of gender-laden values, but the way in which *WNC* is interpreted is what speaks to Fuller’s use of metaphors. Noting that earlier in the text Fuller defines male and female as representatives of the “two sides of the great radical dualism” (310), the context within which the later statements on preponderance relate to gender identity speaks to the problematic nature of essentialist self-definitions in antebellum culture. Rather than strictly defined lines, the concepts of “femininity” and “masculinity” are seen as fluid in existence, as essences that are “perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid” (310). The result is blurry definitions of identity, or at least ones that refute the idea that there is “no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (310). The idea that an individual does not exist in pure or complete feminine or masculine form reiterates Fuller’s argument that an individual’s potential selfhood is dependent on her or his ability to freely cultivate traits outside of the socially constructed spheres society assigns them. Again, this requires that the two metaphors of Muse and Minerva are in “perfect harmony” in order that they “correspond to and fulfill one another, like hemispheres, or the tenor and bass in music” (343).

Jeffrey Steele’s approach to Muse and Minerva as essentially feminine aspects of the female being requires women to tap that core energy that women possess and
are often denied and foster the attributes they possess of Minerva’s strength and intellect. But as gendered terms, Muse and Minerva require a more drastic defining, for Fuller is not only addressing women, but women in relationship, and her construction of Muse and Minerva reflects Fuller’s desire to explain how self-definitions affect both sexes.

The conventional approach to gendered roles in the nineteenth century did not allow these two parts, Muse and Minerva, to operate in perfect harmony. In order for Fuller to move beyond an essentialist approach to gender, she focuses on the fluidity of their existence as organic universal elements in free motion. If Fuller is seeking to reject the assumptions that the world is composed of two complementary sexes, it is not enough for Mirada and Muse to be of fluid form; the human individual must be free to draw upon their characteristics in ungendered terms. This is evidenced in the classification of femininity/Muse and masculinity/Minerva in the ungendered terms which she applies to them:

As far as these two methods can be distinguished they are so as Energy and Harmony. Power and Beauty. Intellect and Love. Or by some such rude classification, for we have not language primitive and pure enough to express such ideas with precision. (343)

Keeping in mind that Fuller’s attempt to redefine the principles as fluid in nature, Robinson notes that Fuller’s vision of the self she desires to fashion is a soul that, in part, is “somehow more than the sum total of the feminine and masculine principles” (93). Fuller’s attempt to redefine the principles is grounded in her desire to break the
social mold that models the reigning notions of the sexual nature of women and men. Linguistically, Fuller is forced to use “femininity” and “masculinity” out of necessity, but she directs them “against the conventions that nurtured them” by acknowledging their “rude classification” (Robinson 93). The result of Fuller’s definition is one which fashions Muse and Minerva as currents devoid of sex, allowing women and men to adhere to them by transcending the gendered realm. As a result, Fuller creates a sort of definition of womanhood and manhood that is more metaphorical than ontological in nature.

Many critics of Fuller’s writing argue that the way Fuller presents Muse and Minerva in WNC results in the advocating of androgyny. In her essay “Incarcerated Souls: Women as Individuals in Margaret Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century,” Julie Thompson argues that Fuller “pioneered” a conception of woman as an individual based on her ability to “embrace both the feminine and masculine” (53) dimensions of her personality. Although she advocates Fuller as a writer who resisted socially constructed notions of identity, Thompson challenges Fuller’s conception of Muse and Minerva as organic essences that are “ironic at best and confused at worst” in that they defeat the purpose of rejecting essentialist forms of self-identification (53). Although Thompson’s point is certainly valid in the context of gender construction, she refuses to acknowledge the possibility that Fuller was attempting to degender the organic essences of Muse and Minerva as distinct entities that, in their most original and natural state, did not exist in physical form.
Additionally, Mary Wood points to Fuller’s writing as one that is so conversational in nature that it “calls into question the marking of certain characteristics as male and female, a marking that is essential to a notion of androgyny” (12). Therefore, by reading Fuller in the fluid and tactile way that modern feminists critics like Luce Irigaray advocates, the seemingly inconsistent nature of the definitions of Muse/femininity and Minerva/masculinity become more significant in their existence within a nongendered sphere than in the possibility of their existence as essentially physical.

As a result of approaching these concepts metaphorically, Fuller is able to construct a sort of idealistic unification of the sexes; one that allows both women and men to adhere to a variety of traits as nongendered attributes, therefore deconstructing the concepts of physically innate gendered norms and making them obsolete. By degendering socially understood gendered traits that are evidenced in the head/heart dichotomy which refuses to validate female intellectual capacity, Fuller constructs a sort of celestial formation of identity, best represented in the fluid nature of the zodiac. Fuller’s zodiac operates as an image in which the body and soul move in free motion. The body, represented by “male and female heads,” are “distinct in expression, but equal in beauty, strength and calmness” (272). The equal positioning of physical expression arranged in pairs is strengthened by the breathing in of the “muse of a heavenly order,” or the organic essences of Muse and Minerva which exist in perfect unification within the zodiac (272). The circular formation of the physical pairs allows both female and male, as expressions of humanity, to adhere freely to the
traits found in Muse and Minerva: power, intellect, strength, emotion, and intuition stretch out on a continuum of equally valid characteristics. Femininity and masculinity become transcendent constructs, divorced from physical form, as there is no gendering of the ability to breathe in and out the various characteristics of the spheres. Rather, by allowing the sexes to draw equally from the spheres, the groupings create a "unison in variety, congeniality in difference" (272).

The result of the image constructed in the zodiac is Fuller's attempt to liberate the female from the penalty of her body by degendering both body and soul and placing them in free motion. This metaphor reiterates Fuller's concept that any individual, regardless of sex, can evoke the principles embodied in Miranda and Muse. The implications of Fuller's construction allow her to move beyond advocating androgyny and into what Cynthia Davis calls the creation of a third gender, in which Fuller "turns the boundary line that ideologically divides the genders on its side, transforming it into a continuum on which every body ranges between the masculine and feminine poles" (*What Speaks* 48). In the zodiac, gender identity operates as a temporary construct to be transcended. But, Davis claims, even this is not entirely correct; Fuller "displaces the conventional gendered poles of male and female, and in their place positions (generic) Man at one end and the Divinity that is the perfect soul in all of us at the other," uniting every individual in her or his "pilgrimage towards the common shrine" to "shed the body and become soul" (*What Speaks* 48). Hence, the construction of the zodiac harkens back to Fuller's desire to enable women not
only to cultivate self-reliance, but also to join with men in seeking transcendence in both the individual and relational realms.

Additionally, Fuller reiterates the purpose of her metaphorical construction by insisting on the zodiac’s organic essence by refusing to claim social constructs of identity that may be considered innate. As evidenced outside of physical form, Nature “seems to delight in varying the arrangements, as if to show that she will be fettered by no rule, and we must admit the same varieties that she admits” (288). Therefore, it is only after “nature has been fully divested of the gendered attributes erroneously assigned to it” that “the fluid gender identities she values as ‘natural’ will be capable of realization (288). Here, Davis argues, Fuller explicitly differentiates both a “woman’s nature” and a “woman’s heart”–which she considers limiting–from the liberating, elevating soul, “unconstrained by the dross of gender” (Body and Soul 40).

What Fuller regards as woman’s nature operates less as a conclusive identity and more as elastic in nature, “always evolving, never final” (Fleischmann 40).

Although WNC reflects a desire to bring women and men into a more equally satisfying relationship with each other, Fuller’s approach requires her to again return to the ways in which women are denied this fluid identity. In order to compensate for the lack of access, or denial of free access, to the cultivation of female intellectual capacity, Fuller insists with great urgency that women learn to cultivate and adhere to the traits Minerva embodies.

The recognition that at the present time, the nineteenth-century ideals do not allow women this unheeded ability to commune freely in such a fashion is what urges
her towards advocating focused female development and education. Arguing "in the present crisis that the preference given to Minerva" Fuller advocates for the development of woman's intellect in order that the balance and harmony of the universe align with the realization of the "central soul" (312). Fuller argues that woman's ability to foster her intellect/Minerva will enable her to engage in critical self-reflection and understanding and articulate her own self-interests, the result of which will be that "when the mind is once awakened to this consciousness, it will not be restrained by the habits of the past, but fly to seek the seeds of a heavenly future" (306). Again Fuller's Transcendental roots return her to the purpose of this focus; educate women, in order that the whole of the individual may be cultivated outside of gendered understandings of identity.

Ultimately, the importance of this emphasis on woman's cultivation of the essence of Minerva lies in the zodiac, that by allowing the faculties have free play, "deeper and purer sources of joyous inspiration" will refresh the earth (311). If every barrier that keeps woman from seeking her potential selfhood is thrown down, then greater and better results beyond what one can image would take place, and "we should see crystallizations more pure and of more various beauty" (260). The "divine energy" would "pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages" and "no discordant collision, but a ravishing harmony of the spheres would ensue" (260). Fuller's highly poetic language seeks to rectify the relationship between woman and man. The hopeful result is one in which, like the Greek and Roman gods who maintain a variety of abilities, both sexes will "comprehend and apprehend all
the others" (311). When this same aspect of community, "of life and consciousness of mind begins among men," than all barriers that impede the cultivation of the soul, or potential selfhood, will disappear, "humanity will have, positively and finally, subjugated its brute elements and Titanic childhood; criticism will have perished; arbitrary limits and ignorant censure be impossible; all will have entered upon the liberty of the law, and the harmony of common growth" (311). This picture of community is what Fuller hopes will be the direct result of liberation of women, and therefore men, from the confines of antebellum gender ideology. It is an approach in which both women and men are given a possible way to move beyond the categorical descriptions of "female" and "male" which hold reverberating consequences for all individuals during the mid-nineteenth century (Haronian 130).

Although it is easy to determine that Fuller’s reconstruction challenges both the ideology of female identity and of gender identity and the language that formulates it, whether Fuller’s construction of degendered natures can operate outside of WNC as a text remains to be determined. In all, does Fuller’s construction of degendered identity simply allow for what Steele refers to as “physiological equilibrium,” or does her reconstruction have further reaching implications for nineteenth-century women? (Symbols 44). Ultimately, can Fuller’s reconstruction of degendered identity withstand the social configuration and power structures that pervade nineteenth-century society or does her approach only build a sort of untouchable utopian vision?
Domestic Motivations

*The Education of Gerty Flint*

The immense popularity of *The Lamplighter* certainly speaks to the significance of its place in nineteenth-century female readership. It is perhaps best remembered today as the occasion for Nathaniel Hawthorne's comment against women writers. Writing to his publisher in 1855, Hawthorne says, "America is now wholly given over to a d—d mob of scribbling women. ...What is the mystery of the innumerable editions of *The Lamplighter?*" (304).

Written by Cummins at age twenty-seven, *The Lamplighter* drew a massive audience and, as Susan Williams notes, one that transcended social, class, and age boundaries, even being edited into a children's picture book to encourage young readers to learn from the life of Gerty Flint (199). Focused on the development of a young girl, *The Lamplighter* offered an alternative image of womanhood in the nineteenth century, one that had potential to veer from the domestic approach to female education and selfhood taught to young women in America.

The foundational aspects of Gerty's potential selfhood are cultivated in the years of her early development, particularly the education offered to her by the multiple parental figures in her life, specifically True Flint, Mrs. Sullivan, and Emily Graham. Despite Gerty's unruly behavior and reckless display of contempt for her abuser Nan Grant, Gerty is able to obtain a highly developed sense of self, one that echoes Miranda's education; Gerty has a strong intellectual capacity, but also a sense of responsibility and ability to determine her own understanding of duty, suffering,
and rational thinking in a fashion that leads her to develop relationships outside of conventional approaches/understandings of social (gendered) relationships.

Gerty’s journey to self-reliance does not begin in the nurturing home of True Flint. Rather, Gerty’s early understanding of relationships and her role within them is drastically different from what she is offered by her future guardian. No stranger to neglect, Gerty’s understanding of reality is born out of the unjust treatment she receives from Nan Grant. Highly abusive, Grant is relentless toward Gerty both physically and verbally, the effects of which Gerty carries with her for the majority of the novel.

What is significant about the abuse Gerty suffers at the hands of Nan Grant is that it manifests itself in more than obvious ways; it directly affects the development of Gerty’s understanding of personal responsibility. As a child, Gerty possesses little ability to recognize the importance of self-worth, as the opening of the novel demonstrates. Gerty’s inability to faithfully perform the one duty asked of her, fetching milk, has cruel results: Gerty is shut out of the house and left on the street. On one level, Gerty’s resistance to obedience is little more than age related. But Cummins makes a point of establishing Gerty’s refusal to obey as an extension of Gerty’s own sense of idleness, or lack of ingrained motivation. Having been given little to do, Gerty has “never known the satisfaction of helping anybody” (8). Hence, Gerty’s sense of self lacks any semblance of responsibility; her boredom is a result of Nan Grant’s inability to instill in Gerty any understanding of positive self-formation or productivity.
This, of course, relates back to Gerty’s lack of positive relationship development, having never experienced the give-and-receive of close human interaction. Interestingly, Gerty’s first and only experience with any semblance of a loving relationship is not developed through human connection but rather between her and the kitten given to her by True Flint. But despite Gerty’s earnest attempts to care for the kitten, even this connection is short-lived and leaves her worse off than before. When Nan Grant discovers the kitten, it is instantly thrown into a pot of boiling water. Gerty’s reaction is rage, which produces a temper in Nan Grant, who promptly boots Gerty back into the streets, permanently.

Despite the drastic nature of Gerty’s expulsion from Nan Grant’s home, and the painful progression of events leading up to it, Gerty’s homelessness actually ends her isolation, for it is on the streets that Gerty meets True Flint. A “first friend” (34) to Gerty, True functions as Gerty’s surrogate father figure. Having known the sting of loneliness himself, a single man who also was orphaned as a young boy, True’s desire for Gerty to remain with him is more than an extension of sympathy. It is the desire to create a relationship, as reflected in the prayer True says over Gerty her first night at his home: “All alone in this big world and so am I. Please God, we’ll bide together” (15). A “hopeful and sanguine” man, True’s desire to create a home in which Gerty can “be his child” (22) is Gerty’s first experience with a positive nurturing relationship. It is True’s ability to display affection and care for Gerty within his small rooms that offers Gerty a real understanding of “home,” a home in which relationships center the cultivation of Gerty’s selfhood.
Unaccustomed to positive aspects of relationships and self-formation, Gerty's transition from the streets to the hearth are notable in that the instruction Gerty receives in her new home enables her to reach for the potential growth Fuller imagines for women in *WNC*, one that encourages self-reliance outside of the dross of domestic obligations. Gerty's infiltration into the domestic sphere is conditioned by both True and Mrs. Sullivan, True's neighbor, who nurses Gerty when she succumbs to exhaustion once in True's home. Both of these adult figures consciously and unconsciously fashion Gerty's understanding of self-possession and motivation without enforcing gender roles and obligations upon her.

The first evidence of the impact True's and Mrs. Sullivan's instruction have had upon Gerty is the shift in her recognition of personal desire. Once in a nurturing environment, Gerty's unruly and abrupt way of expressing her anger towards Nan Grant is overridden by her desire to reciprocate the positive actions modeled by True's and Mrs. Sullivan's gentle and consistent care. Gerty's desire to reciprocate positive actions takes form in her need to please True. Although lacking knowledge or skill in caring for others, let alone herself, Gerty's sincere desire to please is what drives her forward. It is Mrs. Sullivan who recognizes Gerty's potential and who provides an avenue for Gerty to begin to fashion an understanding of both reciprocal relationships and personal responsibility to those relationships.

On the surface, Mrs. Sullivan is the picture of a stereotypical domestic mother; her devotion to her son and her avid simplicity reiterate an image of True Womanhood and the characteristics of the heart in Fuller's head/heart dichotomy.
Yet, despite this tempting characterization, what is interesting is the dualistic nature of Mrs. Sullivan’s seemingly domestic motivation; although she adheres to a sentimental picture of motherhood, the aspects of this part of her character do not have a direct impact on Gerty’s potential development but are demonstrated only in light of its effect on Willie, Mrs. Sullivan’s son. This evidences itself in the way Mrs. Sullivan attempts to fashion Willie’s personhood verses Gerty’s.

Towards Gerty, Mrs. Sullivan is first a healer and then a teacher. Once Gerty is well, Mrs. Sullivan provides Gerty ways to develop her abilities within the space available to them. It seems obvious that Mrs. Sullivan’s character finds its basis in domestic order. “Quaker-like” in appearance, she insists on “outward neatness and purity” and order, the “cause of virtue and happiness” as paths to inward peace (25). But Mrs. Sullivan’s focus on cleanliness is more than practical in nature. Certainly, it is reasonable that her annoyance with the dinginess and germ-infestation of True’s rooms after Gerty’s illness is dealt with by a complete reordering of the space. What is significant is Mrs. Sullivan’s approach to creating order; she sees an opportunity to involve Gerty by offering to teach her how to clean. Mrs. Sullivan’s suggestion is met with hesitation; unsure of her own abilities, Gerty replies, “I don’t know how to do anything” (26). Certain of Gerty’s potential, Mrs. Sullivan replies, “You have never been taught to do anything, my child; but a girl of eight years old can do a great many things, if she is patient and tries hard to learn,” (26) and she encourages Gerty to help her.
It would be easy to argue that Mrs. Sullivan wants Gerty to learn the skills of housekeeping in order to make True’s rooms more comfortable and useful for her adopted father, which is certainly true on one level. In *Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century American Fiction*, Amal Amireh argues that Mrs. Sullivan’s sense of domestic duty is “the answer” to making Gerty into a middle-class woman (115). Approaching *The Lamplighter* from a class and gendered perspective, Amireh argues that Gerty is made “useful” by learning to be domestic for others, first True and then later Emily and her father, and finally, her husband Willie. But Mrs. Sullivan’s desire for Gerty to be a “nice little housekeeper” goes deeper than instilling in Gerty a sense of domestic duty towards her new father and future family members. Rather, Mrs. Sullivan’s motivation is both an answer and fulfillment of Gerty’s personal desire. Answering Gerty’s early plea, “I wish I could do something for Uncle True!” Mrs. Sullivan’s response insists on personal duty rather than domestic feminized duty. Responding to Gerty, Mrs. Sullivan says, “In the first place, you must have things cleaned up for you. If I thought Mr. Flint would like it, I’d get Kate McCarty to come in some day and help us” (27 emphasis added). Mrs. Sullivan’s recognition that Gerty must learn to maneuver within the domestic realm has more to do with her ability to understand personal self-formation and responsibility rather than adherence to feminized gendered roles.

In addition, Gerty’s desire to act is reflected in her inability to recognize that she is “one of the laborers” (28). The sense of domestic obligation is displaced; by
encouraging Gerty to act first for her own benefit, Mrs. Sullivan offers Gerty the opportunity to be a part of something larger than herself; the chance to participate in her own development and share her capabilities and skills to both her own benefit and those with whom she shares her new life. This is Gerty’s first lesson in duty unto oneself, out of which comes personal happiness, for once the rooms are cleaned, True’s surprised response underscores Gerty’s own pleasure in being “instrumental in giving joy to another” (28) by manifesting “her love for True by her labors” (43).

What makes Mrs. Sullivan’s role in Gerty’s life so integral is the specific way in which Gerty is encouraged to develop a potential selfhood that is free of gender-related obligations, unlike the education of Mrs. Sullivan’s son Willie. The difference in expectations between the two friends and future mates is striking. Contrary to the rationalistic approach Mrs. Sullivan takes towards Gerty, the instruction of Willie is underscored by what Claire Chantell terms “sentimental maternalism,” (132) or that which contextualizes the antebellum cult of motherhood as fundamentally emotional and irrational, specifically in the approach of a mother’s attitude towards her children. Strikingly, the development of Willie’s selfhood as opposed to Gerty’s takes place in a highly sentimentalized fashion that reinforces the domestic fiction plot line of Cummins’ novel. Being the only able male body in his immediate family, Willie must work at a young age to support his mother and ailing grandfather. Just when he is unable to find work near home, he is offered a position in India, which forces him out of the lives of his family and Gerty for the majority of the novel.
Hoping to instill in Willie a sense of moral virtue and obligation, Mrs. Sullivan prays avidly for Willie as he prepares to depart: “those prayers which keep men from temptation, and deliver them from evil” (39). The fact that Willie is missing for the greater part of the book is what makes his mother’s attempt to affect his life so interesting. Unlike the very direct ways Mrs. Sullivan attempts to educate Gerty about duty to self, her effect on Willie’s development takes place miles and years distant from his departure. Her influence is demonstrated in a dream she has on her death bed. Relaying the dream to Gerty, Mrs. Sullivan explains how Willie falls into the temptation of worldly pleasures, specifically drinking and money. Just before Willie is about to succumb to temptation he is confronted by his mother’s touch; “I placed myself in front of him, held up my finger menacingly and shook my head. He hesitated no longer” (171). As the dream retraces the “many adventures” in which the mother follows and guides her son, Mrs. Sullivan acknowledges to Gerty her own moralistic role in Willie’s self-formation as one of essential need; “more than once my watchful eye saved the thoughtless boy by my side from pitfall or danger, in which, without me, he would have surely fallen” (171).

The little that is made of Willie’s potential development outside of Mrs. Sullivan’s dreams, and his perpetual absence, make it obvious that Cummins’s intent it to center the novel on Gerty’s selfhood. Despite the fact that both children are expected to have a high level of responsibility, Mrs. Sullivan offers the two children conflicting methods of self-reliance. While Gerty is offered a very tangible, self-assessing way of fostering her own duty to self for individual sake, Willie’s personal
level of responsibility is born out of his obligation to support his family, requiring him to remain pure from the worldly temptations that he cannot be delivered from. As Chantell argues in “The Limits of the Mother at Home in *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter,*” despite the peace the dream grants Mrs. Sullivan on her deathbed which enables her to believe that her mothering spirit will sustain Willie even after her death, the fact that the dream “celebrates the power of the sentimental mother to shape and control her child’s character” exposes a central flaw: that Mrs. Sullivan is a more powerful woman absent from her son’s life than present in it (139). Rather than the tangible way in which Mrs. Sullivan shapes Gerty’s sense of self-worth, her approach to Willie is purely moral, one that is determined to sentimentalize both her as a mother and her relationship to her son. By gendering the relationship between Willie and his mother, and degendering the relationship between Gerty and Mrs. Sullivan, or offering a relationship between the two based outside of gender-role obligations, Cummins’ presents a distinct approach to the female cultivation of self: if domestic duty is given to women within the home, it does not necessarily have to be nurtured because of the possession of any set of particularly feminized traits. Gerty is able to cultivate a level of self-possession simply by being offered the tools to care for herself as an individual, not as a girl. That Willie must go out into the world to gain a level of self-possession is of consequence only because Cummins sentimentalizes his role, and the role of Mrs. Sullivan in his life as mother. What remains significant is how Gerty remains outside of this sentimentality despite her sex.
Educationally, Mrs. Sullivan's approach to Willie is one that supports theories like those of A.J. Graves and Beecher; Mrs. Sullivan adheres to a domestic agenda of the female offering moral support to Willie who must transition into the masculine marketplace. But again, Gerty escapes the feminization of her selfhood in Mrs. Sullivan's refusal to gender her role within the family. From Gerty's introduction into True's home, Gerty's development is more in line with Fuller's Miranda, who is not forced to develop a selfhood within nineteenth-century conventional roles, but adheres to her own personal desire to cultivate her skills and respect her own freedom to cultivate them.

That True upholds Mrs. Sullivan's approach to Gerty's self-formation by refusing to define Gerty's new domestic skills as gendered abilities further enables Gerty to develop a type of genderless identity. Refusing to lean on Gerty or demand that she now become a domestic goddess once she has learned how to care for their rooms, True takes upon himself the duties that might normally be allotted to Gerty as a female. At one point, True makes dinner while Gerty is chatting with Willie, which causes much dismay for Gerty who desires to cook for True. But Gerty's sense of agitation resides more in her personal desire to do for True rather than the obligation of her female body to perform a conventional role. Again, Gerty is taught that remaining true to one's sense of duty has greater collective results; by working together as equals for the betterment of the other, Gerty and True enact a co-creation of domestic space—one in which mutual dependency makes domestic duty less drudgery-driven. Instead, domestic labor becomes a key part of self-acclimation.
This co-created space, fostered by both True and Mrs. Sullivan, does more than foster Gerty’s sense of duty to self; it enables Gerty to develop both her emotive and rational capacities. Gerty’s strong emotional reactions as a child are most often born out of a sense of anger and injustice. For example, after telling Willie about her abusive past, Gerty uses the most “bitter invectives” (35) against Nan Grant, expressing both hatred towards her abuser and desire for revenge. In part, Gerty’s unruly nature, not so “suddenly quelled,” (35) is a part of being a child, and an abused child at that. This expression of bitterness and anger is shocking to True, and although Gerty is visibly shaken, he does not seek to subdue her anger. True feels unfit to check Gerty’s temper, something that only Emily is later able to help Gerty control. But the simple fact that True does not deny Gerty the expression of avid feelings of resentment, even at times when she appears unable to control her responses, is significant. In a time when the sentimental woman is expected to keep all emotion, with the exception of sympathy, internal, Gerty is not checked, at least by True. It seems that True recognizes the reality that Gerty’s response to cruelty and injustice is not a female response, but a human response, and an expected one for a girl who has yet to learn how to call her better capabilities into action, having only recently been transplanted from a place of neglect to one of unconditional love.

What is significant about the nonhindering approach to Gerty’s emotions is that the emotions are balanced by the cultivation of rational thinking. In addition to providing Gerty a space within which she is safe to express both her desire for connection and her anger and resistance to neglect, True’s rooms become a place of
intellectual pursuit. At the urgent desire of True and Emily, Gerty is enrolled in school and taught the basics of a primary education. Although hesitant at first, Gerty makes rapid gains in her studies. Upon being admitting into public school at the age of twelve, Gerty develops a strong desire to learn, and spends hours reading to Emily and True and studying with Willie, who is challenged by Gerty's intellectual drive. Gerty's seemingly natural ability to thrive educationally speaks not only to her intellectual capacity, but to her ability to cultivate her talent when given the right opportunity and conditions. Much like the environment offered to Fuller's Miranda, Gerty's flourishing intellect goes unchecked by her surroundings. Rather, it is encouraged by the "favorable influences" of Emily's advice and direction and Willie's aid and encouragement, awakening Gerty's mind and her "child ambition" (72). True to Miranda's call for the unheeded advancement of the female mind, the open environment encourages the expansion of Gerty's intellectual capacity.

This expansion of Gerty's potential capacity is highly influenced by the guidance of Emily Graham, the young blind woman who befriends Gerty through True and the Sullivans. The close relationship that results allows Emily to fulfill multiple roles, including that of friend, sister, and mother to Gerty. The impact Emily has on Gerty's life is profound, one that both builds on the foundational basis Gerty finds in True's home and pushes her potential self-formation forward, with conflicting results. Although most critical readings of the novel center on Gerty's individual transformation at the call or heed of Emily and her approach to female
virtue, I would argue that Emily fosters Gerty’s deeper motives and intuition, which become the greatest calling on her life.

There are many significant aspects to Emily and Gerty’s relationship, one being their mutual dependency. Despite the fact that Emily is older than Gerty, the effect they have on each other is immediate and bonding. At first meeting, each is highly sympathetic to the other—Emily towards Gerty for her sad past and her current state living with True, and Gerty towards Emily because of her blindness. Although Gerty may not understand the extent of her own sadness, she cries upon meeting Emily out of sadness that Emily cannot see the world. Emily is so struck by Gerty’s open act of sympathy and the contagiousness of Gerty’s grief that “for the first time for years, Emily wept bitterly for her blindness” (55). Interestingly, Gerty’s continuous ability to affect Emily, who has managed to restrain her true emotions over her debilitating condition, sets the stage for multiple scenes in which Emily begins to come to grips with the reality of her own suffering and the consequences thereof. But before Emily reaches any sort of different ground, she spends a significant part of the novel teaching Gerty how to deal with suffering and remain selfless, something that Gerty does not ultimately enact.

In the novel, Emily’s character represents the basic tropes of sentimentalism, specifically sympathy, Christian virtue, and self-control. The embodiment of perfect and sacrificial suffering is central to Emily’s perspective on female duty, a perspective that Emily continuously bestows upon Gerty. Unknown to Gerty until the novel’s conclusion, Emily’s life-long suffering began at a young age when she was
blinded when a chemical used for illness was accidentally thrown into her eyes during an argument between her father, Mr. Graham, and her lover, Philip Amory. Forced to adapt to her blindness, Emily goes about her life with the appearance of contentment, recognizing that, despite the reality that she cannot reverse her misfortune, she can take joy in caring for the misfortunes of others. Emily’s care for others manifests itself in the abundant “benevolence and charity, both of heart and deed” that characterizes the world of “love and sympathy within” her (57). Gerty is the constant reciprocate of Emily’s love, so much so that she takes the young girl in to live with her and her father after True’s death. From their first meeting to the end of the novel, Emily’s suffering is a constant companion and reminder to both women, not only of their necessary companionship, but their respective understanding of personal and Christian duty. Despite their friendship, both women adhere to distinct and separate definitions of duty: while Emily insists on suffering as a Christian principle, Gerty moves towards a definition of duty dictated by her ability to listen to her intuition and follow what her heart commands, even at the cost of losing relationships.

In order to contextualize the role of Emily’s physical suffering within the novel and how it affects the opposing ways in which both Emily and Gerty define duty, it is important to understand the role of the disabled figure within nineteenth-century women’s fiction. Rosemarie Garland Thomson analyzes this role from a rhetorical standpoint, one in which the physically disabled figure most often testifies to her own suffering amid a complex matrix of overall domestic, sentimental, and women’s reform writing. Thomson argues that regardless of whether or not the
disabled body is a minor or major character, her role is instrumental in advancing a "particular rhetorical project" by positioning the body as an authority in social and/or spiritual order, whether to "register its ambivalences" or to "testify to its contradictions" (138). In her article "Crippled Girls and Lame Old Women" Thomson writes:

Disability operates as the manifestation of suffering, a seemingly undeniable sign that makes what is internal and unnarratable into something external and narratable. In this way the visibly disabled body operates as the spectacle of suffering rather than the reality of suffering which is less representable. In other words, disability acts as the stigmata of suffering (138).

Although it may be easy to approach Emily's blindness as simply a mode through which Cummins attempts to teach Gerty selfless suffering, the novel does more than position Emily as a spectacle through which virtue is obtained. Whether or not Cummins was attempting to use Emily's disabled body for its effect on the reader's sympathy, the significance of her role does more than operate as an "exhibition" or "visual spectacle of suffering" (Thomson 138). For if Emily's disabled body operates as a spectacle of suffering upon which Gerty gazes, the desired effect is not achieved. For Emily insists on appearing submissive to the will of God throughout the novel, refusing to reveal to Gerty the real story behind her blindness and the nature of her true suffering, while Gerty continues to remain submissive to her own heart.
Emily’s influence over Gerty is gained both actively and passively. During Gerty’s early years, Emily actively tries to persuade Gerty towards introspection. Upon meeting Emily, Gerty comments upon her own appearance, telling Emily that she is unlovable because she is an ugly child. Emily’s awareness that physical traits should in no way hinder internal attributes is evident in her response to Gerty, telling her that people love children like herself “if they are good” (55). Emily’s approach to “being good” as a source of obtaining love has moralistic ground, for being good is more than a doing “what is right.” For Emily, moral goodness and absolute forgiveness go hand in hand. When Gerty is angered by the relentless teasing of fellow children, Emily tells her, “If you wish to become good and be forgiven, you must forgive others” (62).

What makes Emily’s approach to Gerty so interesting is the narrow terms in which Emily defines relationships. Setting forth a sort of rhetoric of conversion, Emily encourages Gerty to submit to goodness and forgiveness in order to obtain love from those she is in relationship with. This path of Christian virtue echoes Emily’s goal to inspire Gerty “with a higher motive than merely pleasing others” (73). For Emily, the suffering of the self is essential in order to live in relationship with others. By insisting that Gerty, from an early age, learn from the submissive “spirit of the divine master,” Emily “was making [Gerty] powerful to do and to suffer, to bear and to forbear, when, depending on herself, she should be left to her own guidance alone” (73). This perspective carries Emily through a majority of the novel and takes on
significant gender implications in relation to Fuller as Gerty develops into a mature adult.

As women, both Emily and Gerty are subjected to conventions of acceptable female behavior. As stated above, Emily's code of behavior is to align herself with moral duty and submission to others and the will of God. Gerty, on the other hand, has not been taught a strict submission to others as a moral right. Rather, through the training of True and Mrs. Sullivan, Gerty has learned to listen to her own sense of personal obligation to care for herself, and by extension, to care for those around her. Gerty's understanding of Christianity moves from one of submission to one of personal duty. As a child, Gerty has a simple understanding of faith, believing that "God was in heaven; that his power was great; and that people were made better by prayer" (41). This faith grows through the example of True, who offers the practice of Christian virtue in non-moralistic terms. Rather than teaching Gerty moral lessons, True attempts to show God to Gerty in terms of a relationship connection. Offering a small statue of Samuel, True and Willie explain the biblical story of Samuel, who, although completely unsure of why God calls upon him, answers with total submission, "Here am I, Lord!" For Gerty, this understanding takes on the same personal sense of desire as her relationship to True; offering herself spiritually for any work echoes her desire to be made useful, to connect on a deeper level of mutual dependence.

For Emily, these egalitarian relationships are absent from her own life, for unlike Gerty, the cost of having relationships comes at the sacrifice of personal
desires. Despite their different backgrounds, Gerty’s acceptance and resistance to Emily’s teachings reveals how Gerty refuses to domesticate herself despite conventional calls on her womanhood, and she remains true to her personal definition of duty. The most evident example of this difference between Emily and Gerty is the necessity to subdue anger. Most of Emily’s focus on Gerty’s gradual transformation into a self-asserting individual is on Gerty’s need to learn to control her “less pleasing impulses,” (48) and to “bear even injustice, without losing your self-control” (99). For a girl leaving the home of the abusive Nan Grant, learning to control an unruly temper, taught to her by example, is what Emily considers the most significant aspect of Gerty’s learning.

That Gerty learn not to lash out against others is certainly essential to her development as an adult, but the emphasis Emily places on anger is not completely valid. In this sense, learning self control is more about personal integrity than following a standard code of behavior. This is exemplified in both Emily and Gerty’s understanding of the destructive forces of an ill-managed temper. Emily, whose personal experience with unchecked tempers blinded her, knows that the temper, “in one moment of its fearful reign, [can] cast a blight upon a lifetime, and write in fearful lines the mournful requiem of earthly joy” (63). Knowing that anger does not always lead to forgiveness but a lifetime of resentment, as demonstrated in the novel’s conclusion when Mr. Graham and Philip Amory are once again brought face to face, Emily’s approach to quelling friction is by responding with the “power of Christian humility,” that of “principle, of conscience,” the only power to which
“native pride ever will pay homage” (73). True to her character, Emily confronts anger by forcing herself to contextualize events in which she casts herself as the submissive female. It may be that Emily does not necessarily feminize submission but believes all individuals must live in submission to each other, but her actions do not reveal this. Rather, Emily approaches humility and submission in two ways: to obtain eternal life and survive the masculine will.

The first she attempts to instill in Gerty, claiming that only those “who have learned submission; those who, in the severest afflictions, see the hand of a loving father, and, obedient to his will, [will] kiss the chastening rod” (104). But Emily’s Christian beliefs are not the only reason for her submissive approach to living. On the second level, Emily insists on self-submission in order to survive the destructive forces of male arbitrary power that blinded her and forever made her a dependent woman. For Emily, there is no other choice, no other reality; personal power is obtained only by submitting her life to the events that surrounded her, and only by living continuously in that state can she deal with her suffering.

On one level, Emily’s obsession with submission stifles her ability to fully express her justified anger and inner turmoil. It is only when she is alone that this alternative aspect of her selfhood breaks forth, as revealed in the sporadic emotional episodes of Emily’s real grief in the novel. But the expression of this is always hidden; Emily never cries in public or in front of Gerty—for a woman, grief and anger are private emotions best kept hidden.

Gerty, although no less willing, is not so able to hide her emotions. Wishing to
control her temper to please Emily, Gerty tries to comply with Emily’s instruction. Aware that Gerty desires to please her, Emily tells her that maintaining self-control should be done “not for my sake” but for her own sake and for the “sake of duty and of God” (99). Despite her attempts to conquer her anger, Gerty still possesses a “sensitive, proud temper” even into adulthood. Gerty’s proud temper “seemed an inborn thing” that refused to be crushed (73). Although seen as negative by Emily and the social culture surrounding them, this inborn sense of pride need not be interpreted in a negative light. In fact, despite the code of behavior expected from proper and submissive women of the nineteenth century, it is Gerty’s strong sense of personal justice that fosters and keeps her accountable to her personal sense of duty. Anger enables Gerty to step out of situations or any environment that refuses to acknowledge or value her selfhood, and more specifically, threatens to quench her potential selfhood from developing. In Fuller’s terms, Gerty has demonstrated her cultivation of Muse and Minerva in an early environment; any environment that threatens that freedom to self is questioned by Gerty.

There are two major episodes within the Graham household that test Gerty’s understanding of personal duty and freedom. The first requires that Gerty restrain her reactionary temper towards Miss Ellis, Emily’s housekeeper, who maintains a haughty attitude towards Gerty. Ardently believing in Gerty’s lower class status, Miss Ellis considers Gerty undeserving of the continued formal education given to her by the Grahams. Partial to high birth, Mrs. Ellis distains waiting on someone she considers inferior to her own station and makes Gerty’s stay with Emily miserable at
times. During one of Gerty’s afternoons away, Miss Ellis cleans Gerty’s room and throws out a box of Gerty’s most precious possessions. Gerty is furious when she discovers the cause of the missing box, but rather than lashing out at Miss Ellis, she maintains her self-control by locking herself alone in her room to calm herself down.

On one level, Gerty’s reaction displays a growing maturity, especially for a woman who has always found restraint around anyone except Emily “unbearable, and, however proper and necessary a check it might be,” Gerty “was always disposed to resent it” (73). Inherent in this maturity is the significance of Gerty’s ability to call upon her rational strength, as opposed to the highly emotive reactionary girl who throws rocks through Nan Grant’s windows. Although Gerty is still “not afraid of anybody,” (177) this experience with Miss Willis tests Gerty’s ability to adhere to what is typically deemed the masculine trait of rational thinking. At age fourteen, Gerty already recognizes the importance of weighing potentially harmful situations. By weighing the cost of her own reactions to Miss Ellis, Gerty avoids a potentially difficult argument with someone who appears to be of little consequence to her life but who also may create a disruptive environment for both herself and Emily. Although angry, she chooses not to explode, but shares her anxiety with Emily.

It is important to note a significant difference between Gerty’s rational reason to not express anger at Miss Ellis and Emily’s refusal to express her own anger in the novel. Although Gerty does not confront her offender, she does express her resentment to Emily. In the scheme of things, Gerty’s decision not to make a scene during this particular situation proves her ability to weigh the importance of female
reactions. Emily refuses to express any emotion publicly; even the most severe situation that blinded her requires her to maintain silence, even with her closest confidante. Gerty, who “had conquered: [she] had achieved the greatest of earth’s victories, a victory over herself” by not lashing out, does so within a context of perhaps less dangerous potentials (117). For Gerty to act rationally, she avoids creating a hostile environment that could disrupt her own personal freedom, whereas Emily insists on submission to that environment that continues to keep her silent.

The second event in the Graham household that is a turning point in Gerty’s self-formation takes place between herself and Emily’s father, Mr. Graham. A number of things make this event significant, particularly because of the context of the event. While Gerty is living with the Grahams, she gets word that Mrs. Sullivan and her father are in ill health and need Gerty’s assistance. Unfortunately, at the same time Mr. Graham has planned a trip for Emily and wants Gerty to go with them. Expected to accompany the Grahams, Gerty is torn between caring for Emily and returning to be with the Sullivans during Willie’s absence. Recognizing that this decision is stressful for Gerty, Emily’s response is one of understanding; she says “I am confident you love me next to your duty, and I would not for the world that you should give me preference” (134). Trusting Gerty to side with her intuition, Emily encourages Gerty to listen to what her senses dictate.

Mr. Graham is far less understanding. Certain that Gerty will go on their trip, he does not even entertain the idea that Gerty would have to make a decision between the two options. For Graham, there is no decision; Gerty is a dependent woman, and
therefore must do as she is directed. When Gerty reveals her intent to return to the
Sullivans, Mr. Graham is irate. Unleashing his anger and questioning her motivation,
he claims that returning to care for the Sullivans is making a "salve" of herself. If she
would adhere to his desires and travel with the Grahams, she would be treated like a
lady and as one of the family. Although Gerty voices her desire to please his wishes,
Graham is determined that Gerty travel with them: "Wish it—I tell you I insist upon
it. You are under my care, child, and I have a right to say what you shall do" (139).
By extension, Mr. Graham makes Gerty a slave by insisting that she consent to his
will.

The fact that Mr. Graham is characterized as a selfish man throughout the
novel, concerned only with his own plans which "must not be interfered with," even
when those plans sacrifice his daughter's comfort, makes him a continuous challenge
for Gerty (96). In a sense, Mr. Graham presents a harsh duality; although he provides
for Gerty and pays for her education, his own sense of personal responsibility stops
short of any true understanding of relationships. Like the irritated trader's perspective
towards his wife in \textit{WNC}, Mr. Graham is not concerned with Gerty's personal desires
but only with how her refusal to consent to his will upsets his own comfort. Mr.
Graham cannot imagine Gerty desiring anything outside of the realm of his domestic
house and company. Not capable of "understanding the kind of regard which causes
one to find gratification in whatever tends to the present or future welfare of another,
without reference to himself or his own interests," (103) Mr. Graham cannot grasp the
reality that, although Gerty is thankful for his provisions, she is not obligated to him
out of the same requirements, nor can he even imagine having to consent to her seemingly independent wishes.

The former is based on Gerty’s realization that as a woman and as an individual she has a free will that should not be arbitrarily controlled. Aware that Graham’s desires deprive her of her free will, Gerty questions herself; “Does he consider that my freedom is to be the price of my education, and I am no longer to be able to say yes or no?” (143). It is notable that Gerty’s ability to process the circumstances in which she finds herself reveals the ironic nature of Cummins’ characters, proving how Gerty is an inversion of the sentimental approach to womanhood. While Gerty’s reactions to Graham are strong, they are also rational; she responds with little emotion and equal determination. When told that her decision to go the Sullivans would end her education and life with the Grahams, Gerty replies to Mr. Graham, “I believe it to be my duty, and am therefore, willing to sacrifice my own comfort, and, what I assure you I value far more, your friendship” (146).

Contrarily, Mr. Graham’s reaction is completely emotional, displaying a somewhat urgent and almost violent expression of feeling, which is juxtaposed to Gerty’s complete composure. When Emily twice attempts to persuade her father to Gerty’s side, saying “I thought the object, in giving Gertrude a good education, was to make her independent of all the world, and not simply dependent upon us,” and again, “we had better put her out to learn a trade at once, than half-educate, make a fine lady of her, and so unfit her for anything,” (140) Mr. Graham responds in a highly defensive fashion: “I tell you it is a matter of feeling, you don’t seem to look
upon things in the light I do; but you are both against me, and I won’t talk any more about it” (101). Interestingly, while Gerty and Emily, both women, remain rational thinkers, determined to logically draw the boundaries of Gerty’s relationship to the Graham family, Graham is highly reactionary and emotive in his refusal to budge.

It is Gerty’s ability to assert herself that displays her sense of self-duty. While Emily’s understanding of duty requires her to remain silent at the cost of male tempers, Gerty’s sense of duty requires her to defy those powers, regardless of the consequences. Knowing that going to care for the Sullivans might leave her no place to return to at the Graham’s home, Gerty willingly tests the cost in order to obey her own intuition. What this decision offers her is a chance at independence. After leaving the Grahams, Gerty takes a teaching position and finds her own rooms.

It has been argued that Cummins makes little of Gerty’s only paid position in the novel. When Gerty begins teaching the narrator says:

of [her] schooling-duties we shall say nothing, save that she was found by Mr. W [her employer] fully competent to the performance of them, and that she met with those trials and discouragements only to which all teachers are more or less subjected, from the idleness, obstinacy, or stupidity of their pupils. (152-3)

The only other aspect of Gerty’s teaching that is noted is the amount she is paid, “three hundred and fifty dollars a year” (184).

Contrary to some critical option, the reality that Gerty does little with her formal education other than teach for a short time can be interpreted as speaking to
more positive than negative aspects of Gerty’s development. Returning to Amal Amireh’s approach to *The Lamplighter*, she argues that teaching is a temptation that threatens to “undo all the domestic education [Gerty] has received” (116). Amireh’s interpretation of Gerty’s “domestic education” diverges significantly from the approach taken in this thesis. For Amireh, the education offered to Gerty by her adopted family is binding, in the sense that the desire to work for economic independence moves Gerty away from a sort of burden to care for others, which, according to Amireh, remains Gerty’s primary focus. In other words, Gerty’s work episode “underscores her domestic identity in two ways: she renounces economic autonomy for duty, and she proves that work experience is irrelevant to her true self” (116).

Although certainly Gerty’s economic independence is important in the context of nineteenth-century women’s liberty, it is not the most important focus of the novel. Rather, the fact that Gerty does little with her education occupationally does not negate the extreme importance of its role in her life. The significance of Gerty’s education has everything to do with her ability to understand herself and interpret her own motivations and the motivations of others, particularly when Gerty’s sense of duty is challenged. Nina Baym notes that education “emerges as the source of Gertrude’s ability to assess competing ethical claims and resist those which, rationally, she decides are unjust” (*Women’s Novels* 347). In other words, Gerty’s intellectual pursuits and rapidly expanding intuitive senses develop her ability to define her actions, leaving the Grahams and being independent, in ungendered terms.
In no way does Gerty approach the care of the Sullivans as a feminine duty, but as the action of a self-respecting individual. Her formal teaching only adds to her potential development; it reinforces her individual understanding of personal freedom and duty to self.

In Fuller’s terms, Gerty’s education and open environment has enabled her to adhere to the values of will, intelligence, and strength evidenced in Minerva, and the intuitive, magnetic elements of the Muse within her own selfhood. The result is the freedom to fashion a nongendered sense of self, free from the feminization of required domestic obligation and the masculinization of her independent nature.

By extension, Gerty’s identity is based in an active mode of self-formation rather than a passive feminine ideal. How this relates to Gerty’s relationships to others is of essential importance. Gerty’s motivations are always born out of the desire to cultivate relationships with others, specifically those who have proven themselves worthy of her trust. Gerty’s ability to command her capacities enables her to choose to whom her sympathy and connections will be given, without heed to those, like Mr. Graham, who seek to upset the boundaries she has set. Overall, Gerty’s ability to foster her own sense of duty and self-assertion creates, in a sense, a network of family associations outside of any sort of biological connection. As Cindy Weinstein argues in her essay “A Sort of Adopted Daughter: Family Relations in *The Lamplighter,*” Gerty’s ability to gain personal self-possession is founded in the multiple ways she is adopted by those who invest in her potential growth. The foundational aspects of True and Mrs. Sullivan’s training, compounded by Emily’s
educational approach to development both emotional and intellectual in nature, are what enables Gerty to possess herself as an individual. Therefore, Gerty “exercises her sympathy the way she goes about making her family—freely, rationally, and contractually” (Weinstein 1023).

Interestingly, this ability to be sympathetic is demonstrated in nongendered constraints. As Weinstein points out further, Cummins regards the ability to give sympathy as a degendered construct. Men are also active agents in relationship and sympathetic relations, for example, True’s taking Gerty into his home is done out of the sympathetic motivation of his heart. The same is true for other men in the novel: Mr. Miller’s attention to Willie’s senile grandfather, Willie’s devotion to his family’s urgent needs, and Dr. Jeremy’s concern and care for Gerty and Emily.

As a “domestic novel,” *The Lamplighter* places the freedom to cultivate uncensored relationships at the center of a productive and positive selfhood. Regardless of gender, those who foster potential selfhood in Gerty are valued more highly, and are given more weight in Gerty’s life than those like Mr. Graham, who only care for their own desires. Additionally, Gerty’s sense of duty does not bind her to a domestic sphere of being. Rather, it calls her out of the home and into any circumstance that cultivates true relationship. In other words, Gerty is willing to step beyond what Graham considers her assigned sphere in order to care for a woman who fostered her own growth and the “family” she has created. According to Gerty’s definitions, Mr. Graham lies outside of this family unit because he seeks to control it. By approaching the situation as one of relationship hierarchy,
Graham intends to dictate who Gerty will offer her sympathy to. By choosing to pay attention to her own intuition, Gerty continues to give her affections to those who value her, not to those who retract their care from her.

What makes these relationships significant is that Gerty’s approach fosters an increased ability in the characters who surround her to recognize their own potential to grasp their identities outside of gendered definitions of selfhood. This is specifically true for Kitty Clinton and Fanny Bruce. When Kitty discovers that Ben Bruce, her supposed suitor, was taking every opportunity for “amusement and indulgence” in his “marked devotion to Kitty” in order to excite jealousy in Gerty, her sense of devastation equals Gerty’s outrage (234). When Ben reveals his plot, explaining his distaste for Kitty and desire for Gerty, Gerty immediately confronts him, refusing to quell her own sense of dignity; “It is not my place to censure; I speak only from the impulse of my heart” (235). Refusing to stifle her reactions, Gerty remains true to her character. The intuition that guides her away from Ben Bruce’s flattery is the same intuition that enables her to react honestly to the injustice he does both herself and Kitty.

Responding to Kitty’s despair and hoping to instill in Kitty a sense of dignity after she has been so embarrassed by Ben’s false intentions, Gerty encourages Kitty to allow Ben to see that she is “strong and brave” (240) while ceasing to believe in his flattery. With Gerty’s help, and the shelter of Emily’s room, Kitty is also transformed into a woman quite unlike her haughty, self-seeking sister Isabel. Rather, Kitty is changed from “the gay, fluttering, vain child of fashion, into the useful, estimable,
and lovely woman," (240) no longer concerned with selfish gain and empty flattery.
Similarly, Gerty's role modeling and instruction influences Fanny Bruce, who, much like Gerty, needs the guidance of another woman to foster her own potential selfhood. Gerty's own sense of personal duty is echoed in her words to Fanny; "You must cultivate your heart Miss Bruce; you must cultivate your heart" (213). Rather than cultivating any sort of religious or social sense of duty, Gerty encourages the listening to and developing of, in Fuller's terms, the Muse's influence and intuitive sense and possessing Minerva's strength and intellect to do so.

What is unique about Gerty's ability to produce the desire for potential selfhood in others is that her actions revert back upon her one constant teacher, Emily. Refusing to practice what she may feel as self-indulgence, the extent of Emily's loss is not revealed to Gerty until she is confronted with Willie's return and possible engagement to Isabel Clinton. Still, what is Gerty's clear ability to remain transparent about her motivations and reveal both her rational and emotional attributes is what enables Emily to admit her own sense of suffering to Gerty. Hence, the woman who "never sighed" (57) becomes a woman who is able to fully engage in the meaning of her loss. Once Gerty has disclosed her fears that Willie may be betrothed to another, Emily "wept as she listened" and exclaimed "with an excitement of tone and manner which Gertrude had never before witnessed in the usually calm and placid blind girl," that Gerty too "should be thus doomed! O, Gertrude, my darling, we may weep together; but still, believe me, your sorrow is far less bitter than mine!" (313).
It is only then that Emily reveals the secret of her blindness, and Gerty comes to grasp Emily’s sense of duty. But it is a false or failed sense of duty at best, for, as highlighted earlier, Emily’s sense of duty is not the same as Gerty’s. For Emily, her suffering at the hands of her father and Amory Phillip’s tempers cost her deeply, and she approaches this cost as something out of which Christian virtue is born. Telling Gerty “through suffering only we are made perfect,” (322) Emily continues to instill in Gerty a sense that personal suffering requires loss. Gerty’s apprehension of this results in a misreading of motivation; in a state of panic, Gerty offers Isabel a chance to be rescued from a sinking boat, willing to sacrifice her own life for what she thinks will be Willie’s happiness. But her attempt is wrong, because Willie does not love Isabel, and had Gerty only listened to her intuition that believed in Willie’s character, her distress would have perhaps been less severe.

It seems correct, therefore, to conclude that Gerty’s potential development does more than might be expected. In a way, her absence from the lives of these women could have negated a significant aspect of the potential developments of their female characters, an absence Cummins could not imagine. Still, Gerty’s transparent nature enables Emily to finally impart and release the suffocating burdens she carries through the novel. Emily’s outpouring was made possible by a Gerty whose continued self-reliance required her to foster potential development in others.

*The Marriage Plot*

In the context of *The Lamplighter*, the emphasis placed on Gerty’s relationships with others, specifically those mentioned above, is only part of the
overall plot. Despite the importance of these relationships to Gerty’s potential development, her marriage to Willie remains the one relationship whose cultivation presents both the possibility of an imagined egalitarian relationship and a threat to the future of Gerty’s continued potential growth and the survival of her degendered selfhood.

What makes the relationship between Gerty and Willie a challenge is his absence for a majority of the novel. In fact, Willie fades out of the novel as an important central character and reappears in the last chapters to provide, in a sense, a husband for Gerty. In essence, the close friends miss the key developing years of each other’s lives. They do not share or experience any of the same circumstances for over six years, including the loss of Willie’s mother and grandfather, to which Gerty is a direct party of and which Willie is only notified. It seems that the motivation in excluding Willie’s personal development in India, which for the most part goes unvoiced, is that Cummins chooses to center the novel on Gerty’s development rather than Willie’s.

Formalistically, The Lamplighter fits the general plot of women’s fiction in creating a story of a “trial and triumph” for its heroine. As Baym notes extensively in her “Introductions and Conclusions” to the second edition of Woman’s Fiction, this structure is built on how the heroine perceives herself and how that perception works to alter her own self-understanding and create change in those she is in relationship with. When that plot advocates marriage as the end result, it is often on a more “egalitarian than hierarchical” level (18). Therefore, the cultivation of selfhood within
The Lamplighter does more than present a fully self-possessed Gerty, but offers a seemingly shadowy glimpse into what could be the imagined relationship between two equally self-realized individuals in the relationship between Gerty and Willie.

What seems questionable is Cummins’s insistence on pulling Gerty into marriage, stating at the end of the novel, when Willie and Gerty are reunited, that the “long and patient continuance in well-doing” had earned Gerty “so full a recompense, so all-sufficient a reward” (441). Does Cummins choose to remove Willie from the conventional plot for a majority of the novel in order to create a fully capable, adapted, and independent woman whose ability to adhere to Fuller’s construction of potential selfhood enables her to lead a life of her choosing? Or could it be that Cummins, in constructing a novel around the development of a single woman, could only imagine that development as brought to its fullest potential in the life of Gerty and not in the life of Willie, hence his immediate exit and sudden reentrance?

Perhaps the answer to these questions can be found by examining the way in which Gerty and Willie understand the personal developments they formulate separate from each other and how they come together to create the possibility of Fuller’s marriage of religious union. Because few, if any, details are given of Willie’s experiences in India until the conclusion of the novel it is difficult to contextualize Willie’s development outside of what is revealed in the concluding chapters of the story. As children, their self-formations are collective and yet different in nature. Willie, who is accustomed to being loved, “expected to be loved, and was loved by everybody,” (48) was born into a supportive family, whereas Gerty had to find hers.
Although both are educated at school and in the home by Mrs. Sullivan, the development of their gifts is defined differently. While both children are “filled with the desire to contribute to the comfort of their aged friends” by the “beautiful spirit of grateful love which each manifested,” Willie’s sense of desire to care for relationships had been “fostered by pious training” whereas for Gerty “it was a mere impulse” to act in such accord (48). Regardless, both are bound by the mutual desire and expectations that come with loving “family.”

Ultimately, their similarities stop there. Although both children are taught self-reliance and are given an education, very much on equal terms, Willie is urged towards a very different set of goals. The pressure placed on him as a provider for the family weighs heavily on him as a young boy, and these expectations of his mother and grandfather are never realized before their deaths. As his family’s poverty increases, and Willie’s inability to find a position continues, he resolves “manfully to hope against hope” (107) for a position, while Gerty remains the chief comforter of his personal despair. When he is offered a position in India, Willie decides to “struggle and strive among men” (107) and leaves Gerty, a child of twelve, not to see her again until she is nineteen.

Certainly, it is obvious that Willie must support his family while Gerty, who is not biologically responsible for anyone, is left to do her own work. While she teaches to support herself, her income supporting only to her, Willie is forced to leave and enter the marketplace to sustain his family. What concerns us here is not necessarily why Willie leaves, but by how his return affects the potential development of Gerty
as the central female character. It seems no mistake that Cummins sends Willie off in order to focus on Gerty’s self-formation, unhindered by the possibility of romance and marriage expectations, and yet Cummins also does not ignore the presence of these thoughts in Gerty, nor does she attempt to refute a conventional mode of domestic literature by refusing to see Gerty married to her childhood friend.

It is important to establish why it is that Gerty desires Willie upon his return, for their years of separation have kept them from truly knowing each other in any intimate way, at least as adults. As a plot construction, Willie’s return offers the only other chance for Gerty to become a wife. Ben Bruce, the only other suitor mentioned in the novel, is an obvious scoundrel who believes he has “money enough to purchase for a wife any woman whom he chose to select” (266). Despite the lack of available choices, Gerty remains a desirable character. Everyone is aware of her “noble conduct” and “devotion” and her clear ability to dress and carry herself fashionably with no real realization of her talent to do so (206). It is Gerty’s natural abilities that mystify those who do not understand or value Gerty’s adherence to her sense of duty. In fact, she remains unexplainable to many; even Ben Bruce cannot fully explain the impact of her presence. Frustrated by his own confusion, Ben says, “I believe she’s bewitched me, so that I’m not capable of judging; but, if it isn’t beauty, it is because it’s something more than mere good looks” (227). As it has already been established in the above section, Gerty’s adherence to Fuller’s degendered spheres are what attract people to Gerty, Ben Bruce being one of those individuals who is too self-absorbed to understand Gerty’s sense of selfhood.
Gerty, who is not really confronted with why she loves Willie until the end of the novel, has had an education both of mind and of character, fostered completely by her relationship with others. How Gerty understands her relationship to Willie after his return is critical in the sense that Cummins draws Gerty back into a conventional form of femininity. When she is confronted with the reality that Willie’s self-development may have been drastically different from hers during his stay in India in light of his possible engagement to Isabel Clinton, she refuses to acknowledge that he could possess anything but positive motivations:

Who, during the many years she had known him, could have proved himself more worthy of confidence than Willie? Had he not, from his boyhood, been exemplary in every virtue, superior to every meanness and every form of vice? Had he not in his early youth forsaken all that he held most dear, to toil and labor beneath an Indian sun, that he might provide comforts and luxuries for those whose support he eagerly took upon himself? Had he not ever proved honorable, high-minded, sincere and warm of heart? Above all, had he not been imbued from his infancy with the highest and purest of Christian principles? (308)

Although it may appear that Gerty is holding Willie to a highly idealistic childhood standard, it is difficult to determine that Gerty’s perspective is simply immature, due to the lack of information provided by Cummins to carry the connection between Willie and Gerty through the story. The letters that flow between them are often not
completely explained, with the exception of those written about the death of Mrs. Sullivan and Willie’s grandfather. Cummins’s refusal, or perhaps inability to write those letters creates a problem in deciphering the relationship between Gerty and Willie. By leaving the letters of contact out of the story, Cummins chooses to leave any romantic relationship between the two a mystery until Willie returns to America and Gerty is confronted with the reality of his presence. Notably, it is at this time that Cummins chooses to point out that during their “long and regular correspondence, no letter had come from Willie that did not breathe the same spirit of devoted affection for Gertrude, —an exclusive affection, in which there could be no rivalship” (308). This sudden explanation at the end of the novel creates even more confusion for Gerty, whose desire turns more to desperation when she realizes that Willie’s choice for a wife may not be herself but Isabel, a woman whose character is nothing like her own.

What is significant about Gerty’s desire for a relationship with Willie is that it echoes her desire to maintain relationships that foster her own understanding of selfhood. Having lived through the deaths of True, Mrs. Sullivan and her father, Gerty is no stranger to death, and her realization that those who continually support her will also pass forces Gerty to confront her ultimate fear: isolation. Willie becomes her “last prop” (312) on which to lean, and his possible absence from her life is crushing. Notably, towards the end of the novel, after Willie’s return, Cummins chooses to contextualize Gerty’s life as “inexperienced,” and therefore, in need of a support system that only Willie can provide to weather any future storms. But the
provision of Willie as a husband is not completely necessary, as Gerty's established identity has proven her constant ability to listen to her own sense of duty despite her single status. The extreme experiences Gerty has confronted during the story refute any sort of need for validation from Willie. In fact, that Gerty has come as far as she has, without any help from Willie, proves even more that she is an experienced woman, for:

she had even then experienced much of the sorrow of life, and learned how to distil from the bitter dregs of suffering a balm for every pain. Even then, that experience, and the blessed knowledge she had gained from it, had both stamped themselves upon her countenance; the one in a sobered and subdued expression, which usually belongs to more mature years; the other, in that sweet, calm smile and hope, which proclaims the votary of Heaven. (128)

The question then becomes, will Gerty recognize this reality, or will she be pulled into a conventional form of marriage? More importantly, how do Willie's motivations speak to his understanding of his selfhood and Gerty as an individual within the context of an egalitarian relationship? The two conversations that reveal Willie's motivation in returning to Gerty are between Phillip Amory and Willie and Gerty and Willie. In the conversation between Amory and Willie, Willie reveals that his understanding of Gerty grows out of the deep contrast between the "folly, the worldliness, and the cold-heartedness" around him to the "cultivated mind, the self-sacrificing and affectionate disposition" (305) of the girl he left behind. In the
context of Willie’s mind, Gerty’s acts of love towards his dying mother and grandfather were the noblest sympathetic actions she could have taken towards not only him, but her own family. Like Gerty, Willie shares in a collective understanding of family, saying to Gerty upon his departure to India, “take good care of our mother and grandfather—they are yours almost as much as mine” (107 emphasis mine). The significance of their shared approach to relationship projects what possible type of marriage Gerty and Willie could have beyond the novel’s conclusion.

What is not likely is that Gerty and Willie would have, in Fuller’s terms, a marriage of “household partnership,” for Gerty has already proved herself one who does not adhere to the fulfilling of domestic roles for the sake of conventional duty, nor does Willie appear to understand Gerty in that fashion. In his conversation with Amory, Willie explains his understanding of Gerty’s complex character as “the standard by which each [woman] in my mind was measured” (358). This measurement is not made by the physical graces of femininity that the cult of true womanhood proclaims. Rather, Willie’s definitions of Gerty reach beyond the physical realm, for most of his references are to Gerty’s internal being, the being that was fostered in his absence. To Willie, Gerty possesses “a spirit so elevated as to make her great, a heart so noble as to make her rich, a soul so pure as to make her beautiful” (349). What is significant about this claim is that none of these definitions are gendered terms. In fact, they fall directly in line with how Fuller defines an individual by the possession of a soul. Interestingly, Willie claims to be even less concerned about Gerty’s physical ability than her internal abilities. Expressing this to
Amory, Willie says of Gerty, “six years may have outwardly changed her much; but they cannot have robbed her of what I prize most. She has charms over which time can have no power, a grace that is a gift of Heaven, a beauty that is eternal. Could I ask for more?” (359). Rather than classifying Gerty in gendered terms, Willie refuses to acknowledge her for any social understanding of “feminine” or “masculine” traits and instead sees Gerty as an individual whose identity is fluid and all encompassing, regardless of her sex.

Furthermore, Willie recognizes the distinct differences between Gerty and other women, particularly Isabel Clinton. When Gerty expresses to Willie that Isabel’s beauty is extensive, Willie challenges her assumptions, saying:

- do not a proud eye and a scornful lip destroy the effect of beauty? Can fashion excuse rudeness, or noble birth cover natural deficiencies?...

Had Isabel possessed the beauty of Venus and the wisdom of Minerva, I could not have forgotten how little happiness there could be with one who, while devoting herself to the pursuit of pleasure, had become dead to natural affections, and indifferent to the holiest of duties. (410)

What Willie’s comparison reveals is more than his awareness that Gerty possesses far deeper and more fulfilling qualities than the haughty Isabel. Isabel’s lack is Gerty’s gain; that Isabel would “flee the bedside of her father” (410) because she could not watch his feebleness and would rather engage in worldly concerns and flattery than all else, is directly opposed to the actions and attitudes of Gerty, whose sense of responsibility for Mrs. Sullivan and her father grew from their educating
Gerty and providing her a family. This sense of responsibility the self-centered Isabel cannot achieve.

The stress placed on relationships with others is what also refutes Gerty and Willie’s marriage as potentially one of “mutual idolatry,” for it hardly seems likely that either of them would “lock the gates against all glories of the universe, that they may live in a cell together” (283). Gerty’s connection to the world that “has been a good foster-mother to its orphan child” is too close-knit for one to imagine her hiding away to worship any one individual (278). The marriage of mutual idolatry is not how Gerty lives her life, for it requires that she be an active agent only in confinement, which the rest of the novel demonstrates is completely opposed to Gerty’s sense of duty. Gerty’s understanding of how this fits into domestic life provides Cummins an opportunity to imagine a domestic sphere that it not necessarily confining. As Weinstein argues, because the construction of family and therefore domestic space is not biologically defined, it makes sense that Gerty’s understanding of home is also fluid in nature. Rather than confining, the ability to care for and foster relationships with adopted family members is what frees Gerty to grow and change into a fully self-possessed woman.

This fluid construction of family is what could affect Willie’s understanding of potential selfhood in Gerty. In other words, that potential selfhood is developed in the context of relationships of mutual dependency is what motivates Willie to care for Gerty. The early and “earnest longing of his heart “ (107) to save his mother from a life of “toil and poverty” is transferred to Gerty (108). Explaining this central desire
to Amory, Willie expresses the desire for a place in which these relationships are sustained: "To a home, and that, not so much for myself—though I have long pined for such a rest—as for another, with whom I hope to share it" (347). Willie returns to Gerty with the hope of offering her a sustainable future, one in which there is no question of physical survival of the self because Gerty would be financially cared for.

But perhaps more important is how to interpret Willie’s definition of “home.” Is Willie’s understanding of home simply a place of rest? A place that he can finally settle into, having entered the world and made his fortune, to return to Gerty with all those gifts to offer her? Or, is Willie’s definition of home less conventional? As part of the Sullivan family, Willie is, by extension, a part of Gerty’s adopted family; more than a friend, almost a brother. Their marriage takes this relationship further, establishing a permanent lawful connection between the two. As a part of that family, Willie witnessed the approach to domestic space taken by True and his mother, in which the female body is not expected to perform the duties of the domestic sphere as demanded by nineteenth-century conventional wisdom. Rather, domestic space is co-created, and a hierarchal relationship between woman and man is never even presented as an option to Gerty—it is something she does not experience until her confrontation with Mr. Graham. The question then becomes, will Willie see the relationship within the home between woman and man/wife and husband as True does, or will Willie step into the masculine conventions that separate the roles of women and men into the domestic realm and the public sphere? And, perhaps more importantly, will Gerty adhere to the environment offered to her or fight against
conventional roles as she did towards Mr. Graham? It seems that her character testifies to an intuitive awareness of herself and those who value her, a definition of self that could move her and Willie towards the “common shrine” of Fuller’s marriage of religious union. If the freedom of the family is something that is transmitted between biological and nonbiological people, Gerty can freely choose to enter a marriage with Willie that may not hinder her established selfhood. Knowing through her adoption into True’s home that no home is a home “unless it contain food and fire for the mind as well as for the soul” (WNC 260) may carry into Gerty’s own sense of family establishment. And if, like True’s home, relationships are egalitarian, why cannot Gerty and Willie’s home be as well?

What the novel does not reveal is just how Willie and Gerty make this marriage a reality. *The Lamplighter* closes without comment on any specific circumstances after the wedding with the exception of their happiness. It makes sense that this happiness is born out of Willie’s ability to understand Gerty in genderless terms. Perhaps characterizing Willie as able to see Gerty on equal and nongendered terms is Cummins’ way of imagining what an egalitarian marriage could look like. If Willie is able, unlike Emerson, to envision the individuality of Gerty as permanently positive, then perhaps one can project the future relationship between the two childhood friends as Fuller’s seemingly utopic ideal of the marriage, at least within the context of *The Lamplighter*. What is undeniable is that if the marriage of religious union depends upon the concept of a woman being an original individual unto herself, Gerty completes her part.
Subverting Sentimentalism

The Education of Jean Muir

As a central character, Jean Muir’s journey towards her greatest potential development in *Behind a Mask* differs significantly from Gerty’s. Denied access to an environment that encourages her to foster selfhood outside of conventional approaches to femininity, Jean is forced to depend only upon her own knowledge and talent to enact genderless roles in order to ensure her essential survival. Although equally strong and independent, Jean’s self-reliant approach to life comes from the dependence upon the rigid approaches to gender identity from those she interacts with, rather than the egalitarian approach to education and relationships offered to Gerty in an open environment by True and Mrs. Sullivan. Furthermore, the false identities Jean is forced to enact deconstruct the traditional definitions of the sentimental woman, therefore challenging the nature of conventional gender definitions assumed innate characteristics of the sentimental woman.

Additionally, these displays by Jean of multi-facetted aspects of social constructions of female identity point towards the de-gendered fluidity of Fuller’s construction of identity in *WN*C. By examining the complex layering of Jean’s selfhood, Alcott questions both the possibility of degendered identity and its effects on nineteenth-century society and culture, while simultaneously questioning Fuller’s utopian vision as to whether identity can ultimately be determined outside of the influences of social gender and class bias.
What is known of Jean's early education is not revealed until the closing of the novella, and then it is only discovered by the Coventrys in a series of letters between Jean and her friend Hortense. A daughter of a pretended clergyman who marries a woman named Lady Howard for her money, Jean is soon orphaned and takes "her fate into her own hands" (199) and becomes an actress. After marrying and divorcing, she leaves the stage and tries to support herself as a governess and companion. No official education is mentioned. Rather, she is self-taught, learning what she needed in order to pass herself off as a governess in wealthy families. What is clear is that Jean's experience as an actress enables her to continue acting her entire life, an ability she uses to her advantage to carry out her master plan on the Coventrys.

By comparison to Gerty, Jean's childhood is void of any authentic information, although it is noteworthy that Jean's father was a "pretended clergyman," (199) and by way of influence, the connection between the two practicing posers could have generated Jean's need for a false identity. What the reader and the Coventrys know about Jean's background at the opening of the story is only what Jean chooses to reveal by way of acting. The text begins with Jean Muir coming to the Coventry home to work as a governess for Lady Coventry's daughter, Bella. Sent by the recommendation of Lady Sydney, no one in the Coventry household knows anything about Jean's character, but everyone holds a ready opinion about her position as a governess; Jean is entering a family of social standing and cutting perceptions. Lady, or Mrs., Coventry, is a conventional woman of high
society who is rich enough to appear “poor” and “peevish” due to nerves and headaches, possessing the “air of a martyr” when she is unwell, and she abstains from “gaiety” by constantly retreating to her rooms (99). She is not comfortable with having a “stranger” in her home, but Jean, or the “woman” must be endured for the sake of Bella’s neglected education (99). Most significantly, Mrs. Coventry’s attitude towards Jean is one of curiosity; knowing that Jean has recently spent time in the hospital, Mrs. Coventry is far more enamored with the mystery of this unseen person than the possibility of Jean’s abilities.

Bella, the only Coventry female besides her mother, is considered by her family as “sadly backward for a girl of sixteen” (98). Eager to learn, Bella excitedly awaits Jean’s arrival, whereas her eldest brother, Gerald, has an attitude of contempt, thanking heaven that he had “but one sister, and she a spoiled child,” and has escaped the “infliction of a governess so long” (97). A “cool, indolent man, seldom conscious of any emotion, any passion, pleasurable or otherwise” (102), Gerald exemplifies the haughty selfishness of a rich first child and rudely seeks to make no one, even family members, at ease with his opinions, including his assumed fiancée Lucia, who is his equal in haughtiness.

Edward, the younger brother, appears to be the only person to express concern when Jean does not arrive to the Coventrys on time. Realizing that Gerald neglected to send a carriage to pick up Jean at the train station, Lady Coventry expresses concern that Jean may “think it rude to leave her to find her way so late” (98). Although Lady Coventry’s attitude towards the yet-to-appear Jean is certainly one of
nineteenth-century social consciousness, her concern reflects the social assumptions of a woman employed as governess in the home. Although the family recognizes the importance of Bella's education, this recognition does not come without a social awareness that the necessity requires mingling with a woman of significant difference. Telling his family that he possesses an "inveterate aversion to the whole tribe" (97), Gerald's opinion reflects the social view of the governess as a woman of a distinctly lower class, possessing a savage-like nature.

This distaste for Jean's role as a governess is multifaceted and grounded in social precepts of the sexist boundaries that restricted working women throughout the nineteenth century. Because being a governess or teaching of some kind was one of the few occupational opportunities open to women, many women took the work, regardless of whether they possessed any interest in teaching or even in children. In a letter of advice to her editor W. S. Williams, Charlotte Bronte remarks on this very difficult, very demeaning position. Williams was thinking of training one of his daughters to be a governess, a job that Bronte was familiar with, having begun teaching at the age of nineteen. In her letter, she stresses the importance of a desire to teach children and the essential need of possessing fondness for students. Without them, any woman will have a "wearing, wasted existence of it" (274). Revealing her own torture, Bronte comments on the extent of the responsibility, one that, when children turn unruly, will make a woman "wish herself a housemaid or kitchen girl, rather than a baited, trampled, desolate, distracted governess" (274).
In her book *Strong Minded Woman and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, Janet Murray clarifies the difficult position most of these women found themselves in. Struggling on as little as twenty to thirty pounds a year, a governess was “primarily engaged to impart a veneer of learning and genteel manners to her charges, and act as a babysitter” (271). The long hours and confinement led to a very solitary life, and the disposal of her services once the children were grown left her out of work and home, forcing her to look constantly for new positions. This was particularly true in the 1830s and 40s when a worsening economic crisis and unemployment in England left many suffering from a loss of income, leaving their adult unmarried daughters with little support, a situation that led to the formation of the Governesses’ Mutual Assurance society in 1829 and the Governesses’ Benevolent Institution of 1841 in order to support dependant, working women.

Perhaps this is why Alcott chose to set her story in England, a country whose partiality to class-consciousness reflected not only the burden Jean must carry as a dependant governess, but also the structures that force her to enact a femininity in order to prevent the destruction of her selfhood. Forced into dependency, regardless of entitlement, a governess must eek out her existence among the lives of the wealthy, earning nothing for it and despised for it. Nowhere is the class snobbery towards governesses more evident than in the writing of Lady Eastlake\(^2\) about the plight of the governess and those who must provide for her. Classified as the highest dependant of all society, she writes that the governess “is a being who is our equal in birth,

\(^2\) Anonymous name used for editorial
manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth” (276). Having no equals and therefore, no sympathy, Lady Eastlake goes on to say:

She is a burden and restraint upon society, as all must be who are placed ostensibly at the same table and yet are forbidden to help themselves or to be helped to the same viands...her dull, fagging, bread-and-water life is perpetually putting their pampered listlessness to shame. The servants invariably detest her, for she is a dependant like themselves, and yet, for all that, as much their superior in other respects as the family they both serve. Her pupils may love her, and she may take the deepest interest in them, but they cannot be her friends. She must, to all intents and purposes, live alone, or she transgresses that invisible but rigid line which alone establishes the distance between herself and her employers. (277)

It is upon the destruction of this invisible line upon which Jean plots. A single woman in her late twenties, Jean is of low economic and social standing, and therefore must teach other young women in order to meet her basic needs. This defines a second related inherent bias against Jean as a governess; the consequence of her singlehood requires that she bring her work into the home, unlike Gerty, who teaches outside the domestic sphere. As Millicent Bell notes in her article on Jane Eyre’s role as a governess, the employment of a governess raises alarm in the mind of the comfortable class in that it presents the possibility of pauperism, which leads to female degration or even prostitution. She goes on to argue that “more
comprehensively than the teacher who teaches outside the home, the governess is paid to perform the motherly functions of protecting and caring for children and teaching them in their own homes, as the prostitute offers wifely sexual service for payment" (4). It is certainly paradoxical that though a woman’s status as a paid governess degraded her, she was still entrusted with the maternal functions of raising and training children.

The attitudes of the Coventrys reflect the disjointed approaches taken towards Jean as a “working” dependant woman. Gerald’s refusal to send a carriage for Jean because it wouldn’t “hurt her to walk” is met with disgust by Ed and Bella, who insist that the reality of Jean’s obvious poverty and strangeness is enough to offer compassion, echoed in Bella’s claim, “We’ll stand by poor little Muir, won’t we!” (98). Lady Coventry forgets all blame, claiming that if she is to “make an effort to see anyone” it had better be for a woman, including a governess, who believes in the “virtue” of punctuality (98).

Entering a home in which her position is already considered one of inferiority places Jean at a severe disadvantage. Those who are sympathetic are so out of “common civility” (98). Most tellingly, Gerald’s approach to Jean’s role in their home is one of selfish gain, as if he, not Bella, is to bear the effect of her apparent duties. The prospect that he may have to escape the “house while she is in it” lest Jean be “a bore” reveals more than Gerald’s obvious lack of tact (97). Rather than an educator, Jean is considered a source of entertainment, a disposable commodity to cast off, depending on mood and interest.
Jean’s awareness of these perceptions is evidenced in her playing of the role that has been preconceived and provided for her. Upon arriving, Jean’s assumed position is immediately evident when Bella, unaware of such social distinctions, rushes to greet her new governess, and is “authoritatively” arrested by Lucia and told that it is Jean’s “place to come to you, not yours to go to her” (99). Still, Jean’s assumed lower class position is not questioned, at least in terms of her talents—being expected to enact a level of acceptable accomplishment, including being competent in music, French, and drawing. What is significant to this discussion is the way in which Jean “performs” her duties by feeding the Coventry’s social sense of female subordination. Upon arrival, Jean presents the exact replica of the Coventry’s assumptions; a “little black-robed figure” with a “soft, sad voice,” (100) Jean accepts no apology for the neglected carriage, insisting that she didn’t expect one to be sent. At the start, Jean recognizes what the role of governess entails, as well as how to fit herself into it. Characterizing herself as Scotch, nineteen, and with no family relations, Jean evokes a “touch of pity” (100) by appearing older and more haggard, convincing the Coventry’s that her physical appearance is necessary in order that she receive governess positions: this meek and worn girl is the reflection of the meek and worn woman a governess is suppose to appear.

At the same time, what the Coventry’s notice about Jean’s appearance is two-fold; while they desperately want their governess to be a woman who exhibits dependency, they also desire her to be at least interesting. For although poverty, having made its “stamp” upon her, reveals Jean as “small, thin, and colorless,” she
also possesses traits of strength: a "clear, low voice" with a "curious mixture of
command and entreaty in its varying tones" (100). Although she is not "attractive"
she is also not "ordinary." Significantly, the Coventrys are seeking exactly what they
get: a woman who is economically weak enough to require dependency, and strong
enough to maintain a socially acceptable appearance of a virtuous female.

Jean exceeds these expectations by endeavoring to prove that she is capable of
being the "perfect mistress of her act" by singing a "little Scotch melody, so sweet, so
sad," (101) that even Jean’s eyes fill with tears. This performance places Jean at the
center of the Coventrys’ concern, first evoking sympathy by charming their fancies
with a foreign tune, then staging a fainting fit, during which she calls out to her dead
mother in a soft accent that she is sick and all alone. Jean’s act reflects the established
code of a dependent female in the home; commenting on her aloneness establishes the
significance of her role as an isolated individual, forced to work outside the confines
of her family, while at the same time it maintains full recognition of her duties as a
"true" woman when she immediately recovers from personal grief to assume a
position of caretaker and servant, rising from her fit and assisting in the service of
afternoon tea. In a sense, Jean’s role is specific to Fuller’s head/heart dichotomy. A
governess, Jean embodies the full role of dependent woman; she is wife to the
Coventrys, consenting to their every wish and dependent on them for establishing the
identity they desire her to possess.

Also significant is the role Jean plays as employed woman. As a governess,
she is employed inside the home, which is her outward way of ensuring her physical
livelihood. But it is Jean’s double employment that ultimately establishes her means of permanent survival in both public and private ways. On a public level, Jean commands space by both submitting to the wills of those in it, including the Coventrys, and simultaneously refuting their assumptions. She plays perfectly into Lady Coventry’s sense of domestic ideology by serving with an attitude of both command and grace and by refusing to allude to the assumed scandalous relationship she had with Sydney (her former employer), which is considered by Lady Coventry “prudent and proper” (104). Still, Jean engages in the “pornography of her culture” by staging a victimized fainting fit in the middle of her act (Fetterly 8-9). In all, Jean is the perfect package: she is innocent, but not too severe, staging perfectly selected self-presentations of female sentimentality to hide her authentic self and actual motivation. Her consistency convinces Edward, who considers her a “poor little woman” (101) and sets out to act charitably towards Jean in an effort to make her life easier within the Coventry home.

The only individual aware of Jean’s game is Gerald, who Jean controls by making him think he knows what she is doing, while he is really a part of her plan to dupe them all. By managing to carry a quite dialogue with him, unnoticed by the others, Jean allows Gerald to see behind her mask of presumed domesticity and sentimentality by revealing an additional aspect of her assumed identity. Gerald’s haughty nature does not go unnoticed by Jean, even within the small time-frame of the first introductions, and her utmost contempt for him as a “titled fool” leads her to react in a revealing, yet mysterious, fashion. Knowing full well Gerald’s assumptions
about her womanhood hinge on her position as a dependant woman, Jean does not hide her contempt; she reacts to every comment made by Gerald before he is aware of her sudden presence. In all, Jean’s ability to convince Gerald that she is playing her role while maintaining a certain level of mystique enables her to enact the role of a socially acceptable governess and mysteriously vague woman. Publicly, Jean is an actress upon the stage of social ideologies, igniting interest while maintaining a balance of acceptable domestication.

Alcott presents Jean as completely aware of her stage. She enters the Coventry household with an awareness of social distinctions of both class and gender and enacts them perfectly. Although the Coventrys are aware of her position, only Gerald questions her intent. Commenting on Jean’s first appearance and fainting production, he says to Lucia, his assumed fiancée, “Scene first, very well done,” to which Jean replies, “Thanks. The last scene shall be still better” (101). Although Jean reveals to Gerald her acknowledgement of his awareness, Gerald’s own curiosity is ground in his already established social assumptions about Jean as both a governess and a woman; both roles require a certain amount of impression making, and Jean is doing her best to act the role. Gerald also possesses a certain level of “masculine-driven” interest in this “uncanny little specimen,” who he characterizes as both “young” and “dangerous” (101) based on his assumptions of his friend Sydney’s relationship to Jean and Sydney’s certain interest in her. That another established gentleman like Sydney could be taken with Jean causes Gerald to wonder at her “wild woman’s
power," or her ability to entice men, a prospect particularly interesting in the Coventry household where there are "two young gentlemen to be captivated" (104).

What Gerald and the rest of the Coventry family are not aware of is the extent of Jean’s intent, which is only available to the reader when Jean enters the private realm of her own rooms. It is here that the meaning of Jean’s curious smiles and flashing eyes come to light. Alone in her room, Jean’s conduct is “decidedly peculiar” in that she removes the mask of lady-like appearance, removing her braids, makeup, pearly teeth, and simplistic dress, to reveal a “haggard, worn, and moody woman of thirty at least” (106). Stereotypical of the improper woman, Jean sits on the floor and drinks from a flask, removing all social barriers that keep her from her “true” herself. Jean’s private unmasking reveals more than her disguise; it lays open the inner turmoil of a woman whose environment requires her to enact socially constructed forms of female identity in order to ensure her survival in an environment that refuses to acknowledge her outside of her gendered position. Jean’s expression of “fierce disdain” and “passionate force” speak to her determination that she will survive if there is “power in a woman’s wit and will” (105-6).

Unlike Gerty, whose motivation is always duty to self within valued relationships, Jean’s true motivation derives from the need to ensure her essential survival by succeeding in her plot to marry a Coventry male. Unlike in The Lamplighter, in which Gerty’s character is always transparent, the reader always questions Jean’s authentic selfhood. It is with hesitation that one approaches Jean’s unmasked identity as ultimately real; for although she is “unmasked,” she is also
aware of her unmasking, "Come, the curtain is down, so I may be myself for a few 
hours, if actresses ever are themselves" (106). The significance of Jean’s talking to 
herself reveals her awareness that she is permanently on stage, a device Alcott uses in 
order to portray woman’s recognition that she is permanently actress and can never 
truly be herself because she is forced to enact so many conventionally gendered roles. 
Ultimately, Jean embodies a duality of self, both public and private. She outwardly 
displays the role of the domestic, sentimental woman while revealing, at least to 
Gerald, that she is aware of the role she is enacting. Privately, Jean unmasks the 
sentimental woman to reveal a more perverse side of her humanity, while always 
aware that even this “true” aspect of her selfhood is called into question by the reader.

It is immediately evident in the first chapter of Alcott’s novella that we are 
outside the boundaries of Fuller’s idealistic process of fostering potential selfhood, in 
that Jean is already up against those “social configurations and power structures” that 
Cynthia Davis claims limit the range of choices women have to cultivate their 
identities (What Speaks 49). Whereas Fuller’s woman is focused on the cultivation of 
selfhood, Alcott’s woman, embodied in Jean, is focused on ensuring the basic 
survival of that selfhood. Jean’s quest to ensure her basic survival moves beyond the 
function of governess and into an ever-greater realm of self-protection and the only 
profitable way in which nineteenth-century women make a living: marriage.

Jean’s knowledge that her position as governess is also disposable forces her 
into the greater recognition that the only way in which she, as a woman of the 
nineteenth century, can ensure her basic survival is by manipulating acceptable forms
of femininity as she maneuvers her way into marriage. Her goal is to convince one of the three Coventry men to take her as his bride, therefore ensuring her position within a protected sphere. Contrary to Fuller’s approach to marriage as a “journey towards a common shrine,” Jean is forced to consider marriage as a means to an end; it is a relationship through which she gains access to the ability to foster her potential selfhood. Fuller’s recognition that woman’s full livelihood rests in her ability to find a partner is what presses her towards the redefinition of woman as soul. The assumed natural result of this redefinition is that woman would be free to choose if, who, and when she desired to marry. But Jean is not given this option. On the social level, Jean’s immediate environment does not allow her to cultivate a natural sense of selfhood in Fuller’s terms; in other words, Jean is not able to freely draw from the realm of Muse and Minerva outside of her need to survive. What Alcott gives us is a picture of a woman who breaks the constrictions of gendered roles by subverting them for her own use. By playing with socially constructed forms of gender, Jean is able to not only convince the Coventrys she is nothing more than a sentimental woman, but is able to draw them into her plot in order to gain her own ground.

Jean’s duality manifests itself in forms beyond that of the sphere of a governess. A majority of *Behind a Mask* is devoted to showing exactly how it is that Jean can call into question the meaning of gender identity by masking and unmasking her selfhood through a series of roles. As stated above, Jean’s initial introduction to the Coventry family places her as a domestic dependant, intelligent enough to teach Bella but low enough to remain or appear submissive to the general household. As
Alcott moves through the novella, Jean’s plot to marry one of Coventry men and gain wealth and independence is revealed in a series of roles and masks she adopts that are directly derived from socially constructed assumptions about women’s roles and yet permit her to cross gender barriers in order to gain independence. The genius of the text rests in Alcott’s ability to present conflicting forms of femininity and masculinity within the same woman, forcing the social construction of gender identity to reveal its foundational flaws.

This first flaw is revealed in what Mary Elliot calls Jean’s embodiment of “quasi-gendered terms” or a “soft (masked) feminized persona” (1). It is this dawning of femininity that draws the Coventry men (and women) to Jean, for she exhibits exactly the type of attitude and behavior that gives a woman her power to charm. This is first exhibited in Jean’s introduction to Sir John, master of the Coventry Hall, a “luxury befitting the ancestral home of a rich and honorable race” (107). Jean is immediately taken with the Hall’s purpose, and determined to “have the best” she eagerly sets out to convince Sir John to cultivate an interest in her. By enacting what Fuller claims are the “conquests” (325) of the vain woman, Jean charms Sir John with her maiden timidity, pretending not to know him when they first meet, acting shy and out of sorts, and feeding his ego by commenting that she loves him for his “virtue and bravery” (Alcott 108). By enacting the appearance of an “earnest” and “pretty” maiden, Jean causes confusion, for when her true identity is revealed, that she is not a friend of Bella’s but her governess, Sir John displays a slight change in manner, revealing his own class bias against Jean’s position as governess within his family.
Noting Sir John's change in manner, Jean receives his offered bouquet of flowers with a "curious air of pride, mingled with respect" (109) and wanders off, leaving Sir John in wonderment over her mysterious behavior. This putting on of "soft femininity" is also exemplified in her actions towards Ed and Gerald. She claims not to be fond of "scandal or gossip" and is treated with the utmost lady-like respect when Edward chooses to stick to "safe subjects," (114) like his sister's schooling, in order to assure Jean's sense of proper dialogue. With Gerald, Jean enacts a quality of feminine submission, asking him to remind her when she neglects her duties "for pleasure" (111). Jean even goes so far as to convince the Coventry women that she is a conventional governess by displaying feminine aspects of nurturing: by decorating Lady Coventry's room with daily nosegays, flattering Lucia by admiring her mother's portrait because of its likeness of her, and reminding the proud girl that Jean is always aware of her place (111-12). These exhibits of soft masked femininity enable Jean to convince the Coventrys that she embodies the acceptable forms of female roles, reminding them of her ever-present ability to "naturally" assume her position within the domestic structure. Yet it is Jean's awareness that she is exhibiting these forms of femininity that reveals the flaw: how natural can these "natural" roles of femininity be if they are consciously evoked?

The same holds true for the second foundational flaw to a socially gendered construction, in which Jean embodies a "hard (unmasked) masculinized female persona" (Elliot 1). This persona is "unmasked" and "masculinized" in that it enacts a sort of evident awareness of a female seeking to control others and her own
situations. Jean’s embodiment of this trait reveals both her true “unmasked” nature as well as social definitions of female displays of power. This is most evident in an early scene in which Jean tames Edward’s horse, a “fine brute” who is not willing to accept Jean’s “new proceeding on the part of lady” to pet him (109). Jean’s awareness that the horse’s wildness might keep her from gaining any sort of control causes more determination on her part; “I am not your master, and your rebel. Nevertheless, I’ll conquer you” (109). This desire to conquer, established socially and historically as a “masculine” trait, speaks to Jean’s apparent desire to conquer the masculine power structures that keep her from unmasking her full identity. Significantly, this “masculine” trait is not exhibited in the acting out of brute force, but rather in a type of feminine seduction in which Jean charms the horse to her side by acting passively towards it, singing and presenting herself as ignorant of its presence. By “degree and with must coquetting” (109) the horse permits contact, as do the Coventry men she also seeks to capture.

The result of Jean’s ability to dominate is further exemplified in Edward’s response to seeing a “spirited horse bending his proud head to her hand” (110). Surprised by her ability to command and conquer the “wild wayward beast,” (110) Edward finds Jean’s ability irritably intriguing. Jean’s recognition of a woman’s power is couched in her response to Edward, telling him men do not understand the art of this type of power because they only break the spirits and hearts of women, and do not do it properly. Jean’s reaction displays her recognition that she is both
unmasked in terms of her ability to dominate as well as masked by the social understanding and implications of her enactment of domination as a gendered trait.

The clearest and most effective example of Jean's ability to exhibit both the "soft (masked) feminized persona" and the "hard (unmasked) masculinized female persona" is in the public and private staging of dramatic roles. The significance of these scenes rests in the stated aspect of Jean's ensured acting; in other words, each scene depicts Jean as she essentially is: an actress on both the public and private stage. The public staging of Jean's duality is presented in the form of the tableaux vivants the Coventrys enact to entertain guests during an evening party. These parlor performances contain "highly stylized and melodramatic acting" in which the "presentation of emotion was even more pronounced" because facial expressions remain static (Halttunen 179). The tableaux vivants, or living pictures, focus on the actors and actresses in still poses, resembling famous statues or paintings and often literary or mythic characters. Jean's position within the different scenes displays both the social masks she is forced to deploy as well as the potentially "real" self she is forced to hide.

The first scene enacted by Jean and Gerald reveals the intensity of Jean's internal struggle and unmasked embodiment of masculine traits. The living picture presents Jean standing over Gerald, getting ready to murder him by beheading him:

Hatred, the deepest and bitterest, was written on her sternly beautiful face, courage glowed in her glance, power spoke in the nervous grip of the slender hand that held the weapon, and the indomitable will of the
woman was expressed—even the firm pressure of the little foot half hidden in the tiger skin. (147)

The characteristics Jean takes on in expression outweigh her physical appearance, for she depicts herself with all the power and dominance possible in a murderous woman. The significance of this tableau vivant lies in Jean’s ability to “engage (and dominate) a set of relatively subversive and expressive practices that were inscribed with a sense of personal and oppositional power” (Dawson 2-3). Jean’s display of personal power is significant in the reactions it causes: the audience is awed and entranced by her sheer force, while Gerald catches a “glimpse of the truth” in the “marvelous change in Jean” (147). For a short time, Gerald sees into Jean’s intense detestation of the constructions that force her to mask herself, but the curtain’s immediate closing reveals yet another reality; Jean’s duality is always fluctuating and changing—even Gerald can never be sure of her true identity.

This is further displayed in the second picture in which they enact the “Marriage a la Mode,” Gerald as “fugitive cavalier” and Jean as “Roundhead damsel” (148). In the scene, Jean is protecting her lover from the knights that are quickly approaching to kill him. She publicly puts on the mask of feminized ardent protector. This, too, produces a drastic sensation in Gerald, who is overcome with his role as sufferer under the “indescribable spell of womanhood” in Jean’s ardent perfection (149). The genius of Alcott’s staging rests in the next and final scene, where the roles are reversed. When a rustle betrays the knight, Jean is shot by the coming men. Lying at the feet of the man (Gerald) who failed to protect her, she suffers and dies,
revealing the real implications of a woman who is forced to enact the roles socially defined for her; they are ultimately destructive to the self.

Jean’s private enactment only enriches the complexities of her masked and unmasked selves. Her highly sentimentalized scenes involve weeping over mysterious letters that cannot be delivered with a “tragical expression,” claiming it is her “duty to forget” (115) and then calmly burning or tearing them to pieces. One of the most significant scenes of private staging takes place directly after Gerald and she perform the tableaux vivants and Jean is preparing to dress as a queen for her next piece. At this point, Gerald is aware that Jean has told Sir John of her “true” identity as daughter of Lady Howard, signifying Jean’s right to a more wealthy and powerful position in society, and that Sydney, provider of her last position, is out to prove her false. Gerald seeks her out to profess his love, expressing pity for her obligation to work a life of dependency and not being given what she deserves as a woman of higher social standing. Jean’s reactions to Gerald’s assumptions, or belief in her lies, reveal the duality of the staging of feminine roles. The truth of Jean’s reactions are found in her disgust with Gerald’s pity for her, and her awareness that this pity ends her role as servant and promotes her to equal ground with him.

Jean’s awareness that Gerald has fallen for her scheme forces her back into the masked feminized role she must continue in order to ensure his confession of love. By insisting that it is only correct that a barrier remain between them despite her “authentic” identity as Lady Muir and that she go on “unknown, unpitied, and unloved” (152), Jean evokes a deeper sense of pity in Gerald. This pity is further
evoked by her expression of desperate dependency, couched in the acknowledgement that, as a woman, she is penalized by her body and must lean on Gerald for support, "do not think me unwomanly! Remember how alone I am, how young, and how much I rely upon your sincerity, your sympathy" (154). By casting herself as victim of Sydney, the abusive lover, Jean enables Gerald to cast himself as masculine rescuer. Suddenly aware that he has "stepped into a romance, yet finding keen pleasure in the part assigned him" (156) Gerald throws himself into the part, as if he were part of the romance novel, insisting that Jean marry him.

The significance of these private and public stagings lies in Alcott's ability to prove in Jean that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed forms of identity because they are disposable. As shown, Jean enacts what gender traits she chooses, masking and unmasking at will, trying on socially acceptable forms of female identity and alternating at will. The extent to which these gendered traits are treated as commodities is revealed in Jean's awareness that she is acting. Couching these stagings within the text allows Alcott to exemplify woman as permanent actress, always aware of her part, and drawing others in by her adherence to the acceptable gendered roles. Jean's ability to dawn gendered traits as she chooses negates the socially accepted belief that they are "natural" to one's sex. Alcott's text establishes a division of essential femininity and masculinity by subverting gender roles within Jean's identity, thus proving the falsity of the sentimental woman as "naturally" emotive and dependent.
By choosing to mask and unmask these forms of femininity and masculinity, Jean is able to produce the results she desires: the interest and love of the Coventry men. Edward is the first to admit his passion. Captivated by the duality of her character, he is drawn to her ability to treat him as an "elder sister" (122) or an equal and is taken with her intellectual abilities and talent. When Edward is driven to express his passion, he writes a letter begging Jean to "fly with him, to share his fortunes, and be the good angel of his life" (125). Pretending to be too proud to respond, Jean casts herself in the role of a woman at the mercy of her own devices, asking Gerald whether it is her duty to leave the Coventry household or stay, while outwardly maintaining her insistence that she did nothing to move Edward by claiming she does not "make" men love her but that her avoidance only draws them to her (125).

Here is an interesting point of difference between Jean's and Gerty's definitions of duty. Gerty refused to give in to the conventional definition of duty defined by Mr. Graham, insisting on always acting as her heart dictates. On the other hand, Jean toys with definitions of duty, particularly duty as defined by Emily, which requires suffering. Jean knowingly places duty in the hands of Gerald, who has the ability to direct her as he chooses. But knowing that this act casts Jean as a woman who bends to a conventional definition of duty by placing her happiness and/or her suffering in the hands of another is to Jean's gain. Gerald may wish for her to leave in order to rid his home of a governess, but he is too taken with Jean's persona to simply tell her it is her duty to go.
In what follows, Alcott toys with the romantic/sentimental definitions of masculine fury and desire, placing Jean as woman in the center of male wills as both a dependent and stronghold. When Edward demands that Jean “satisfy” his desires by confessing her love for him, she refuses. Edward’s fury rises to a pitch, forcing Jean into the physical shelter of Gerald, who “involuntary” turns to protect her. Recognizing their “willful desire to oppose the other” Edward lashes out and stabs Gerald with a pruning knife, at which point Jean steps in to play the role of savior, proving herself a “girl of uncommon skill and courage” (128-9). Essentially, Jean’s awareness of her effect on the Coventry brothers allows her to enact even more roles; she is at one moment the dependant, meek woman seeking protection, and the next moment a “masculinized,” uncommon girl who rescues men from their ensuing fury.

As a result, Jean’s actions cast the Coventry men in their own roles; Edward, no longer wishing to be sent away from the home to “make a man” of himself, desires to take the chance of getting into mischief by falling in love with a woman below his class. Gerald is cast in the masculinized role of dominance and power by forcing Edward to recognize him as “master” (129) and insists on sending him away. The casting of the Coventry men allows Jean to even further her putting on and off of gendered roles by becoming angelic protector when Gerald is stabbed (“There is no danger, I will stay with you till help comes”), and healer, restorer and nurse while he is recovering (129). The transition of power roles between Jean as unmasked and Gerald allows Jean to serve her own will. Gerald’s later insistence that Jean recognize him as “master” of the house and Jean’s consent to “try” to obey his every wish is
couched in her recognition that although she must mask herself as a submissive female, ultimately, her ability to maintain a level of unmasked masculine dominance is what keeps her in control of the relationship.

The Marriage Plot

Although Jean's embodiment of un/masked femininity and masculinity reveals the inherent flaws of social constructions of gender, there still remains the questions of Jean's "authentic" identity. In what ways is Jean free to draw from Fuller's de/gendered spheres? How do these un/maskings reveal any semblance of an authentic or potential selfhood?

Jean's subverting of sentimentality, and therefore socially constructed forms of femininity and masculinity, does more than allow her to obtain her goal. Although ultimately Jean's quest to ensure her selfhood is a great success, the effect her duality has on those around her is equally significant. Establishing Jean's un/masking of femininity and masculinity as a conscious and therefore "unnatural" act presents clearer evidence that Fuller's deconstruction of gender identity is possible. The fact that Jean is acting consciously to subvert socially constructed forms of femininity and masculinity proves that she defines herself not as essentially female, but essentially human.

In Fuller's terms, Jean's genius derives from her natural ability to adhere to Fuller's construction of Muse and Minerva. What Jean does naturally is evoke the realm of Minerva, drawing on creativity, intellect, and self-determination to ensure
her economic and physical survival. This ability is juxtaposed with the evoking of the Muse, in which Jean’s intuitive senses are brought along-side her intellect, enabling her to move into a position of gendered equality.

Like the multiple layers of Fuller’s construction and the multiple layers of Jean’s identity, the interpretation of Jean’s adherence to Fuller’s degendered spheres is multifaceted. Jean’s evoking of Minerva is both natural and unnatural, in that she is forced to use her intellect to survive, just as much as she naturally uses her intellect to develop her plan. The same is true with the Muse; whereas Jean naturally evokes her intuitive sense in order to maintain awareness of everything around her, she is also forced to do so, or risk the downfall of her scheme. Regardless of approach, Jean’s embodiment of the “magnetic intuition” and “creative genius” is what causes her to act out in a nonconforming fashion (WNC 302).

What is significant is that, unlike the women of Fuller’s text, Jean is not evoking the spheres for the betterment and cultivation of her soul, but in order to fit herself for the greatest possible chances of survival. The effects of Jean’s embodiment of both the spheres plays out in the suspicions and interests of the Coventry family. Her ability to cultivate both the aspects of the Muse and Minerva allow her to create a sphere to which everyone is naturally drawn. It is not long until everyone is cast under Jean’s spell: Bella is only happy in her society, Mrs. Coventry claims that no one can nurse her but Jean, Sir John is taken with her “graceful little attentions,” and Edward is drawn to Jean by her “wit and woman sympathy” (120). Even Lucia, who rarely joins in, both respects and envies Jean for her
accomplishments while Gerald is intrigued by Jean’s “persistent avoidance of him.” No longer a governess that hovers “between superiors and inferiors,” Jean becomes the “life of the house” (120).

How Jean’s embodiment of the spheres and continued self-reliance affects the Coventry males is also significant. Gerald, who is immediately captivated by Jean for the wrong reasons, is slowly brought to submit to Jean’s power. By gendering Jean as “useful” for his amusement and then curious about Sydney’s interest in her, Gerald recognizes the complex duality of Jean’s masking in her power to captivate even Edward. But Jean’s embodiment of the degendered spheres allows her to unmask both Edward and Gerald of their “masculine” identities. Edward, who is dependent upon Gerald to obtain a working position for him, is highly frustrated by Gerald’s lack of motivation. Jean’s ability to distract even Edward from his purposes speaks to his recognition of both her intuitive and intellectual abilities. Exclaiming to Gerald his reason for wanting to pursue Jean romantically, he says, “She would make a man of me. She puts strength and courage into me as no one else can...there’s no sentimentality about her; she is wise, and kind, and sweet...and is as true as steel” (132).

Jean’s ability to “make a man” out of Edward, rather than the socially acceptable way of “making a man” of Willie, who is forced into the marketplace, demasculinizes Edward. The same is true for Gerald. Too passive to even choose a wife, Gerald is assumed engaged to Lucia, who “the family had given him for his future mate, as he was too lazy to choose for himself” (126). Always complaining that
there is "nothing to expend his energies upon," (116) Gerald is irritated by Edward's persistent questioning of and interest in Jean and refuses to be captivated by her, claiming he defies "the Scotch witch to enchant me, except with her music" (123).

But Jean's acting ultimately wins him over, and he is awakened with "unwanted energy" and comes begging for Jean to help him "try and repair my long neglect" (124). Claiming that for Jean's sake he "can be anything," Gerald hastily extinguishes any hope for Lucia and sets out to make a man of himself, recalling Jean's insistence that "energy is more attractive than beauty in a man" (116).

In the degendered realm of Muse and Miranda, the Coventry male is actually "mastered" by a female who treats males like women by evoking both of the degendered spheres for her own betterment. Jean's unnatural masked actions of "femininity" influence both the Coventry brothers towards the betterment of their own individual selfhoods. Once passive, lazy, home-dwelling gentlemen, they become active agents, using their intellect and determination (naturally evoking Minerva) by going in search of long neglected duties.

On a social level, Edward and Gerald appear to simply be fulfilling their "natural" roles as men. In Fuller's terms, Jean's embodiment of the spheres allows the two Coventrys to recognize their own lack of growth, or the imbalance of present spheres within themselves. It is not until Jean gains her individuality within the household by gaining equal footing with the Coventry men that they are able to see their own lack of potential. Ultimately, Jean's embodiment of both of Fuller's degendered spheres allows Jean to fulfill Fuller's goal of potential growth. By
embodying both Muse and Miranda, Jean’s actions allow her to “prophesy” (\textit{WNC} 265) to both Ned and Gerald in a way that allows them to recognize the imbalance of elements within their own lives. Essentially, Jean unmaskes Gerald by forcing him to change in order to please her. What is unmasked is not simply a masculine nature but a dualistic one; Jean recognizes Gerald’s true self as one that desires to be both master of her and mastered by her. Jean’s intuitive sense allows her to recognize the explosive nature of this duality, claiming to Gerald that, “Under the ice I see fire, and warn you to beware lest you prove a volcano” (152).

By acknowledging this duality and ab/using it for her own means, Jean is able to ensure herself a position of safety in Gerald’s desire for her. But it is not without great ambition that this position is granted. When Edward reveals in a letter that he knows her secret past and threatens to reveal her plot unless she departs from the Coventry home immediately, Jean becomes frantic to carry out her plan; “Can it be accomplished in so short a time? It shall be, if wit and will can do it, for it is my last chance. If this fails, I’ll not go back to my old life, but end all at once” (174). Jean’s determination to conquer is met by the severe drain all of her acting has been on her, but she still clings to her plot to marry a Coventry male, “resolving to win the game in defiance of everything” (190).

Jean’s desperate reaction is not a gendered proclamation; her basic drive to survive is essentially human, not female. Her emotions are not “feminine” in nature, but “human” in nature, for Jean “acts out of necessities and on motives that are precisely the same as those of men, and she evinces emotions and desires that would
be considered quite ordinary and acceptable in a man" (Fetterley 10). That Jean’s rash emotions and motives are seen as “masculinized” is only a result of Jean being socially penalized for her body. Jean’s manipulations are simply her weapons of survival, and her distinct awareness of them is what enables her to ensure her plan, which is to convince not only Edward and Gerald but also Sir John to desire her.

Due to Sir John’s “discovery” of Jean’s supposed past as Lady Muir, the persuading is already much underway by the time Jean reaches the point of desperation. Concerned that she will not be able to “open his eyes” in time, Jean once again cast herself in the role of female sufferer, sobbing out to Sir John that Gerald has been “weak enough” (175) to love her and she must leave the Coventrys. This enactment works to heighten Sir John’s interest, for “something in her unusual agitation struck him as peculiar and excited his curiosity. Never had she seemed so interesting as now, when she sat beside him with tearful eyes, and some soft trouble in her heart which she dared not confess” (175). What Sir John does not know is that Jean is acting out of a “calmness of desperation,” (175) and is willing, at any cost, to ensure her livelihood against Edward’s truthful words. Jean’s final attempt nearly saves her; crying over a portrait of Sir John, she flatters her way into his ready-to-be convinced heart.

Jean’s strong, emotive acting again refutes any assumptions that gender traits are tied to the body; rather than acting as a sentimental woman, Jean’s acting is “positioned as a situational response to extreme difficulties, as an exaggerated corrective” to the insurmountable problems she faces at the Coventrys (Dawson 5).
The fact that Sir John, and earlier in the story, Edward and Gerald, are convinced by her emotional passion is because they are always "misreading" it as directed towards them while the reader knows that Jean is always motivated by her ambition. The three Coventry men are "ultimately unable to comprehend a full grammar of gesture and motivation, for their view of Jean is continually hampered by the complementary and dependent role in which they situate her" (Dawson 4).

At the same time, all three Coventry men are taken with what they believe is Jean’s authentic persona. Unconvinced that a governess could possibility be a strong, independent, self-reliant woman, they are skeptical that Jean could do anything beyond what they assign to her. But just as Fuller notes, when the sign of a fully competent, intellectually capable woman appears, the eyes glisten, and the men offer "not merely approval, but homage" (WNC 266). More than their desire to win Jean over, all three Coventry men willingly participate in the sentimental perspective of women; they believe in Jean’s emotional pleas and need them in order to establish the gender roles they hold to be true; the Coventry men are dependent upon Jean’s dependence upon them.

This emotive response never operates as a true reflection of Jean’s internal landscape until she is granted the title of “Lady Coventry” by marrying Sir John. When he asks her to marry him, Jean’s emotional reaction is one of real relief and happiness, for "the name which was the height of her ambition, and the blessed sense of safety which came to her" fills her with such intense satisfaction that "tears of real feeling stood in her eyes" (181). In order to ensure her safety, she convinces Sir John
not to speak to the Coventry brothers until their marriage is solidified, for her intuitive sense is that Gerald will become violent if he has not already discovered the truth about her past.

The conclusion of *Behind A Mask* deals with the revealing of the “truth” of who Jean Muir is, but although her past actions reveal who Jean might have been, ultimately, the story does little to confirm her real identity. Told through a series of letters, Jean’s past comes to light when Edward purchases letters written to Jean’s friend Hortense, in which Jean reveals her plot to divide and conquer the Coventry household. Unwilling to believe “any false tales against her,” (193) Gerald refuses to listen to Edward read the letters, convinced his role is to defend Jean’s honor. Only after Edward has insisted that the Coventry family needs to listen to him in order that the “honor of the family” not fall, is Gerald slightly convinced (193).

What the letters reveal about Jean’s past is that her earlier occupation as an actress penalized her severely, for when Sydney discovered that Jean had once acted upon stage, he is shocked and immediately refuses to marry her, at which point she seeks out the Coventrys. In the letters, Jean’s honest feelings towards each of the Coventrys is displayed. She writes to Hortense, “they are an intensely proud family, but I can humble them all” by captivating the sons, and when they have committed themselves, “cast them off, and marry the old uncle, whose title takes my fancy” (195).

The discovery that Jean has been acting comes as a shock to the Coventrys. Their disbelief is echoed in Lucia’s exclamation that it is impossible for a “woman”
to write such a thing. Mrs. Coventry’s disbelief turns to fear, insisting that she is
"mortally afraid of this creature" and she must be taken away and something done to
her, as if Jean would “burst in to annihilate the whole family” (199).

The Coventrys’ reaction to Jean’s letters are no more out of step than their
reactions to her constant acting; because she so convincingly acts the part of the
perfect woman, they see her only as a socially acceptable dependent woman. The
satisfaction of Jean’s master plot concluding with the revelation of the letters shows
her as a “sexually appetitive women” who, Nina Baym notes, is almost “man-like” in
nature and deed, challenging every assumption of gender identity (Women’s Novels
29). Ultimately, Jean “stands revealed as the culture’s ultimate monster; … she has
treated men like women” by treating them as commodities to be tossed to the wind
(Fetterley 12). Jean’s success is what makes the Coventrys hate her, for she has
proven them fools and earned the “right” to equality.

Although the letters reveal a different side of Jean, to the reader the letters
which immediately convince the Coventry family of Jean’s evil ways are not as
convincing as Alcott’s text. As Dawson argues, “their version of Jean’s story is not as
compelling as the intriguing doubleness of the narration, during which Jean’s identity
and deceptions, but not necessarily her malice and scorn, have been suggested, and it
is this doubleness that enriches the narrative” (11). Although Jean’s ability to act is
far superior to her ability to write, both her writing and acting reveal the duality of her
selfhood in unique ways. That she is able to unmask herself in the writing of the
letters allows the reader a clearer way into the possibility of discovering who Jean is.
Ultimately, the reader must look to the complex layering of selfhood in Jean’s acting in order to gain any semblance of her identity. Jean’s plot to ensure her survival requires “extraordinary self-discipline and self-control” for she must “continually act as if she is not acting and pretend that she is not pretending; she must never let the ultimate mask of ‘real self’ slip” (Fetterly 7). The questioning of Jean’s “real self” calls into play the reality that essentially Jean’s authentic selfhood is unknowable. As Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine B. Stern note, Jean Muir is many things:

A woman bent upon revenge, a woman filled with feminist fury directed against the male lords of creation, an actress, a fascinating flirt, a woman with a mysterious past—in short, a psychological if not Gothic witch, who, proud and passionate, mysterious and mocking, wields a subtle spell. (88)

The only conclusion that can be drawn from her human nature is that the social constructions of womanhood force her to bear up “against the sting of shame and the prejudices of the world” in order to gain access to an identity outside of gendered assumptions (WNC 329). Jean’s ability to foster Fuller’s degendered spheres, in a sense, proves their validity. In Fuller’s terms, Jean’s ability to adhere to degendered sphere enables her to authentically enact inauthentic female roles while not losing any of the physical “grace and beauty” that society claims an intelligent woman risks by acting “masculine.”

The proof of this lies in the response of the Coventry men to Jean’s embodiment of the spheres; her intelligence only pulls them closer. Even when they
are determined to sentimentalize her, Jean uses the characteristics of the Muse to counter their approach, intuitively drawing them closer with her magnetic energy.

Yet, Jean’s ability to naturally adhere to Fuller’s spheres does not completely unmask her. Unlike Gerald, who admits his mask is real and what is underneath is really him, Jean’s unmasking only reveals yet another mask. The inability to define Jean’s authentic selfhood borders on the remarkable, since the story appears to reveal so much of her. It raises doubt as to whether Fuller’s gender-as-temporary utopian vision can exist anywhere but in the internal selfhood of an individual. Jean’s awareness that she wishes to be “anything but what I am” (193) is couched in the reality that the selfhood she must present is one of gendered norms, whereas her unmasked selfhood is ultimately only known to herself. Fuller’s “celebration of gender as a temporal construct” in actuality may be a premature construction, for, “it fails to acknowledge that the choice of how we live our lives and bodies is not, in the final analysis, solely up to us, but also depends upon the transformation of the dominant social discourses that … narrate us” (Davis 49-50).

As Baym argues, in the context of Alcott’s story, the authentic selfhood of Jean is always going to be an expression of the “larger social formations” that dictate her understanding even of herself (Women’s Novels 14). Although Jean’s ability to bring Fuller’s degendered spheres of Muse and Minerva into balance internally, the society in which she lives remains divided on gender lines. As Steele notes, one woman’s ability to possess Fuller’s model of balanced spheres “provides a model only of psychological equilibrium, not of social harmony” (Transforming America
Therefore, Jean’s authentic selfhood will only operate on an internal level as long as social constructions of identity remain in place.

Any future possibility of Jean fostering her authentic potential selfhood is evidenced in her marriage to Sir John. Jean’s warning that those who love her, love her at their peril is no longer a needed warning once she is married. The “honor” of Sir John’s name which will “screen and protect” (180) Jean enables her to claim her title of Lady Coventry as “beyond” the reach of the Coventry brothers who wish to reveal her past. Sir John’s refusal to listen and Jean’s ability to remain masked establishes their marriage as one of protection rather than one of common ground. Sir John’s desire to remain blind “till time opens my eyes” (180) speaks to the possibility that Jean’s true identity will also be revealed to her husband. Her desire to do her best to be a “good wife” to Sir John is a promise that Jean “faithfully performed in afteryears” (180). But the reality that Sir John’s denial forces Jean to remain masked to him only reiterates the elusiveness of the text. Any promise of Jean’s ability to foster her potential selfhood is hindered by what constitutes being a “good wife,” which could be remaining masked indefinitely to conventional roles within the marriage of household partnership or mutual idolatry.

Because Alcott refuses to continue the test, the reader can only project what the future marriage between Jean and Sir John will be like. If Sir John continues to consciously refuse to hear the truth of Jean’s past and consciously or unconsciously continues to sentimentalize Jean as a dependent woman, then there is little hope for an environment in which Jean can foster any sort of authentic potential identity. Sir
John's motivations may continue in the line of paying homage to the image of a woman who inauthentically embodies socially constructed gendered personas for the sake of survival. Paradoxically, although Jean has gained independence economically from her role as governess in her marriage to Sir John, she has also gained dependence upon him to ensure her livelihood regardless of her true identity.

The text's elusiveness solidifies the potential identity of Jean as indeterminable, although her ability to recognize her selfhood as socially constructed is not. Ultimately, as a reflection of nineteenth-century female selfhood, Jean embodies Fuller's fluid approach to identity, although not as Fuller would have hoped. Jean's natural ability to adhere to Fuller's degendered spheres of Muse and Minerva does not exist outside of her need to survive. Alcott's text reflects the difficulty of creating the utopian vision Fuller set out to embrace in *WNC* by insisting on the role of social barriers to determine, or at least negate the cultivation of the female potential selfhood, and therefore Fuller's hope that the balancing of the spheres within the female individual will result in greater harmony between the sexes. At best, both *WNC* and *Behind A Mask* present possibilities for social reconstruction and offer nineteenth-century women an ideology that does not penalize them for being female.
Imagining Equality

Upon reading some of Louisa May Alcott’s stories, editor James T. Fields encouraged her to “Stick to your teaching, Miss Alcott. You can’t write” (Stern 69). That both Fuller and Alcott faced such literary discouragement is an example of the many women who, by discrimination or misreading, were encouraged not to follow their desire to write. Certainly Alcott, like Fuller, set out to prove her skeptics wrong, producing an immense body of work that made her increasingly famous and a central figure in American literary history.

So, too, has Fuller slowly gained overdue attention for her place among American writers. At the time Fuller was writing WN, the mid-nineteenth century was a hotbed of developing reform movements. What makes WN so central to this era is the complexity with which Fuller approaches the female identity. For Fuller, the reinterpretation of political law as inclusive of women is only part of understanding the position of women in antebellum society. While her reformer contemporaries were attempting to convince the public to begin listening to women’s rights and female educational reform, Fuller had moved beyond political interpretation and was challenging the very gender-based assumptions of sexual identity. Her redefinition of femininity and masculinity as degendered organic essences offers humanity a complex alternative to approaching equality between woman and man, a challenge foundational to American history and the gender studies of the past few decades.
Furthermore, how Fuller applies this redefinition to the relationship between the sexes moves her vision from reform out into community. Rather than approaching the self in isolation, Fuller encourages her readers to understand themselves in relation to others, centralizing the importance of a collective fostering of selfhood accomplished by the freedom of both sexes to draw from and cultivate their intuitive and intellectual senses for the betterment of themselves and society.

Within the framework of this thesis, whether that freedom is actually realized still remains in question. For within the context of *The Lamplighter* and *Behind a Mask*, it appears that although Cummins and Alcott recognize the significance that nineteenth-century definitions of female selfhood need desperate expansion, the structures of the society's approach to marriage is perhaps too rigid for women to gain access to their greatest potential self. Both Gerty and Jean remain inside the necessity of marriage—one that potentially threatens their ability to cultivate continued self-reliance. Despite both characters' ability to adhere to fluid definitions of identity, Gerty's relationship to Willie and Jean's relationship to Sir John requires either a shift in approaches to gendered identity by the husbands, or the sacrifice of future potential selfhood in the wives. Because both stories end abruptly at marriage, the reader can only hypothesize as to what the fate of the central characters will be: will it be held by the self-reliant woman or the man's desire for conventional roles within marriage?

Perhaps Cummins and Alcott recognized the current impossibility of their central characters moving forward in a society and culture that cannot imagine
personhood existing apart from innate gendered traits. But the reality that both stories conclude in an open-ended fashion could be a testament to Cummins’ and Alcott’s hope; perhaps not during the mid-nineteenth century, but somewhere in the future the marriage story of Gerty and Jean could be written, in a society that openly embraces the roles of woman and man in a egalitarian relationship. It seems the authors could hope for no less.

Certainly Fuller understood the significance of social pressures on female identity and the certain possibility of change. As twenty-first-century readers, it seems relevant to ask just how far the possible visions of these three authors have come. Certainly the gains of the women’s rights movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century broke through the firm social constructions Gerty and Jean faced as women. The second and third wave of the feminist movement has only encouraged the shifting of American culture towards approaching female identity outside of the conventional perspectives of female and male roles. But just how far have these movements taken us towards Fuller’s utopian vision? Despite the growing acceptability of women outside the private sphere, it seems that American culture has a significant way to go before reaching Fuller’s approach to a potential genderless female selfhood. Certainly critics and theorists of the last century have increasingly stepped beyond social conventions, reevaluating gender and woman’s place within the context of social, economic, and political boundaries. It seems that, like Fuller, the desire to “dispense with all illusions” (Self-Definitions 52) about the role of women in American society is a continuous journey, one that, with the help of visionaries like
Fuller, Cummins, and Alcott, will push the definition and application of how we understand women writers, women in literature, and women in society.
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