This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

The Voice of Fanny Fern

presented by

Wendi VenAlger

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Masters degree in American Studies

David T. Bailey
Major professor

Date April 7, 1995

THE VOICE OF FANNY FERN

By

Wendi A. Alger

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of American Studies

1995

ABSTRACT

THE VOICE OF FANNY FERN

By

Wendi A. Alger

Art in a democratic society often answers varying needs. Four nineteenth-century writers, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry David Thoreau, and Fanny Fern used their literary creations to satisfy a subcultural need for an alternative definition of individualism. Alcott, in *Little Women*, and Stowe, in *Oldtown Folks*, sought to circumvent masculine repression while remaining within an acceptable feminine realm. Thoreau, in *Walden*, sought to define individualism by privileging his imagination. Fern, by privileging her readers voices, attempted to extend individualism to a broader audience. Fern's articles identified her readers needs, recognized cultural problems within her society and created strategies to address both. Fern's *Ruth Hall* fuses the domestic realm and marketplace together through the theme of motherhood, forming the basis of a moral capitalism. Fern's literary creations revise the notion of art in a democratic society: Art is that which entertains while acting for the good of society.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> We are tired...of the piled up horrors with which some novelists bait for readers. Anybody can introduce a ghost or a bloody head; it takes genius, and that of the very highest order, to make what are called "common-place" events and persons interesting. (Fanny Fern, *New York Ledger*, April 20, 1861.)

> Now if there is one word in the English Language that I hate more than another, it is the word genteel. No matter where, or how, or to whom, or by whom it is applied, my very soul sickens at it. It is the universal and never failing indorser of every sham ever foisted upon disgusted human nature. (Fanny Fern, *Folly As It Flies*, 1868.)

Fanny Fern, the first woman newspaper columnist, popular novelist, and a creator of American culture, offered entertainment to a large spectrum of people. With her abhorrence of "genteel values" and her unceasing allegiance to a Democratic ideal in America, she acted as a champion for the common people who composed America: a voice for the voiceless in society.

Fanny Fern's contributions to American culture became possible in part due to the commercialization and democratization of literature in America. Mass produced print which flooded the country from the 1820's on, brought increasingly high literacy rates, which in turn invested the individual reader with autonomy through the freedom of choice.

The newspapers that Fanny Fern wrote for represented a link between the commercialization and democratization of literature and

leisure. The Industrial Revolution, through time and labor saving technology as well as shortened work days, gave at least some people more leisure time. Reading as an affordable medium of entertainment could easily and cheaply be found through the penny papers, subscription libraries and periodicals. Further, this leisure activity could be snatched in brief intervals of free time at the convenience of the reader. These newspapers and periodicals in turn served as avenues for the dissemination of genteel values and morays predetermined by the cultural and publishing elite.

Fanny Fern rejected this cultural hegemony of the elite; with sensitivity and clarity, she redirected her readers' attention to the everyday events and people in American society. She "remembered the ladies" in a manner that the founding fathers did not.[1] She wrote compassionately about social criminals and offered modern solutions for reform. She realistically described the plight of the urban poor. Although some of her early writings capitalized on sentimentality, her use of sentimentality reflected deliberate manipulation in order to garner a large audience. Finally, her barbs directed at the "genteel" class unerringly found their marks, allowing millions of readers to laugh with her at the ridiculous pretensions and hypocrisies of elite society. Fanny Fern, in her sometimes witty, sometimes serious, and often biting prose, found a place in the hearts of many nineteenth-century feminine readers, and through a

---

[1]Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776 pleading for more equitable treatment of women: "I desire you to Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power in the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could." John Adam's April 14, 1776 reply to his wife unequivocally rejected her plea. Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution And The Word* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 110.

rhetorical medium of entertainment, offered these readers vicarious participation in the creation of American culture.

The artistic sketches of ordinary people which captivated millions of readers served as the foundation for the social commentary Fern rendered in her novel, *Ruth Hall.* The use of an American vernacular perpetuated the democratization of literature and aided Fern in transcending the class barriers inherent in her diverse audience. Fern used *Ruth Hall* to extend the possibilities of self-reliance to women by demonstrating that women could adapt successfully to the business world, thereby broadening the definition of individualism for women.

Finally, Fern in *Ruth Hall* attempted to reconceptualize the definition of literary genius in a democratic society. The text examines the plight of a woman artist in a society which definitively rejects the notion of feminine genius. Enormous book sales bolstered by popular demand and gratifyingly positive fan mail projects a revised notion of artistic success. Fern's primary intent to educate a mass audience depended upon on her ability to garner such an audience; thus reaching the masses with a novel which radically re-envisions power structures in American society becomes Fern's model of artistic success: Art is that which entertains while acting for the good of society as a whole.

Chapter I

> Work early and work late, if you would excel. Never rely on *natural* genius; none but a *natural* fool ever does that. (Fanny Fern, *Musical World and Times*, Nov. 19, 1853.)

The concept of artistic value in the nineteenth-century must be examined in light of the rapid growth of the nation and economy experienced during the first half of the nineteenth-century. This growth shaped the careers of writers and the place of literature in American society. Before 1820, aspiring writers could not hope to earn a living by their pen, because a lack of capital, high production costs, an inefficient system of distribution, poor transportation, and an absence of a predictable literary market inhibited the growth of an American based publishing industry.[2] Publishers, in light of an uncertain market, sought to cater to the dual demands of a split audience. Travel books, captivity narratives and histories satisfied the demand for literary entertaintment. Religious tracts and self improvement books catered to those seeking religious reading materials.[3] Publishers and writers perhaps found the growing nation's cultural insecurity even more disturbing. American publishers sought to alleviate this tension by attempting to establish

---

[2]Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage. Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 7-8.

[3]Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution And The Word, The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 18.

a superior literary tradition. However, until the third decade of the nineteenth-century, America remained culturally dependent on England for literature, relying on reprints of British fiction.[4]

Technological advances in the printing industry from 1820 to 1850 radically changed the opportunities for printers, publishers and writers in America. Revolutionary developments in presses, typecasting, typesetting and paper coupled with an increasingly adequate supply of capital, enabled publishers to produce more books at less cost to the consumer.[5] In order to get these books in the hands of readers, publishers offered generous discounts to booksellers.[6] Booksellers, in turn, became more sensitive to the book-buying needs and interests of the people.[7] Subscription libraries sprang into existence, making the pursuit of reading more accessible to larger numbers of people and at the same time, enhancing the publisher's and author's profits. Periodicals and literary magazines such as McCalls became popular. Newspapers, already widespread, became ubiquitous as they linked with emerging political parties.[8] Finally, literary critics and publishers,

---

[4]Ibid., p. 11. Davidson states that the novels most Americans read during and directly after the Revolutionary period were texts borrowed directly or indirectly from European authors.

[5]Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*. p. 8. Developments in transportation added to the emergence of an American printing industry. Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, accessible by either waterways or railways, became publishing centers. These centers themselves developed new methods of promotion designed to attract a large audience of American readers.

[6]Ibid., p. 9.

[7]For more, see Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*: "The Book in the New Republic."

[8]Ibid., p. 160. Davidson cites that by 1810, 22 million readers were being served out of 376 newspapers.

exploiting newspapers as a forum for reviews and advertisements, pushed authors and the publishing business into prominence.

While the nation's economy and the American publishing industry enjoyed increasing prosperity, the spectrum of people demanding various forms of reading materials increased. One estimate calculates that by the early nineteenth-century, approximately 90% of the white adult population in the Northern Republic was literate.[9] Although historians differ on the criteria that constitutes literacy, most agree that by the early nineteenth-century, more people were reading and hence, demanding more reading materials. By mid-century, the struggle to implement a system of education open to all, regardless of wealth or status, was first won in the Northern states. The Western states followed suit and the South, beginning in the 1850s, worked to establish free public school systems, as well as numerous private academies and colleges. The increase in the number of schools and students facilitated literacy for at least white students.[10] This democratization of literacy, coupled with technological progress in the printing industry, led to the rise of reading as a form of commercialized leisure.[11]

The growing industries in urbanized centers in America brought with its technological advances, increasing concern over the

---

[9]Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, p. 10.

[10]Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944). For more, see pp. 227-264.

[11]Publishing as a big business seemingly represented an ascendancy of commercialization over leisure activities. The publishing elite could feasibly control the reader in their pursuit of enjoyable literature, However, this view essentially ignores the primacy of the reader in his or her ability to choose from the proliferation of reading material being distributed in America during the second half of the nineteenth-century. For more, see Davidson, *Revolution and the Word.*

decaying morality in American society. Ministers, educators and reformers banded together to inculcate genteel values of self-control, industriousness and earnestness in what they perceived to be an unruly mass of immigrant urban working-class, thereby preserving virtue and purity in America. The alliance between the genteel reformers of elite society and the middle-class entrepreneurs facilitated the dissemination of this genteel culture to a large audience:

> As nineteenth century cultural entrepreneurs sought to develop a vast new market, they popularized genteel values and conceptions of art. The editors of the leading popular magazines and monthlies, the new mass publishers, the most widely respected writers and artists participated in the commercialization of American culture.[12]

By attempting to control the kinds of reading materials that reached the public, social reformers and editors alike sought to use literature as a tool of social control.

Despite the genteel reformers intense struggle to maintain their elite cultural hegemony, their efforts met with resistance among the working class and the immigrants who sought to retain their own values.[13] Fanny Fern, a woman representing a new form of writing, refused to adhere to the demands dictated by the cultural elite. Despite this, editors, particularly newspaper editors, remained anxious to publish her articles because of popular demand. Her articles dramatically bolstered newspaper subscriptions, highlighting the appeal she held for ordinary people. She artistically captured in

---

[12]John. F. Kasson, *Amusing The Million, Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), p. 5.

[13]Ibid., p. 5.

print the very aspects of American society that the reformers attempted to obliterate.

Fanny Fern's rejection of the hypocritical mainstream culture reflected only one response to cultural tensions. The function of literature provoked a wide range of often conflicting responses. Art in a democratic society sometimes acts as a medium through which artists can conceivably re-define societal values or morays. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau each used his or her writing to address a subcultural need for an alternative definition of individualism. These writers sought to re-configure the majority culture's definition of individualism in an attempt to achieve a viable state of self-reliance. Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe used their writing to fashion a feminine individualism which attempted to circumvent masculine repression while remaining within a realm deemed socially acceptable for women. In other words, both writers wrote to reform the existing domestic sphere in a manner which allowed more autonomy. These authors' evolving definitions of feminine self-reliance differed, however. In *Little Women,* Alcott focuses specifically on economic gains made through the fruit of labor, while Stowe, in *Oldtown Folks*, concentrates on escaping intellectual and spiritual oppression in a patriarchal society. Henry David Thoreau lived on the periphery of nineteenth-century American society, and his writing also reflected an attempt to define an alternative individualism, albeit in a radically divergent way. He sought to define individualism by privileging his imagination. Thoreau, in *Walden*, enters nature to

allow the individual imagination ascension in carving out a complete state of spiritual, intellectual and physical self-reliance.

All three authors wrote to delineate an individualism which liberated the *self*. These writers employed a variety of strategies in their artistic re-creations. Alcott and Stowe sought to redefine the status quo through covert means; by writing in a feminine manner and by addressing subject deemed appropriate for women. Thoreau offered alternatives by overtly rejecting status quo. While the agendas of these three writers reflected societal inequities which clamored for resolution, and as such, intersected with the needs of their society, they nevertheless attempted to define and achieve a state of self-reliance which worked well for *themselves*. Fanny Fern, like these writers, attempted to offer an alternative individualism based on her own experiences and resulting needs as a marginalized member of her society. Like Alcott, Fern recognized the need for material economic gains for women, and like Stowe, Fern rejected the intellectual and spiritual oppression she identified in patriarchal (and often hypocritical) religious institutions. Fern's writing also paralleled the radicalism of the individualism evinced by Thoreau in that she completely rejected marriage as a viable means of security for women.

Fern's writing differed from these authors in the scope of her aims. Her newspaper articles represent the forum in which she identified with her readers needs, recognized cultural issues and problems within her society, and employed a myriad of strategies in responding to both. In her novel *Ruth Hall*, Fanny Fern brings the domestic realm and marketplace together by merging a woman's

need for economic independence with her special capabilities as a mother. Motherhood, instead of providing a barrier to the marketplace, becomes the basis for a moral capitalism which in turn ensures the viability of a virtuous Republic. *Ruth Hall* becomes the text which synthesizes Fern's own goals, her readers needs, and cultural ambiguities inherent in societal inequities to formulate a radical individualism which seeks to completely overturn the previously masculine perogative of self-reliance.

Louisa May Alcott used her writing to formulate a feminine individualism. She based this individualism on a work ethic which emphasized the importance of financial independence, but which did not entirely reject her society's emphasis on feminine self-sacrifice. The standard view of Alcott's artistry describes her father, Bronson Alcott, as configuring largely in her development as a writer. Certainly, his ineptitude in financial matters coupled with his desire to instill a superior education while demanding complete subservience fostered in Alcott an internal conflict which she seemingly attempted to resolve through her writing.[14] Alcott, as a writer, was overwhelmingly preoccupied with making money: " I can't do much with my hands; so I will make a battering ram out of

---

[14]Louisa May Alcott, *Alternative Alcott*, Edited with an Introduction by Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. xi. Stern, in the introduction of *Behind A Mask* notes that Bronson Alcott's "inability to earn a living became proverbial even among the high-minded and unworldly Transcendentalists." Louisa May Alcott remarked in her journal that he "possesses no gift for money making."

my head and make a way through this rough and tumble world."[15] However, she never pursued wealth for her own benefit. She worked primarily to support her family while living plainly herself. Further her endeavors to live morally invariably found expression in her writings. Thus, while Alcott's perpetual conflict with her father left her emotionally scarred with a sense of inferiority, he nevertheless shaped her character and her career. Louisa May Alcott redefined the role of women in her society by emphasizing the importance of work in becoming self-reliant. In doing so, she also recognized a need for a re-envisioning of masculine roles. By offering an alternative example of marriage union based on equality, Alcott wrote to privilege a woman's right to individualism through an extension of her autonomy inside and outside of the home. *Little Women* operates as the workplace for her ideals.

Alcott wrote *Little Women* as an autobiographical novel, and the father figure, Mr. March, appears conspicuous in his absence. Alcott packs Mr. March off to the Civil War before the novel opens, and the tomboyish daughter, Jo, announces herself as " the man of the family."[16] Alcott refuses to summon Mr. March's appearance until Chapter 24, the beginning of Part II. His activity, after his auspicious re-entry into the March household, consists of reading philosophy, uttering a few moral platitudes, walking the eldest daughter, Meg, down the aisle to get married and holding his wife's hand as the third daughter, Beth, dies.

---

[15]Ednah D. Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott, Life, Letters, and Journals* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889), p. 60.

[16]Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, Edited with an Introduction by Elaine Showalter (New Brunswick: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 5.

Mr. March offers his advice to Jo about her writing on a few occasions, and Alcott, as both the narrator and the character Jo, leaves the reader with a glimpse of her feelings towards Bronson Alcott. Mr. March, like Bronson Alcott, equates living morally and striving for truth with religion. Materialistic concerns mean little to either; only by striving to obtain lofty ideas of an "inspired nature" can Jo live up to Mr. March's religious values. As Jo jubilantly shows her family a check for her first prize-winning story, everyone appears happy for her, except Mr. March, who promptly puts a damper on the party's spirits by saying "You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money."[17] Later, Mr. March again offers his advice to Jo concerning the revision of her first novel:

> Don't spoil your book, my girl, for there is more in it than you know, and the idea is well worked out. Let it wait and ripen," was her father's advice; and he practiced as he preached, having waited patiently thirty years for fruit of his own to ripen, and being in no haste to gather it, even when it was sweet and mellow.[18]

Clearly, Alcott intended a stab at her own father's lack of productivity. Further, this comment reflects dual functions of art in a democratic society. At one level, the novel fulfills the need for economic independence. On a very different level, the novel as art can instigate and benefit from a dialogue with its audience[19].

---

[17]Ibid., p. 268.

[18]Ibid, pp. 269-270.

[19]Davidson, p. 14. Davidson demonstrates that the novel in the early Republic derived its power from such a reciprocal relationship with individual readers: "Psychologically, the early novel embraced a new relationship between art and audience, writer and reader, a relationship that replaced the authority of the sermon or Bible with the enthusiasms of sentiment, horror, or adventure, all of which relocate authority in the individual response of the reading self."

Significantly, Mrs. March answers Mr. March's advice with the remark that "criticism is the best test of such work, for it will show her both unsuspected merits and faults, and help her to do better next time." [20] These different stances about art also reflect divergent conceptions of art. Bronson Alcott wrote to produce works which satisfied his own goals, and worked to establish himself as a source of authority among his small transcendental circle. His writing never appealed to a mass audience. Louisa Alcott, with her drive to support both herself and her family, deliberately catered to public interests and publisher demands. Mrs. March urges Jo to submit the novel for publication, saying that she could learn from criticism.

Despite the example of a strong woman provided by Abigail May Alcott, Louisa Alcott nevertheless inhabited a world shaped by feminine self-sacrifice. Abigail May, increasingly embittered by her husband's financial ineptitude, sacrificed health and peace of mind in keeping her family solvent. Louisa Alcott, in turn, worked to provide for her family as she grew older:

> Mother is to be cosey if money can do it. She seems to be now, and my long-cherished dream has come true; for she sits in a pleasant room with no work, no care, no poverty to worry, but peace and comfort all about her, and children glad and able to stand between trouble and her. Thank the Lord? I like to stop and "remember my mercies." Working and waiting for them makes them very welcome.[21]

The peculiar combination of self-reliance and self-sacrifice facilitated Alcott's efforts to nurture her beloved mother who had an arduous life struggling to maintain her family, highlighting the republican

---

[20] Alcott, *Little Women*, p. 270.

[21] Cheney, *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters and Journals*, p. 261.

implications behind Alcott's drive to become economically self-sufficient. Financially solvent women potentially worked for the good of the larger community by supporting family structures. However, the dichotomy between the societal emphasis on female self-sacrifice and barriers to female self-reliance often created burdens of anxiety and guilt in women's lives.

The conflict between self-sacrifice and self-reliance manifests itself in Louisa's characterization of John and Meg's traditional marriage in *Little Women*. After a domestic spat with John, Marmee's advice to Meg on the subject of keeping peace with her husband advocates self-sacrifice:

> Be careful, very careful, not to wake this anger against yourself, for peace and happiness depend on keeping his respect. Watch yourself, be the first to ask pardon if you both err, and guard against the little piques, misunderstandings, and hasty words that often pave the way for bitter sorrow and regret. [22]

The husband's respect appears more important than the wife's and Mrs. March's advice places the responsibility of marital happiness on the woman: the woman should be the first to ask forgiveness and the woman should be careful of her words. The woman bears the responsibility of smoothing over misunderstandings. Mrs. March's advice is *not* happily remembered by Meg, however. She has a difficult task in sacrificing her self-esteem:

> "I will be the first to say 'forgive me,'" but he did not seem to hear her; she went very slowly across the room for pride was hard to swallow, and stood by him, but he did not turn his head. For a minute, she felt as if she really couldn't do it; then came the thought, "This is the beginning, I'll do my part, and have nothing to reproach myself with," and stooping down she softly kissed her husband on the forehead. [23]

---

[22]Alcott, *Little Women*, 279.

[23]Ibid., p. 280.

Meg, in order to end the argument, lays aside her pride in a "penitent" kiss. Furthermore, although John "laughingly" apologizes for making fun of Meg's jellypots, Alcott insinuates that this type of relationship is pitiable. Although Meg seems to find contentment in her domestic little world, Alcott rejects this world as the "shelf on which young wives and mothers may consent to be laid."[24]

Alcott seems unable to find enough relief by portraying Mr. March as an ineffectual figure; she decisively replaces him, thereby re-envisioning men's roles in society. She creates a substitute father and mate in the guise of Mr. Bhaer. Mr. Bhaer possesses nurturing qualities usually identified with women: he raises and supports two little orphan nephews. In addition to his fondness for children, Bhaer also exhibits a willingness to perform some domestic tasks:

> ...there he stood in his dressing gown, with a big blue sock on one hand and a darning-needle in the other; he didn't seem at all ashamed of it, for when I explained and hurried on, he waved his hand, sock and all.[25]

The reader cannot help but like Mr. Bhaer, and Alcott deliberately makes him a likable character by bestowing him with matriarchal qualities. "The children went to him like bees to a honey-pot; and, establishing themselves on each knee, proceeded to captivate him by rifling his pockets, pulling his beard, and investigating his watch, with juvenile audacity."[26] Children flock around Mr. Bhaer as if he is a type of mother figure, and more importantly, Bhaer is at home in this domestic atmosphere.

---

[24]Ibid., p. 399.
[25]Ibid., p. 338.
[26]Ibid., p. 451.

Alcott did not disapprove of marriage or motherhood: she disliked the social restrictions imposed on women by the conventional types of marriages in her day. The union of Jo and Mr.. Bhaer represents a marriage based on equality. Jo is not emotionally or intellectually stifled by Mr. Bhaer, and Alcott refuses to define her as the weaker counterpoint to male dominance. Friedrich describes Jo as a "strong-minded lady."[27] While Jo agrees to marry Mr. Bhaer, she refuses to relinquish her right to work:

> I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now,--for woman's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go, she added, resolutely.[28]

This passage, in acknowledging the burden of work Louisa's mother carried in sustaining the Alcott family, re-envisions womans role both inside and outside of the home. Jo significantly refuses to give up her right to work, which acts as a sustaining force for Louisa and forms the basis for a reformed self-reliance. Louisa May Alcott, in *Little Women*, provides an alternative marital union: "Though it came in such a very simple guise, that was the crowning moment of both their lives, when, turning from the night, and storm and loneliness, to the household light, and warmth, and peace waiting to receive them with a glad "Welcome home," Jo leads her love in, and shuts the door."[29] Jo leads Friedrich into the home; she takes the initiative, and Bhaer does not seem to object to Jo's strength of character. Alcott recognizes the insecurity inherent in the traditional

---

[27]Ibid., p. 470.
[28]Ibid., p. 480.
[29]Ibid., p. 480.

nineteenth-century marriage and attempts to empower women by envisioning a feminine self-reliance through the creation of a marital union based on equality.

Just as Louisa May Alcott used her writing to limit her father's influence and carve out an alternative definition of individualism based on a work ethic, Harriet Beecher Stowe also attempted to mitigate her father's repressive influence by creating a self-reliance which emphasized the need for spiritual and emotional autonomy. As an affectionate and active father, Lyman Beecher evinced an overwhelming concern for his children's spiritual salvation, amply demonstrated by his drive to "put his children through the exquisitely painful exercises necessary to wrest their hearts from Satan and give them to God."[30] Beecher's overzealous concern sowed the seeds of doubt, guilt and anxiety in Stowe's mind, and she began writing to ease the anxiety which had left her torn since adolescence.

The repressive nature of Calvinism gnawed more deeply at Stowe's conscience as she grew older, and writing proved to be a creative outlet to channel her sufferings in a positive direction. Tragedy precipitated most of her major novels. As a maternal woman, the deaths of three sons affected her deeply. None of these sons died converted and as she struggled to overcome anguishing doubt about the security of their souls, she wrote some of her major novels. *The Minister's Wooing* , written in the aftermath of Henry Beecher's death, clearly singles out women as the pathetic victims of extremist Calvinistic theology, evincing her own despair at losing an

---

[30]Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 15.

unconverted son. *Oldtown Folks* reflects Stowe's attempt to negate doctrines which cause guilt and suffering. In this novel, she asserts her own spiritual autonomy in creating a Christ-centered religion based on maternal qualities.

Oldtown Folks, a novel of local tradition, describes the scene and atmosphere of Stowe's youth, New England society. The text provides an invaluable glimpse into the thought and traditions of Puritan culture, and more importantly, a glimpse into Stowe's own feelings towards the religion of her father and of the New England fathers. Here she identifies the psychological damage New England Calvinism caused women:

> With many New England women at this time period, when life was so retired and so cut off from outward sources of excitement, *thinking* grew to be a disease. The great subject was, of course, theology; and woman's nature has never been consulted in theology. Theologic systems, have, as yet, been the work of man alone. They have had their origin, as in St. Augustine, with men who were utterly ignorant of moral and intellectual companionship with woman, looking at her only in her animal nature as a temptation and a snare. Consequently, when, as in this period of New England, the theology of Augustine began to be freely discussed by every individual in society, it was the women who found it hardest to tolerate or assimilate it, and many a delicate and sensitive nature was utterly wrenched in the struggle.[31]

This passage represents key issues which fosters Stowe's drive to re-define the traditionally masculine perogative of individualism through her writing. She points out that society's refusal to view men and women as "moral and intellectual" equals demoralizes only women. Theology, only concerned with the depravity of woman's physical nature, ignores the development or well-being of woman's

---

[31]Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Oldtown Folks* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, & Co., 1869), p. 438.

emotional state. Stowe feels that the intellectual woman, prevented from taking part in the making or interpretation of doctrine, often becomes crushed by its repressiveness.

Esther Avery, the daughter of the minister in Cloudland (and something of a combination of Harriet and Catharine Beecher) possesses the combination of sensitivity and intellect which Calvinism tortures. Esther inherits from her ancestors both the intellectual capacity to reason as well as "exquisite moral perceptions":

> The consequence of all this was the internal strife of a divided nature. Her heart was always rebelling against the conclusions of her head. She was constantly being forced by one half of her nature to movements, inquiries and reasoning which brought only torture to the other half.[32]

Stowe obviously thought of her own and her daughter Hattie's emotional reactions to Calvinism as she depicted Esther's repressed character. Stowe unceasingly strove to reconcile her emotional needs with the cold forceful logic presented by Beecher's religious teachings. Unfortunately, as an intelligent woman, Stowe found this logic difficult to transcend and subsequently, she turned away Calvinism on emotional grounds.

Ironically, Stowe describes the "key-note" of Mr. Avery's theology as "the free agency of man." Mr. Avery exhorts his parishioners to escape their state of depravity through their own volition: "Every line of his sermons said to every human being, 'You are free, and you are able.'"[33] Despite this assertion, Esther is anything but free as she remains bound by guilt. Mr. Avery's

---

[32]Ibid., p. 439.
[33]Ibid., p. 441.

concern for her salvation and his smothering love for her cannot rescue Esther from her despondency. Mr. Avery's zealousness allows Esther no quarter; no room for her own religious growth. Stowe rescues Esther, and perhaps herself, by creating a character named Harry who presents Esther with a different type of religion, one which replaces the doctrine of guilt with the nurturing love of Christ.

Harry, a young orphan, possesses a religion which centers around Christ's love and an awe-inspiring, but forgiving God. Whereas Mr. Avery's Calvinism relies on the cold analytical process of reasoning, Harry's religion operates on emotional responsiveness, and the trust that God, although powerful, is benevolent:

> "Reasoning!" said Harry, impatiently; "we must trust the intuition of our hearts above reason. That is what I am trying to persuade Esther to do. To me it is an absolute demonstration, that God never could make a creature who would be *better* than himself. We must look at the noblest, best human beings. We must see what generosity, what tenderness, what magnanimity can be in man and woman, and believe all that and more in God. All that there is in the best fathers and best mothers *must* be in him."[34]

By placing man and woman side by side in addressing those traits which mark godliness, Stowe, through Harry, reforms or changes the patriarchal structure of power in New England Calvinism. Stowe does not reject men, rather she rejects the efforts of men to control the intellectual, spiritual and emotional development of women.

Stowe's revised religious order clearly upholds the premise that a matriarchal power structure offers more potential for salvation and spiritual fulfillment. She effectively creates a more democratic religious system by allowing women increased autonomy

---

[34]Ibid., p. 440.

in doctrinal interpretation and equal access to God through a maternal, Christ-centered influence. Harry's love leads Esther to God: "his simple faith in God's love was an antidote to her despondent fears. His mind bore hers along on a current. His imagination awakened hers."[35] Although it might seem as if Stowe simply places Esther under a *different man's* direction, thereby upholding masculine control, she creatively negates this interpretation with dual strategies. First, Stowe describes Harry's love and religion in maternal terms: "his conclusions were all intuitions. His religion was an emanation from the heart, a child of personal experience, and not a formula of the head."[36] Further, she clearly assigns Esther an equally important role in obtaining salvation:

> The most auspicious and beautiful of all phenomena that ever diversify this weary life is that wonderful moment in which two souls, who hitherto have not known each other, suddenly, by the lifting of a veil or the falling of a barrier, become in one moment and forever after one. Henceforth each soul has in itself the double riches of the other. Each weakness is made strong by some corresponding strength in the other; for the truest union is where each soul has precisely the faculty which the other needs.[37]

Through her depiction of Harry and Esther, Stowe delineates the need that men and women have for each other, and as such, re-envisions woman as man's "intellectual and moral companion,"[38] thereby overturning Calvinism's doctrinal emphasis on woman's "animal nature." Harry also upholds the need for religious individualism in his words to Mr. Avery: "it is right and proper that our minds should be forced to think on all these subjects; but I have

---

[35]Ibid., p. 466.
[36]Ibid., p. 466.
[37]Ibid., p. 466.
[38]Ibid., p. 438.

not thought and cannot think like your, nor exactly like any one that I know of. I must make up my opinions for myself."[39] Finally, by re-defining Esther's role as an equal in both temporal and spiritual relationships, she asserts the right to feminine autonomy and individualism in her own intellectual and spiritual development.

Stowe and Alcott clearly saw democratization and individualism as linked. Both women keenly felt their marginalized status as limiting not only their social privileges, but also their artistic potential; therefore, individualism could only be possible by extending the privileges of democracy to women as a collective. Henry David Thoreau did not share the identification of individualism with democracy. For Thoreau, individualism was of the individual's making. For men, self reliance and assertiveness was not only expected, but also rewarded. Therefore, democracy represented not that which needed to be extended to more people, but that which was simply to be taken as a natural right.

Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden*, created a radical individualism which rejected not only the majority cultural definition, but also those literary definitions formulated by his contemporaries. He displayed contempt for "happy novelists" like Louisa May Alcott, and he rejected newspapers like the ones Fern wrote for as delusional. Like Stowe, Thoreau expressed the need to cultivate the individual intellect and the importance of developing one's own spirituality. However, unlike Stowe, he saw no need for men and women to work cooperatively together in finding intellectual and spiritual fulfillment. Thoreau envisioned the

---

[39]Ibid., p. 460.

ultimate self-reliance as the prerequisite for individualism by simplifying his life and stripping away the superfluous. Although Thoreau addressed problems that he saw in his society such as pretentiousness and hypocrisy, as well as a dearth of intellect, he was not concerned with the adequacy of his solutions to society as a whole. Thoreau's *Walden* evinces a radical individualism which rests solely on the primacy of developing his own imagination.

Despite Thoreau's intent to give his imagination full rein in both his experience on Walden Pond, and subsequently in the descriptive narration of these experiences, Thoreau's style lends *Walden* substance. Further, the use of a common vernacular conveys Thoreau's sense of democratic usefulness. Language operates as an important transmittor of cultural values and human morality: "What men say is so sifted and obliged to prove itself as answering to a common want, that nothing absolutely frivolous obtains currency...The analogies of words are never whimsical and meaningless, but stand for real likenesses. Only the ethics of mankind, and not of any particular man, give point and vigor to our speech."[40] Thoreau's use of language reflects a democratic sentiment by preferencing the common laborer's words over "the scholar's labored sentences": "He hated writers who did not speak out of a full experience but used torpid words, wooden or lifeless words, such words as "humanitary" which have a paralysis in their tails."[41] To Thoreau, the most important task for a writer was to breathe life into deadened words; to use language in a manner which

---

[40]F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941, p. 86.

[41]Ibid., p. 86.

conveys the intensity of the experience it reflects. He insisted that "the theme is nothing, the life is everything. All that interests the reader is the depth and intensity of the life excited."[42] Thoreau wanted to create an effect with his language; an effect which transcended mere physical description but which nevertheless conveyed solidity. He sought to construct "sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new impression; sentences which suggest as many things and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct."[43] *Walden* exemplifies Thoreau's meticulous concern for detail in creating a narrative which seeks to stimulate intellectual and spiritual growth within the individual who possesses the ability to *hear* his words..

Thoreau's concern for what he viewed as a lack of intellectual development in his society led him to reject the artistry of his literary contemporaries. He levied one of his diatribes against the effects inherent in the "easy-reading" created by "happy novelists":

> The result is dulness of sight, a stagnation of the vital circulation's, and a general deliquieum and sloughing off of all the intellectual faculties. This sort of gingerbread is baked daily and more sedulously than pure wheat or rye-an-Indian in almost every oven, and finds a surer market.[44]

The "dulness" and "stagnation" caused by readings novels fostered the opposite effect of life that Thoreau strove to create in his own writing. Rather than expending energy on what Thoreau perceived to be soul enriching nourishment found in the "worthies of

---

[42]Ibid., p. 89.

[43]Ibid., p. 91.

[44]Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Edited with an Introduction by Michael Meyer (New York: Penguin Classics, 1983), p. 151.

antiquity,"[45] the public ostensibly prefered the unwholesome and sickly sweet "gingerbread" provided in nonsensical novels: "All this they read with saucer eyes, and erect and primitive curiosity, and with unwearied gizzard, whose corrugations even yet need no sharpening..."[46] Thoreau directly attacked the literary world that Alcott contributed to with her novels aimed at a young and primarily female audience. Thoreau viewed public demand for this type of literature frightening because he felt that the attention which many readers lavished on the trivialities found in novels collectively damaged the potentials of a democratic society:

> We are under-bred and low-lived and illiterate; and in this respect I confess I do not make any broad distinction between the illiterateness of my townsmen who cannot read at all and the illiterateness who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects.[47]

Individual illiteracy caused by obdurately refusing "solid reading" destroyed the very fiber of society. Only the efforts of the individual could rectify such intellectual deterioration. After an individual identifies a lack of intellect and culture in his life and subsequently endeavors to improve himself through the riches found in good reading, he helps to enrich society by securing "for his children that intellectual culture."[48] By negating the value of the "frivolous" and stripping away harmful effects of "light reading," Thoreau identified a potentially richer intellectual state for the individual.

Not only did Thoreau reject the work of feeble novelists, he also refuted the validity of the newspaper realm that Fern inhabited.

---

[45]Ibid., p. 152.
[46]Ibid., p. 152.
[47]Ibid., p. 152.
[48]Ibid., p. 152.

He particularly despised the habit of reading the newspaper over the morning coffee, as this habit undermines intellectual growth:

> After a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. "Pray tell me any thing new that has happened to a man any where on this globe,"--and he reads it over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself.[49]

The newspaper, or the "penny-post" held no value for Thoreau; he described it as an "institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest." Further, newspapers prohibit a development of individualism because an individual will not *see* for himself, relying on sensationalized accounts of events. Newspapers offer only "delusions" while nature holds out a "fabulous" reality.[50] If one perceives the newspaper to be a necessity, than at the very least, readers need to avoid "sucking the pap of neutral family papers, or browsing 'Olive-Branches' here in New England" and seek out material from all of the learned societies.[51]

While Thoreau wrote *Walden* as a wake-up call to heed and perhaps repair cultural problems, he appeared unconcerned about its acceptance within his society. Thoreau merely advises his readers to accept what parts of *Walden* which they might find useful: "As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat,

---

[49]Ibid., p. 155.
[50]Ibid., p. 139.
[51]Ibid., p. 155.

for it may do a good service to him whom it fits."[52] While offering *Walden* as a guide for those who might wish to simplify their material existence while simultaneously enriching individual spirituality, Thoreau spoke primarily to and for himself.

Thoreau manifested less concern for the well-being of individuals within society than fear of the moral disintegration of the potentials of society. He seemingly evinced more concern for his own autonomy and spirituality:

> It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong...but it is his duty, at least to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support.[53]

Ever concerned with human potentiality, Thoreau nevertheless cared more for preserving a fertile environment for his own spiritual growth than seeking to draw the masses towards intellectual fulfillment. He offered words of wisdom, but cared little for fame or popularity. A comparison of his authorship drawn to an Indian attempting to sell baskets in an increasingly capitalistic, consumer-oriented society vindicates the value of disinterested self-sufficiency:

> I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.[54]

Thoreau assiduously avoided any action which led to dependency of any type. While he found writing a worthwhile enterprise, he wrote primarily for his own satisfaction. He disdained the necessity of selling his words in order to financially support himself.

---

[52]Ibid., p. 46.
[53]Ibid., p. 393.
[54]Ibid., p. 61-2.

The act of writing for Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry David Thoreau and Fanny Fern served as an avenue of self-definition. The restrictions that Alcott, Stowe and Fern faced as female artists in a society which rejected the notion of feminine genius underlay their common goal of claiming the voice as a "pre-condition for autonomy."[55] Despite this shared need, Fern's definition of individualism differed radically from these women writers. Fern's complete rejection of marriage as a viable option for feminine fulfillment, exposes her belief that women needed to be economically independent. In this way, her definition of individualism more closely resembles Thoreau's extreme notion of self-reliance. While Fern agreed with Thoreau that carving out one's own place and resultant role in society was essential to physical and spiritual well-being, she nevertheless more clearly than Thoreau recognized the inapplicability of this maxim to marginalized members of American society. This recognition directed Fern's work in actively privileging the voices of the powerless. Her writing attempted to redefine economic structures by transforming both the marketplace and the criteria for entering the business world. In addition, Fern re-envisioned the family unit by focusing on women's ability to act as both nurturer and provider, thereby altering social structures in American society. Finally, the transformations Fern envisioned in both economic and social structures inevitably guaranteed a radically altered political status for women. The differences manifested in Fern's and Thoreau's writing due to Fern's

---

[55]Nancy Walker, *Fanny Fern* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 62.

sharper awareness of political disenfranchisement and its societal ramifications inevitably led to differing conceptions of artistic genius.

The shared bonds that Alcott, Stowe and Fern shared as politically disenfranchised members of their society led these women writers towards a quest of self-authentication. All three women came from middle class families who were well known, and deeply spiritually oriented. Each author grew up in an environment where intellectual development was considered a priority, and as such, all three received a superior education in light of the limited educational opportunities available to women. Further, despite their privileged familial backgrounds, all three women experienced fairly severe economic and emotional deprivation which fostered an identification of their subordination. Women writers, such as Stowe, Alcott and Fern, faced dilemmas which Thoreau in his privileged status as a male writer would not have recognized.

As women writers, literary critics denied these women any claim to genius on the basis of sex. The struggles that Jo March faces as a writer in *Little Women* mirror Alcott's own efforts to obtain artistic freedom. Although Jo finds moderate financial success as a writer, she exerts no real power over her publishers. For that matter, she finds herself pushed around by the opinions of the various men in her life. When Jo decides to take the manuscript of her first novel to three publishers, she "trembles" as she submits "it with fear."[56] One of the publishers agrees to publish the work if Jo would "cut it down by one-third and omit all the parts which she

---

[56]Alcott, *Little Women*, p. 269.

particularly admired."[57] Her father advises against editing; "let it wait and ripen" was his advice. Jo decides "with Spartan firmness" to lay "her first-born on her table and chop(ed) it up as ruthlessly as any ogre."[58] She does, however, leave a portion of the novel in which her father admires, even though she has her own "doubts" about it. Hence, Alcott juxtaposes the initiative Jo displays in seeking to publish her works with her meek acquiescence to masculine demands. Further, the maternal images in this passage insinuate that women artists must sacrifice the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother in seeking an artistic career.

Women writers in the nineteenth-century wrote to earn a living. Bronson Alcott's insolvency forced Louisa Alcott into the role of a provider. Likewise, the death of a husband and the subsequent rejection by her family left Fern a penniless widow with two small children. Stowe also consistently strove to supplement her family's meager income with sums earned through her writing. Thoreau's job as a surveyor insulated him from deprivation; therefore he was more free to stimulate and feed his personal intellectual and spiritual growth.

Although these women writers sought and found economic prosperity with varying degrees of success, they were denied artistic freedom. Nina Baym, in *Women's Fiction: A guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* discusses the lack of first rate literature produced by talented women. She attributes this deficit as a product of the feminine writers' image of themselves: "they saw

---

[57]Ibid., p. 269.
[58]Ibid., p. 270.

themselves not as 'artists' but as professional writers with work to do and a living to be made from satisfactory fulfillment of an obligation to their audience."[59] This obligation represented at least two agendas, the first being entertainment for a mass audience and the second in providing an education for women. Emotional conflict and insecurity probably further limited their artistic freedom. Mary Kelley, in *Private Woman, Public Stage*, identifies the doubt and confusion as arising from the conflict between the divergent roles these writers found themselves forced to fulfill. The strain of finding themselves in the limelight as enormously popular writers, yet unceasingly hampered by their society's feminine ideals undoubtedly influenced women's writing. Kelley also states that the "invisibility of females in their ancestry, contributed to and heightened their insecurity and sense of illegitimacy as public writers."[60] While Kelley focuses on internal factors hindering artistic freedom, Baym points to an external hindrance.

Baym describes a tacit bargain between editors, reviewers and women writers as hindering women's artistic freedom: "Women may write as much as they please providing they define themselves as women writing when they do so, whether by tricks of style--gracefulness, delicacy; by choices of subject matter--the domestic, the social, the private; or by tone--pure, lofty, moral didactic."[61] Alcott found a safety valve for her emotions through anonymous and pseudonymous writings. Madeleine Stern emphasizes that Alcott

---

[59]Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820-1870* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 16.

[60]Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage*, p. 37.

[61]Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, p. 21.

knew "the exposure of feminine anger and passion made for less respectable reading; in short, if writing constituted a safe means of expressing anger, publication did not.[62] Thus, while publishing under her own name, Alcott acquiesced to publisher and reviewer demands through the latter part of her writing career. *Little Women*, written as a didactic moral handbook at the request of her father's publisher, represented a capitulation to the desires of the publishing elite. Nevertheless she managed, through covert feminism, to convey a fairly radical commentary of the traditional marriage.

Fern differed from most nineteenth-century women writers in that she displayed no apprehension about putting her anger in print. *Ruth Hall*, a fictionalized biography written from the depths of personal anger, asserted Fern's beliefs that women had the right to feel and express emotion in print. The feminist anger in *Ruth Hall*, while not new, deviates from the anger in most sentimental fiction by suggesting that women are best left unmarried and economically independent. Harris agrees, in her reading of *Ruth Hall* with Ann Douglas's observations that "Fern built her work openly on the defiance her fellow authoresses labored to conceal."[63]

Fern, far from accepting to literary critic's dictums, criticized their arrogance and ignorance. Instead of chopping up her manuscripts (like Jo March) to satisfy male critics, she bitingly

---

[62]Lynette Carpenter, " 'Did They Never See Anyone Angry Before?': The Sexual Politics of Self-Control in Alcott's 'A Whisper in The Dark' ". *Legacy*, 3:2 (Fall, 1986), pp. 31-41. Carpenter refers to Tompkin's argument that domestic novels use "submission and self-control" as instruments of female power. She argues that Alcott had no illusions about the potential for power in the face of masculine, temporal authority. Women paid dearly for the submission to man and for the suppression of their emotions.

[63]Susan K. Harris, *19th Century American Womens Novels, Intrepretive Stratiegies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 34.

satirized these men in a manner which rendered their complaints ridiculous. For example, the following letter, which Ruth receives from a male critic in *Ruth Hall* attacks the notion of feminine genius:

> You are not a genius--no, madam, not by many removes; Shakespeare was a genius--Milton was a genius--the author of 'History of the Dark Ages,' which has reached its fifteenth edition, was a genius--(you may not know you have now the honor of being addressed by him;) no, madam, you are not a genius, nor have I yet seen a just criticism of you writings; they are all either over-praised or over abused; you have a certain sort of talent, and that talent, I grant you is peculiar, but a genius--no, no, Mrs., or Miss, or Madam Floy--you don't approach genius, though I am not without a hope that, if you are not spoiled by injudicious, sycophantic admirers, you may yet produce something creditable; although I candidly confess, that it is my opinion, that the *female* mind is incapable of producing anything which may be strictly termed literature.[64]

Instead of passively accepting this criticism , Ruth laughs it off as vanity. Further, she highlights the shallowness of this male critic's opinion by juxtaposing his letter with the voluminous amount of fan mail enthusiastically endorsing her book. Fern condemned unfair literary criticism which allowed an author's book to be "reviewed on hearsay, by persons who never looked between the covers," causing a woman artist to "either weep in silence over such injustice, or do violence to her womanly nature by a public contention for her rights." [65] This comment reflects not only a critique of gender-biased interpretations of literary genius, but also the inadequacy of constructed expectations of womanhood which only allow "weeping in silence" as an appropriate response to injustice.

---

[64]Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction by Joyce Warren (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. 166.

[65]Ibid., p. 172.

Fern leaves no doubt that career and motherhood are not mutually exclusive roles. Publication day of Ruth's first novel is marked by memories of each articles contribution to her children: "Little shoeless feet were covered with the proceeds of this; a little medicine, or a warmer shawl was bought with that."[66] Despite her shared subordinated status with other women writers, Fern's definition of individualism differed radically from Alcott or Stowe. Fern's experience with deprivation due to a lack of male support coupled with her new found ability to independently provide for her children led her to reject marriage as a means of economic sustenance.

Fern's definition of individualism comes the closest to Thoreau's in their common assertion that extreme self-reliance provides the basis for self-definition. Thoreau's writing develops out of the intensely private identity which he creates for himself: "inside Thoreau's private configuration, there was only himself." Thoreau created an identity for himself which kepts "other men out and parts of himself in"[67] , thereby preventing him from relating fully and personally to the problems of his society.

> Our stock in life, our real estate, is that amount of thought which we have had, which we have thought out. The ground we have thus created is forever pasturage for our thoughts...If you have ever done any thought with these finest tools, the imagination and fancy and reason, it is a new creation, independent on the world, and a possession forever. You have laid something up against a rainy day. You have to that extent cleared the wilderness. (J., ix, 350)[68]

---

[66]Ibid., p. 175.

[67]Frederick Garber, *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 16.

[68]Ibid., p. 12.

Thoreau sees clearing the wilderness or getting "rid of the excess baggage whose excesses burst our boundaries" [69] as a necessary step towards self-definition. It is an act that "men do best when they are full themselves." [70] The only tools men need to realize the creation of their own consciousness are the "imagination, and fancy and reason." In essence, Thoreau believes that men can live and think freely, completely independent of social obstacles.

What distinguishes Fern's writing from Thoreau's is the recognition that while men not only have the right, but also the duty to clear a space physically, intellectually and spiritually, women have spaces *carved for them.* Women, corrupted by a lack of opportunity to extend their being, find no creative outlets for their energies or opportunities of being their best. While Thoreau "organizes his perceptions of himself and his world," women too often perceive themselves through society's eyes, perpetuating a personal dishonesty.

Thoreau advocates simplification within one's own physical environment as an important step in clearing the consciousness to facilitate intellectual and spiritual growth:

> Simplification involves a clearing of the ground for the self, that is, the establishment of the self's own place...The result would be self-circumscription, the establishment of precise personal perimeters." [71]

Thoreau sees clearing one's space by removing that which is superfluous to the boundaries necessary because true genius resides

---

[69]Ibid., p. 15.
[70]Ibid., p. 11.
[71]Ibid. p. 15.

within the self, within the cleared space. This is precisely Fern's point from an antithetical angle. Despite the potentialities for personal genius, women cannot remove excess baggage because the baggage is not of their own making. Women live cluttered lives, enclosed within an often smothering domesticity, fettered by the restrictions of wifehood, motherhood and societal morays which govern every aspect of their lives from dress to birth control. Further, women fear the edge of the clearing because society fails to provide their sex with adequate tools or skills to challenge the boundaries determined for them. Frederick Garber in *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination* says that according to Thoreau, "it appears that when the activity of living is fullest and richest, the talent creates grounds for the mind's pasturage, making a clearing out of part of the mindless wilderness which surrounds it."[72] Again, Fern concurs with this; constricted feminine lives lead to feeble minds and barren landscapes. For women, however, simplification is impossible because independence is impossible due to an inability to find economic autonomy.

Fern equates conquering the marketplace with clearing the wilderness. Women, becoming self-reliant through a moral capitalism which would operate for the good of society, could conceivably find fulfillment on several levels. The most basic level of finding physical sustenance, invariably leads to the ability to define one's own place in society. Opportunities for self-definition open up possibilities for spiritual and intellectual personal growth. Fern also envisions the extension of women's moral qualities into the

---

[72]Ibid., p. 12.

marketplace, perpetuating a republicanism through capitalism. Women, notably mothers, who find economic independence can potentially exercise their voice in a manner which articulates social reform. Fern's own newspaper articles serve as a forum in which she articulates social concerns and offers creative solutions for social reform. Finally, Fern's writing exemplifies another important legacy of feminine self-reliance; the realization of feminine potentialities of artistic genius. Thoreau himself views his material job as a surveyor as vital to his artistry: "his talents as a surveyor, the commercial activity by which he lived and protected his genius, put him out at the line where the clearing stood."[73] While he complained of having to keep the job "simply for self-support," this self-support provides Thoreau with the independence necessary to ensure intellectual and spiritual development. For Fern, self-support represents the first crucial step in the clearing process.

---

[73]Ibid., p. 13.

Chapter II

> Why shouldn't women work *for pay*? Does anybody object when women *marry for pay*?--without love, without respect, nay with even aversion?...How much more honored is she who, hewing out her own path, through prejudice and narrowness and even insult, earns honorably and honestly through her own independence. (Fanny Fern, *New York Ledger*, July 16, 1870)

Fanny Fern, born as Sara Payson Willis on July 9, 1811, was the daughter of Nathaniel and Hannah Willis. Although she was born in Portland, Maine, the family soon moved to Boston where they acquired recognition as a literary family. Nathaniel Willis published *The Recorder*, the first religious newspaper in America. He later began *The Youth's Companion*, the first children's periodical.[74] Fern's brothers, Nathaniel P. and Richard Willis both became prominent newspaper editors.[75] Sara herself received a superior education at Catharine Beecher's Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut before marrying into a prominent Boston family. Personal misfortune soon struck Sara. Her husband, Charles Eldredge died, leaving Sara and her two young daughters penniless. Her father coerced her into a second marriage with Samuel P. Farrington who

---

[74]Joyce Warren, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* (New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p.

[75]Fern later wrote many articles about newspapers; reading newspapers, as well as writing about publishing in newspapers. Her family background in the periodical print greatly influenced her career. For more, see Warren, *Fanny Fern, An Independent Woman.*

physically mistreated her. She finally left him, despite vociferous opposition from her family.[76]

Fern's difficult personal circumstances provided her with keen insight into the lives of two classes. She was born and married into middle-class families with upper-class aspirations. Marital disaster left her enduring as dire economic hardship as the people she later described in her newspaper articles. Sara's father, father-in-law, and brother, (Nanthaniel P. Willis), refused to help her economically or otherwise. As a result, Fern explicitly renounced the feminine subordination dictated by societal values and customs which favored masculine perogative. Sara Eldredge, in her superior education, writing ability and identification of herself as a subordinated member of the population, held a unique place in American society. She had the vision and the voice to levy a social critique of her society. Sara began to write newspaper articles to support herself, and Fanny Fern was born.

Fern immediately asserted a new artistic individualism through her writing style. In June of 1851, she sold one of her articles to the Reverend Thomas F. Norris of the Boston *Olive Branch* for fifty cents.[77] He perhaps agreed to print her article because her writing adhered to his own ideas of good prose:

> Say it in plain old English, use the most easy words and forms of speech in your power, do not use obsolete or out of the way terms, use no exordium, come directly at what you aim, and give the largest possible numbers of ideas in the fewest possible words. Use no circumlocution, and when you have done, stop; an article is never too short when the writer has comprehended his subject; any verbose additions only take from the force of the article...We beg our contributors all to learn how

---

[76]Ibid, Chapter, 5, "Dark Days.

[77]Ibid., p. 92.

> to say much in a few words...Persons gifted with a concise, forcible, yet graceful and easy style, never fail of success. Daguerreotype your subject, and leave your reader to study the picture. (*Olive Branch*, May 3, 1851)[78]

Norris's advice in this article proved prophetic; Fanny Fern's easy, direct style contributed greatly to her overwhelming success. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, a popular periodical, heralded Fern as the welcome harbinger of a new writing style, marking the end of the "stilted rhetoric" and "parade and pomp" of literature.[79] She breathed life into her subjects, describing their lives with clarity and humanity. Her directness, simplicity and down-to-earth-style both brought the world of literature to many new readers while simultaneously making this new class of reader, the ordinary people, newsworthy.

Fern's style reflected her purpose in writing. Fern despised the pretensions and hypocrisies of genteel society and often openly displayed her intent to expose such hypocrisies. Fern always came "before the public stark naked"[80] without the restraints that Victorian society demanded. While literary critics, particularly anxious to disseminate their visions of genteel society, condemned

---

[78]Ibid., p. 98.

[79]Ibid., p. 277, from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (July, 1854).

[80]Ibid., p. 1. After Nanthaniel Hawthorne condemned the "damned mob of scribbling women" who cornered the literary mass market during the decade known as the feminine fifties, he softened the blow somewhat by praising Fern: "In my last, I recollect, I bestowed some vituperation on female authors. I have since been reading 'Ruth Hall'; and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were--then their books are sure to possess character and value. Can you tell me anything about this Fanny Fern? If you meet her, I wish you would let her know how much I admire her." Nanthaniel Hawthorne, *Letters to William Ticknor, 1851-1869*, ed. C. E. Frazer-Clark, Jr., 2 vols. (Newark, N.J.: Carteret Book Club, Inc., 1972), 1:78.

Fern's vulgar lack of femininity, publishers generally found the willpower to quell any approbation they may have felt about promoting such vulgarity. Her book sales more than compensated these entrepreneurs for the ineffectual wrath of literary critics.

Fern deliberately exploited the buying power of the masses in her quest to re-define women's roles in society, thereby allowing more opportunity for feminine self-definition. Although Fern's slang, fresh prose and radical views represented the cutting edge in journalism, the mediums in which she chose to express her views were conventional. Both nineteenth-century novels and newspapers were produced for mass consumption, and Fern's use of these mediums reflected her intent of securing a large audience. Because Fern's emphasis on "everyday people and events" overturned the cultural views of the elite, her subject matter spoke to a much broader audience of middle and working-class people, accounting for her widespread appeal. Jane Tompkins, in *Sensational Designs* states that "the text that becomes exceptional in the sense of reaching an exceptionally large audience does so not because of its departure from the ordinary and conventional, but through its embrace of what is widely shared."[81] Fern's efforts to reach a large audience reflected her intent to uphold the culture of ordinary people, and used their support to overturn elitist dictums, thereby altering the balance of power in American society.

Fern's reformist goals necessitated first capturing an audience and sparking a sense of injustice in her women readers, leading to an

---

[81] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs, The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). p. xvi.

awakening of a class consciousness. Fern used a variety of techniques in reaching a feminine audience. She often spoke directly to women, approaching her subject humorously, using a black humor antithetical to women and particularly to the role of a middle-class woman in a genteel society. The humor exemplified in the following letter to a female admirer highlights a subversive feminine capacity for violence:

> My dear Eva:--Bless your soul, *I can't love a woman*! I had as lief take a dose of physic!...*Women never made decent friends to their own sex*; they are always telling each other's secrets, and pulling each other's caps and characters to pieces...Besides...you labor under the impression that I felt *merry* when I wrote all that nonsense! *Not a bit of it*; it's a way I have, when I can't find a razor handy to cut my throat! (*Olive Branch*, Jan. 31, 1852)[82]

This letter demonstrates plural purposes inherent in most of Fern's writing. On the most superficial level, her writing entertained people who could, perhaps, forget the daily grind of unending work. The working class might get a laugh at the expense of genteel women who seemingly have nothing better to do than "pulling each other's caps and characters to pieces." This ridicule of the upper class exposes Fern's second and more serious agenda; that of undermining cultural dictums which have little relevance in the lives of people struggling to survive. Finally, by minimizing the influence the social elite, she paved the way for a re-envisioning of women's roles. Women, confined within unfulfilling lives could become carping and undesirable. The inability to release frustrations in a socially acceptable manner might lead to violence turned inward, implicit in the threat to "cut [her] throat."

---

[82]Ibid., p. 100.

Nancy Walker, in *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, emphasizes that women are not supposed to be humorous: "For women to adopt this role means that they must break out of the passive, subordinate position mandated for them by centuries of patriarchal tradition and take on the power accruing to those who reveal the shams, hypocrisies, and incongruities of the dominant culture." Walker further contends that feminine humorists potentially face serious economic ramifications: "To be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless, and at the same time to risk alienation those upon whom women are dependent for economic survival."[83] Fern never feared alienating authorities; she bitterly learned through her own personal hardship to rely on no one for sustenance. Impoverished and friendless, responsible for feeding two children, Fern fought her way out of poverty. Her struggle to survive transformed her from a helpless, dependent, young girl into a strong, not easily intimidated woman.

Fern addressed the problems working women faced in asserting their right to individualism. The Industrial Revolution offered more job opportunities for women; however, most of these jobs as seamstresses, domestic servants, or factory workers, payed little for long strenuous hours. "A Bit Of Injustice" describes the unfairness of paternalistic attitudes and restraints which kept women dependent and helpless:

---

[83]Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing, Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 9.

> "AS A GENERAL THING there are few people who speak approbatively of a woman who has a smart business talent or capability. No matter how isolated or destitute her condition, the majority would consider it more "feminine" would she unobtrusively gather up her thimble, and, retiring into some out-of-the-way-place, gradually scoop out her coffin with it, than to develop that smart turn for business which would lift her at once out of her troubles; and which, in a man so situated, would be applauded as exceedingly praiseworthy." (*New York Ledger*, June 8, 1861).[84]

Fern's sarcastic tone displays no humor; she herself was forced to develop an acute business sense to survive. Further, she found businessmen only too willing to take advantage of her helpless position as a female in the male-dominated business realm. Fern praised those women strong enough to struggle for economic independence, for no matter what hardships they might endure in obtaining complete economic autonomy, she maintained that "*No crust so tough as the grudged bread of dependence.*"

Daily physical hardship prevented many working class women from developing a sense of individualism, and by artistically sketching their plight, Fern spoke directly to middle and upper-class women. "The Working Girls Of New York", obviously hopes to engender sympathy for less fortunate women, thereby cementing an alliance between women which crosses class boundaries. By evoking the middle-class rhetoric surrounding the "vicitimized" working woman, Fern exploited one of the socially constructed images of less fortunate urban sisters in order to gain a middle-class audience. She described the morning procession of young women towards their jobs:

> They shiver as the sharp wind of early morning strikes their temples. There is no look of youth on their faces; hard lines appear there. Their brows are knit; their eyes are sunken; their dress is flimsy, and foolish,

---

[84]Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, p. 318

> and tawdry; always a hat, and feather or soiled artificial flower upon it; the hair dressed with an abortive attempt at style; a soiled petticoat; a greasy dress, a well-worn sacque or shawl, and a gilt breastpin and earrings. Now follow them to the large, black-looking building, where several hundred of the are manufacturing hoop-skirts... *You* could not stay five minutes in that room, where the noise of the machinery used is so deafening, that only by the motion of the lips could you comprehend a person speaking...Why, these young creatures bear it, from seven in the morning till six in the evening; week after week, month after month, with only half an hour at midday to eat their dinner of a slice of bread and butter or an apple...Pitiful! pitiful, you almost sob to yourself, as you look at these young girls. *Young*? Alas! it is only in years that they are young. (*Folly As it Flies*, 1868).[85]

After sparking her readers' attention through images which would appeal to her audience, Fern procedes to tell the story with keen insight from the working class-perspective. Although Fern sketches the barrenness of the girls' living quarters, the meagerness of their food, and the inadequacy of their salaries, she also tells her readers that the young girls prefer their positions in bleak factories over domestic house service because of the limited autonomy domestic jobs offer: "when six o'clock in the evening comes they are their own mistresses, without hindrance or questioning, till another day of labor begins...they stroll the streets; and who can blame them? There are gay lights, and fine shop windows. It costs nothing to wish they could have all those fine things. They look longingly into the theatres, through whose door happier girls of their own age pass, radiant and smiling, with their lovers. Glimpses of Paradise come through those doors as they gaze."[86] Fern understood far better than many members of her own class that this bit of leisure time facilitated a sense of autonomy; because for at least a small portion of their day, working girls could act as their own mistresses. Fern's

---

[85]Fanny Fern, *Folly As It Flies; Hit at by Fanny Fern* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), p. 221-222.

[86]Ibid., p. 222.

efforts to understand and write about urban labor problems from a working class-perspective was important because her efforts reflected an attempt to make behavior, viewed by the middle-class reformers as either victimized or merely perverse, seem understandable without denying a portion of agency to these women.[87] In this way, Fern worked to establish a universal sisterhood which transcended the immutable and unobtainable true womanhood promulgated by well-intentioned, but misinformed, middle-class white women.

Kathy Peiss in *Cheap Amusements* discusses the desires of young women to procure excitement or entertainment in the late nineteenth-century as well as the problems they faced in doing so. She echoes Fern's earlier observations that young women preferred factory work over domestic house service because such jobs seemingly offered more autonomy. However, as Peiss points out, exploitive conditions of many factory jobs left young women with little free time, energy or money to pursue entertainment. "Fatigue and poor health were more often their lot than finery and entertainment."[88] Christine Stansell in *City of Women* points to the

---

[87]Christine Stansell, *City of Women, Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press,1987). Stansell discusses the varying uses of "testimonies to female victimization" in nineteenth century New York. By 1851, the labor movements in New York leaned heavily on middle-class notions of true womanhood in seeking to make labor gains for the men which would (ostensibly) allow working women to stay home. Further, moral reformers also relied on this same rhetoric when deciding which worthy poor to help. Brightly dressed Bowery Girls, intractable Irish servants and unrepentant prostitutes (despite the measure of agency these women exerted in their lives) were not candidates for middle-class sympathy. The timid, pallid seamstress represented a (partially constructed) object for potential and profitable reform.

[88]Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), pp. Peiss points out that middle class mistresses often encroached on their servants free time, thereby hindering any pursuits of leisure time.

same issues occuring at an earlier time period. Her discussion of the Bowery girls in New York City during the antebellum period exposes harsh living conditions operating alongside of a striking assertion of female autonomy through dress and entertainment. Fern's descriptions of factory girls blended the rhetoric of suffering, which had roots in legitimate poverty, with the effort to express a feminine individualism through an autonomous use of leisure time and flamboyance in dress: "Despite their poverty, however, these young immigrant women, with their gaudy costumes, promenades and evenings at the theater, had their own notions of where to seek the makings of womanhood."[89] Although Fern, in recognizing both harsh living conditions and a desire for autonomy leads her to address the plight of working girls with gravity, she often employed other strategies in bringing these women to the attention of literate America.

Fern used a sarcastic humor to describe working women in "Feminine Waiters At Hotels."[90] On seeing a newspaper article stating that some "leading hotels are considering the policy of employing female waiters," Fern satirically notified her female working-class readers of an opportunity for better employment:

> GOOD news for you, poor pale-faced sempstresses! Throw your thimbles at the heads of your penurious employers; put on your neatest and *plainest* dress; see that your feet and fingers are immaculate, and then rush *en masse* for the situation ousting every white jacket in Yankeedom. Stipulate with your employers, for leave to carry in the

---

Although factory jobs offered young women an opportunity to get out of the home, the fifteen to eighteen hour workday with small wages left them with little free time and barely enough money to pay for food and rent.

[89]Stansell, *City of Women*, p. 168.

[90]Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1854), p. 332.

> pocket of your French apron, a pistol loaded with cranberry sauce, to plaster up the mouth of the first coxcomb who considers it necessary to preface his request for and omelette, with "*My dear.*" (*Fern Leaves, Second Series*,).[91]

Although the article offered practical advice to young women in handling the perils of waiting on "unmitigated snobs," and advised these young women to enjoy watching fools a "kind Providence sends," her biting satire unequivocally condemned the constricted lifestyles women faced as a result of men's behavior. *Women* must restrain themselves in both dress and manners to avoid unwanted advances by *men*. Men's behavior definitively operated to circumvent individuality for women.

"A Soliloquy Of A Housemaid", written from the perspective of a domestic servant, provides an intimate peek at the drudgery young women often experienced:

> Oh Dear, Dear! Wonder if my mistress knows I'm made of flesh and blood? I've been up stairs five times, in fifteen minutes, to hand her things about four feet from her rocking-chair! Ain't I tired? Wish I could be rich once, just to show ladies how to treat their servants! Such a rheumatiz as I've got in my shoulders, going up on that shed in the rain. It's "Sally do this," and "Sally do that," till I wish I hadn't been baptized at all; and I might as well go farther back while I'm about it, and say I don't know what I was born for!...Now, instead of ordering me round like a dray-horse, if they'd look up smiling like, now and then, or ask me how my rheumatiz did; or even say good morning, Sally--or show some sort of interest in a fellow-cretur, I should know whether it was worth while to try to live or not. A soft world would ease the wheels of my treadmill amazingly, and wouldn't kill them, any how! (*True Flag*, Sept., 11, 1852)[92]

Household servants, subjected to dehumanizing treatment by employers did not possess the ability to assert either autonomy or individuality. Dependent on jobs which necessitated catering to the

---

[91]Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1854), p. 332.

[92]Fern, *Ruth Hall*. p. 237.

whims of the "genteel" for bare economic subsistence, domestic servants could not be self-reliant. Fern brought the actual world of working-class people to the forefront of society by writing of their plight; poor working conditions, homelessness, starvation, and perhaps most importantly, their intrinsic worth as human beings. Fern contradicted images of unruly Irish servants rendered through the complaints of middle-class mistresses, and in doing so, presented the very humaness of the working-class that she wrote about. These people had feelings, desires, and needs and Fern upheld the validity of those needs.

Marriage and motherhood constituted two central facts in a woman's life in the nineteenth-century, especially for middle-class women. Fern's scathing satire condemned masculine self-centeredness too often found in the traditional nineteenth-century marriage. She emphasized that "matrimonial tears are poison:"

> *Smile! It flatters your husband.* He wants to be considered the source of your happiness, whether he was baptized *Nero* or *Moses*. Your mind never being supposed to be occupied with any other subject than himself, of course a tear is a tacit reproach. Besides, you miserable little whimperer, what have you to cry for? A-i-n-t y-o-u m-a-r-r-i-e-d? Isn't that the *summum bonum*--the height of feminine ambition?..."*Smile!" you simpleton!* (*Olive Branch*, Aug. 28, 1852)[93]

This article attacks the limited opportunities for feminine fulfillment only too apparent in the circumscribed domestic environment. Women often found themselves denied intellectual stimulation due to both limited educational opportunities and the endless drudgery of household work and child-birth. Although Fern spoke directly to woman readers in this passage, her biting satire unequivocally

---

[93]Ibid., p. 236-237.

condemned male selfishness. The article also criticizes the complicity of middle-class women in adopting and relying upon the domestic ideology of true womanhood. The reliance on such images and rhetoric for an assertion of autonomy was damaging for both working-class and middle-class women. The circumscribed domestic arena, with its lack of intellectual stimuli that Thoreau found damaging, could lead women to concentrate on misplaced arenas for reform. Stansell points out that the efforts of middle-class women to reform their unruly servants often fostered frustration, while making little marks on the domestic help.[94] Many of Fern's articles insinuate that the traditional marital institution or socially constructed gender roles would provide more useful targets for reform in mitigating undesirable behaviors attributable to both sexes.

Fern's next step towards mitigating the influence of socially and psychologically damaging constructed gender roles was less subtle. She suggested an assertion of individuality might necessitate discarding all binding and unfair rules; telling women to "make a bon-fire of all the 'Hints to Young Wives,' 'Married Woman's Friend,' etc. and throw in the authors after them." She personalized the following article with a description of her life with "Mr. Fern," highlighting the effects of men's chicanery on women's self-esteem:

> Mr. Fern came home one day when I had such a crucifying headache that I couldn't have told whether I was married or single, and threw an old coat into my lap to mend. Well, I tied a wet bandage over my forehead, "left all flying," and sat down to it--he might as well have asked me to make a *new* one; however I newly lined the sleeves, mended the button-holes, sewed on new buttons down the front, and all over the

---

[94]Stansell, *City of Women*. For more, see Chapter 8, "Domestic Service." pp. 154-168.

> coat-tails--when finally it occurred to me (I believe it was a suggestion of Satan,) that the *pocket* might need mending; so I turned it inside out; and *what do you think I found?* A *love letter from him to my dress-maker*! I dropped the coat, I dropped the work-basket, I dropped the buttons, I dropped the baby (it was *female*, and I though it just as well to put her out of future misery) and then I hopped up into a chair in front of the looking-glass, and remarked to the young woman I saw there, "F-A-N-N-Y F-E-R-N! if you---are---ever---such---a---confounded fool again"---and I wasn't. (*Olive Branch*, Feb. 1852)[95]

This particular piece, like the earlier article which sarcastically dismisses the notion of feminine conviviality, rejects middle-class notions of sisterhood which might operate as a source of emotional sustenance for women. Rather than defining the mother as a maternal role model, Fern prefers to "put her {the daughter} out of future misery" by dropping her. Although obviously commenting on the shoddy behavior of "Mr. Fern," she offers a warning to her feminine readers; namely not to trust men like Mr. Fern, and to protect oneself. Reliance on men or other women offers little potential for emotional or physical sustenance. Implicitly, a woman must shoulder at least part of the responsibility for personal happiness by refusing to blindly trust others.

While motherhood ostensibly reflects the highest honor a woman can achieve, "Sunshine and Young Mothers" deliberately mocks the Victorian idealized vision of motherhood. Fern allows women to laugh both at their own, less than desirable predicament and the absurdity of their society's blindingly exalted vision of motherhood. She precedes the article with the following quotation:

> "Folly--For girls to expect to be happy without marriage. Every woman was made for a mother, consequently, babies are as necessary to their 'peace of mind,' as health. If you wish to look at melancholy and indigestion, look at an old maid. If you would take a peep at sunshine, look in the face of a young mother."

---

[95]Ibid., p. 224-225.

Fern continues to write "*NOW I WON'T STAND THAT*! I'm an old maid myself; and I'm neither melancholy nor indigestible! My "PIECE *of mind*" I'm going to give you, (in a minute!) and I never want to *touch* a baby except with a *pair of tongs*! The latter part of the article is worth printing in full, as it humorously juxtaposes the leisurely quality of a husband's morning with the exhaustive chaos of a young mother's morning:

> "Husband" gets up in the morning and pays his "*devours*" to the looking-glass; curls his fine head of hair; puts on an immaculate shirt bosom; ties an excruciating cravat; sprinkles his handkerchief with cologne; stows away a French roll, an egg, and a cup of coffee; gets into the omnibus, looks *slantendicular* at the pretty girls, and makes love between the pauses of business during the forenoon *generally*. Wife must "hermetically seal" the windows and exclude all the fresh air, (because the baby had the "snuffles" in the night;) and sits gasping down to the table more dead than alive, to finish her breakfast. Tommy turns a cup of hot coffee down his bosom; Julianna has torn off the string of her school-bonnet; James wants to know if she'd like a joint of mutton; the milkman would like money; the ice man wants to speak to her "just a minute;" the baby swallows a bean; husband sends the boy home from the store to say *his partner* will dine with him; the cook leaves "all flying," to go to her "sister's dead baby's wake," and husband's thin coat must be ironed before noon. "*Sunshine and young mothers*!!" Where's my smelling-bottle? (*Olive Branch*, July 3, 1852).[96]

This article, appealing to middle-class women readers in the sharp, if over exaggerated, delineation of the separate spheres, mocks the "man's" intrinsic value to the household through the use of quotations marks. In this context, at least, the man's workday appears enjoyable, while the woman's day consists of unending work and little enjoyment. Further, this article provides an insightful response to Thoreau's assertion that simplification represents a necessary prerequisite for self-definition. Women who find every minute of their day devoted to other people's needs cannot exercise

---

[96]Ibid., p. 231.

any agency in clearing away the superfluous. All of the seemingly trivial incidents which demands a woman's full and unending attention must be taken care of in order to fulfill the values of domesticity prescribed by middle-class definitions of womanhood. Obviously, the subject of this article possesses no resources or energy to become self-reliant in either an intellectual or spiritual sense within the home, or in an economic sense outside of the home.

Fern captured all classes of women in print. However, unlike her vindication of working and middle class culture, Fern sarcastically portrayed elite women as "genteel" snobs. Being thoroughly familiar with both Boston and New York, Fern took special pains in describing the elite women of these cities. She was especially critical of the New York woman:

> The New York Woman doteth on rainbow hats and dresses, confectionery, the theatre, the opera, and flirtation...The New York woman thinketh it well-bred to criticize *in an audible tone* the dress and appearance of every chance lady near her, in the street, shop, ferry-boat, car, or omnibus...She scorneth to ride in an omnibus, and if driven by an impertinent shower therin, sniffeth up her aristocratic nose at the plebian occupants, pulleth out her costly gold watch to--ascertain the time! and draweth off her gloves to show her diamonds...On Sunday morning, the New York Woman taketh all the jewelry she can collect, and in her flashiest silk and bonnet, taketh her velvet-bound, gilt-clasped prayer-book out for an airing...After church, she taketh a turn or two in Fifth Avenue, to display her elaborate dress, and to wonder "why vulgar people don't confine themselves to the Bowery." (*Fresh Leaves*, 1857)[97]

Fern uses pompous, stilted language to describe a pompous, hypocritical lifestyle. This article represents a rejection of not only the ridiculous ostentatious display of wealth, but also the triviality of the wealthy woman's life.

---

[97]Fanny Fern, *Fresh Leaves* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857), "Knickerbocker and Tri-Mountain," p. 99-100.

The Boston upper-class woman fares little better in Fern's scathing commentary:

> The Boston woman draweth down her mouth, rolleth up her eyes, foldeth her hands, and walketh on a crack...She dresseth (to her praise be it spoken) plainly in the street, and considereth india-rubbers, a straw bonnet, and a thick shawl, the fittest costume for damp and cloudy weather..She is well posted up as to politics--thinketh "as Pa does," and sticketh to it through thunder and lightening. When asked to take a gentleman's arm, she hooketh the tip of her little finger circumspectly on to his male coat-sleeve. She is prim as a bolster, as stiff as a ram-rod, as frigid as an icicle, and not even matrimony with a New Yorker could thaw her. (*Fresh Leaves*, 1857)[98]

Whereas Fern characterizes the New York woman as ostentatious in both dress and mannerisms, she describes the Boston woman as proper and circumspect. Fern portrays both types of elite women, however, as narrow-minded, concerned only with their own lives and interests. Fern's satirical words "the Boston woman walketh on a crack" clearly reveals her condemnation of such a limiting lifestyle. At the same time, she seemingly pities these women who, in different ways, are as trapped by paternalistic restraints as working-class women. The Boston woman "thinketh as Pa does" implies that these women were unable to think for themselves. The jewels displayed by the New York woman merely represent the gilt bars of a societal cage. Both types of genteel women remain subject to masculine authority in a narrowly prescribed world. Further, both types of women were cut off from a universal sisterhood by their inablity to understand the world that their less fortunate sisters inhabited.

Many women, whether trapped by economic deprivation, chained to abusive husbands, or insulated within protective and

---

[98]Ibid., "The Boston Woman," p. 100-101.

smothering marriages often found themselves emotionally unfulfilled. Fern identified and addressed a need for feminine leisure activities:

> Women lead, most of them, lives of unbroken monotony, and have much more need of exhilarating influences than men, whose life is out of doors in the breathing, active world...Sirs! if monotony is to be avoided in man's life as injurious, if "variety" and exhilaration must always be the spice to his pursuits, how much more must it be necessary to a sensitively organized woman?[99]

This passage identifies the dangers of underdeveloped potential as damaging to feminine self-esteem. Further, "lives of unbroken monotony" prohibit feminine self-definition. Fern's writings brought the necessity of creating enjoyable leisure activities for women to the attention of those responsible for shaping American culture.

Fern's unique vision stemmed from her own experiences with poverty. As a result, her vision became sharper and more attuned to the concerns and problems of different classes. Her attempts to facilitate a universal sisterhood took her sympathy with the ordinary people of America a step farther than even many of her friends found possible to condone. Her views on prostitution and criminal reform brought personal censure from members of her own class. Fern wrote a series of articles titled "Blackwell's Island." These articles unflinchingly exposed the sadistic prison conditions of nineteenth-century America. Fern offered modern solutions for reform and empathized with the poor living conditions which led many of these people to a life of crime. "Blackwell's Island No. 3" candidly discusses a topic which no "nice" woman should mention:

---

[99]Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, p. 308.

prostitution. She begins the article by telling the "fastidious Mrs. Grundy" to step aside:

> I ask no leave of *you* to speak of the wretched girls picked out of the gutters of New York streets, to inhabit those cells at Blackwell's Island. I speak not to you of what was tugging at my heartstrings as I saw them, that beautiful summer afternoon, file in, two by two, to their meals followed by a man carrying a cowhide in his hand, by way of reminder; all this would not interest you; but when you tell me that these women are not to be named to ears polite, that our sons and our daughters should grow up ignorant of their existence, I stop my ears. As if they could, or did!...As if they could ride in a car or omnibus, or cross in a ferry-boat, or go to a watering-place, without being unmistakably confronted by them...Most consistent Mrs. Grundy, get out of my way while I say what I was going to, without fear or favor of yours...You say their intellects are small, they are mere animals, naturally coarse and groveling. Answer me this--are they, or are they not *immortal*? (*New York Ledger*, August 28, 1858)[100]

This article roundly condemns those who turned their faces away from this type of social criminal, maintaining that prostitutes are "naturally depraved and irredeemable." Fern attributes much of the blame for prostitution on those members of society who perpetrate it by either refusing to help the victims or condone it by neglecting to ostracize irresponsible young men who often seduce these women.

Fern highlights the capacity for feminine violence in the article "Have We Any Men Among Us?" Upon reading an advertisement proclaiming "Men Wanted," she replies with, "Well, they have been 'wanted' for some time; but the article is not in the market, although there are plenty of spurious imitations." This articles operates on dual levels. First, the sketch offers vicarious, if vengeful, power through amusing anecdotes. Although most sentimental or domestic novels expressed their attempts to gain power covertly through their superior moral qualities such as complete submission, Fern openly

---

[100]Ibid., p. 306.

emasculated her targets, exemplified in her description of cowardly men who refused to defend their female relatives from slander:

> Time was, when milk-and-water husbands and relatives did not force a defamed woman to unsex herself in the manner stated in the following paragraph:
>
> 'MAN SHOT BY A YOUNG WOMAN,--One day last week, a young lady of good character, daughter of Col._____, having been calumniated by a young man, called upon him, armed with a revolver. The slanderer could not, or did not deny his allegations; whereupon she fired, inflicting a dangerous if not a fatal wound in his throat."
>
> Yes; it is very true that there are "MEN wanted." Wonder how many 1854 will furnish. (*Musical World and Times*, Sept. 24, 1853)[101]

Fern's readers may have enjoyed articles of this type because they opened a realm definitively closed to women who were not supposed to feel or show violent emotions, let alone violent behavior. However, the article also emphasizes that undesirable behavior on the part of women stems directly from the behavior of men. Further, many of her readers no doubt were aware that Fern often wrote from personal experiences, thereby engendering trust within her readers.[102]

Acutely aware of the limitations society imposed on feminine lifestyles, Fern subscribed to and advocated a pragmatic feminism. She emphasizes that the question of "female rights" was a "debatable

---

[101]Ibid., pp. 262-263.

[102]Fern herself suffered from slander. Samuel P. Farrington, Fern's second husband, damaged Fern's reputation by spreading rumors about her supposedly adulterous liaisons, although Farrington's own brother publicly denied the validity of any such rumors. Despite her quiet, secluded lifestyle, the public perpetuated the rumors, scandalized at Fern's presumptuous behavior in leaving her husband. Fern's own family, particularly her brother Nathaniel P. Willis and her father, not only refused to help her economically, they also contributed to the already rampant slander. Fern, being a woman, possessed no legal recourse; she could not prevent the slander, nor could she bring charges against Farrington for physical or verbal abuse. For more, see Warren, Joyce: *Fanny Fern, An Independent Woman*, and Fanny Fern, *Rose Clark* (New York: Mason Brothers).

ground; what you may call a vexed question." Fern then tells her readers that demanding "rights" would only threaten male dominance, thereby tempting men to tighten restrictions on women:

> In the next place (just put your ear down, a *little* nearer), granted we *had* "rights," the more we "demand," the *more we shan't get 'em.* I've been converted to that faith this some time. No sort of use to waste lungs and leather trotting to *Sigh*-racuse about it. The instant the subject is mentioned, the lords of creation are up and dressed; guns and bayonets the order of the day; *no surrender* on every flag that floats! (*Olive Branch*, Dec. 1852)[103]

Fern refers to the third National Woman's Right Convention held in Syracuse, New York, in 1852. Although she personally applauded the heroism of the women who fought for women's suffrage, she knew that the fight for suffrage strikes at the reins of power still firmly held by men. Women had little leverage to force men into acquiescing to feminine demands. She knew the immediate hopes of obtaining the vote for women remained slim, and therefore opted for a course of action which would net more expedient results.

Her writing reflects a pluralistic agenda in obtaining practical gains for women. The first important goal encompasses attracting a large audience which she does by deliberately utilizing mediums of writing designed to entertain. The second step towards more equitable feminine treatment is fostering a sense of group consciousness which underlines feminine shared bonds as subordinated members of society. She wrote of her desires to break out of the prescribed feminine role in the *New York Ledger*: "I want to do such a quantity of "improper" things, that there is not the slightest harm in doing. I want to see and know a thousand things

---

[103]Fern, Fanny. *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*. p. 243.

which are forbidden to flounces--custom only can tell why--I can't." (*New York Ledger*, July 10, 1858).[104] The third goal Fern evinces manifests itself in the drive to educate her readers. She teaches her readers to both anticipate masculine opposition and offers viable avenues of change through practical advice: "The only way left is to pursue the "Uriah Heep" policy; look *'umble*, and be almighty cunning. Bait 'em with submission, and then throw the noose over the will. Appear not to have any choice, and as sure as gospel you'll get it. Ask *their* advice, and they" be sure to follow *yours*. Look *one* way, and *pull another*! Make your reins of silk, *keep out of sight, and drive where you like*!"[105]

Although Fern's advice might sound suspiciously like the methods of the women who espoused the cult of true womanhood in advocating submission and deference, some crucial distinctions must be made between two.[106] Whereas some women reformers and writers advocated complete submission in order to gain power and recognition, Fern suggested "baiting" men with humility. The cult of true womanhood sought to bring the outside world into the home where the wife and mother exercised moral hegemony, whereas Fern sought to disarm men in order to get out of the home. While her advice could potentially help some women in gaining a measure of practical freedom, she nevertheless remained aware of its limitations in physically abusive marriages.

---

[104]Warren, *Fanny Fern, An Independent Woman*, p. 185.

[105]Ibid., p. 243.

[106]Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, pp. 81-85. Tompkins states that "by ceding themselves to the source of all power, they bypass worldly male authority, and as it were, cancel it out.

In speaking out for victims of physical or sexual abuse, Fern spoke directly to her readers in a manner completely devoid of wit. She offered more than sympathy for these women, she also firmly advocated definitive action by these women to better their lives. "A Word On The Other Side" advises wives to leave brutal husbands, imparting a radical message to women in the 1850's:

> What I say is this: in such cases, let a woman who *has the self-sustaining power* quietly take her fate in her own hands, and right herself. Of course she will be misjudged and abused. *It is for her to choose whether she can better bear this at hands from which she has a rightful claim for love and protection, or from a ninedays-wonder-loving public.* These are bold words; but they are needed words--words whose full import I have well considered, and from the responsibility of which I do not shrink. (*New York Ledger*, Oct. 24, 1857).[107]

Laws failed to protect women from abusive marriages. Further, the militant stance for feminine rights at this time could offer no protection for abused wives, and women who viewed submission to male dominance as a representation of their moral superiority actually left themselves vulnerable to potentially abusive situations. Fern, on the other hand, bypassed male authority. If a woman found herself in an abusive marriage, she should remove herself from the repressive influence. Although many women might have found the obstacles created by such a radical action seemingly insurmountable, Fern emphasized that it is for a woman to decide if she wants to bear abuse from a "*nine-days-wonder-loving public*" or from the her husband from whom "*she has a rightful claim for love and protection.*"[108] Fern blazed a path of independence in leaving an abusive husband, and set a positive example for those women who

---

[107]Fern, Ruth Hall and Other Writings, p. 294.
[108]Ibid., p. 294.

found themselves locked into degradation and abuse that the law did nothing to prevent.

Fern believed that women should pursue careers and economic independence despite the cost of public censure. Fern's article "Mrs. Adolphus Smith Sporting The Blue Stocking" humorously reflects the difficulties that middle-class feminine writers might encounter in juggling careers and families:

> *WELL*, I think I'll finish that story for the editor of the "Dutchman." Let me see; where did I leave off? The setting sun was just gilding with his last ray--"Ma, I want some bread and molasses"--(yes, dear,) gilding with his last ray the church spire--"Wife, where's my Sunday pants?" (*Under the bed, dear*,) the church spire of Inverness, when a--"There's nothing under the bed, dear, but your lace cap"--(Perhaps they are in the coal hod in the closet,) when a horseman was seen approaching--"Ma'am, the *pertators* is out; not one for dinner"--(Take some turnips,) approaching, covered with dust, and--"Wife! the baby has swallowed a button"--(*Reverse* him, dear--take him by the heels,) and waving in his hand a banner, on which was written--"Ma! I've torn my pantaloons"--liberty or death! The inhabitants rushed *en masse*--"Wife! WILL you leave off scribbling? (Don't be disagreeable, Smith, I'm just getting inspired,) to the public square, where De Begnis, who had been secretly--"Butcher wants to see you, ma'am"--secretly informed of the traitors'--"Forgot *which* you said, ma'am, sausages or mutton chop"--movements, gave orders to fire; not less than twenty--"My gracious! Smith, you haven't been *reversing* that child all this time; he's as black as you coat; and that boy of YOURS has torn up the first sheet of my manuscript. There! it's no use for a married woman to cultivate her intellect.--Smith, hand me those twins. (*Fern Leaves, Second Series*, 1854)[109].

This article obviously appealed for middle-class women. Fern describes interactions with servants that working class women would not have had, and further, working class women would most probably would have even less time for "scribbling", even if they had an education. While women writers faced a myriad of domestic problems in juggling a career and a family, they faced far worse

---

[109]Ibid., p. 265.

difficulties created by crossing the boundaries from the domestic sphere to the market place.

Fern set an example for women aspiring towards finding fulfillment outside the sanctioned institution of marriage. In attempting to earn a living, she found herself thrust into the brutal, capitalistic world of business. Several publishers initially took advantage of her by paying her far less than her articles were worth if measured by the increased circulation's rates of newspapers engendered by her articles. Her talents were further exploited by editors across the country who reprinted her articles without her permission and certainly without any remuneration. Fern knew that this type of larceny confirmed her talents and she boldly used the newspaper to address the thefts. In 1852, Fern responded to a male imitator, Harry Honeysuckle: "Did you know, my dear "Honeysuckle" that plants sometimes *choke* each other? You'll die of the *Fern-strangle* one of these days, if you don't leave off shooting round a corner at my "model" factory! Don't you suppose *every body else* sees them? and does any but the genuine coin ever get counterfeited, hey? Don't I appreciate the unintentional compliment? "Steal my thunder?" They can't do it, Harry. It has "my mark" on it. Every body sees the theft." (*Olive Branch*, Oct. 16, 1852)[110]

Fern became particularly adept at operating in a capitalistic society. Further, she set an example for other women writers to guard their business interests. After becoming a successful columnist, the firm of Derby and Miller in New York approached Fern about publishing a collection of her articles. In 1853, James Cephas

---

[110]Warren, *Fanny Fern, An Independent Woman*, p. 113.

Derby offered Fern the sum of one thousand dollars or ten cents on each copy sold.[111] Although Fern, destitute at the time, needed the money to support her children, she refused to give in to the motherly urge which demanded a capitulation of the copyright. She astutely perceived that the book would be successful; *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio* sold over 70,000 copies in the first few months.[112] Fern assisted other women writers in their careers through her business-like refusal to release the copyrights of her publications. While Fern's defiance made her life as an artist difficult, she refused to succumb to hardship. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in the suffragette paper *The Una*, wrote: "The great lesson taught in *Ruth Hall* is that God has given to woman sufficient brain and muscle to work out her own destiny unaided and alone."[113]

Although Fern identified with the demands continually placed on middle-class women in maintaining a household, and understood the emotional and intellectual oppression facing upper-class women in their restricted lifestyles, she also sympathized with the different, yet equally restraining, problems that faced working-class women. "The Working-Girls Of New York" describes the harsh economic trap these girls find themselves in as a result of their desire to pursue work outside the home.[114] The article also clearly underlines the pervasiveness of masculine hegemony that cuts across class lines: "Jostling on the same pavement with the dainty fashionist is the

---

[111]Ibid., p. 108.
[112]Ibid., p. 109.
[113]Ibid., p. 140.
[114]Fern, *Folly As It Flies; Hit At By Fanny Fern*, p. 219.

care-worn working girl. Looking at both these women, the question arises, which lives the more miserable life--she whom the world styles "fortunate," whose husband belongs to three clubs, and whose only meal with his family is an occasional breakfast, from year's end to years end; who is as much a stranger to his own children as to the reader;...Or she--this other woman--with a heart quite as hungry and unappeased, who also faces day by day the same appalling question: Is this all life has for me?"[115] Fern astutely observes that the woman trapped in a marriage for economic reasons might be just as chained by lack of autonomy as the working girl who often fruitlessly sought a better life. Fern wants her feminine readers to identify and commiserate with each other, whether these readers are members of the working-class or elite society. She hopes to offer comfort to working-class women, while fostering an understanding of the working-girls plight in the elite reader, thereby cementing an alliance between all classes of women.

Fern's articles, in their compelling portraitures of ordinary American lives, challenged traditional gender roles. Unfortunately, the scope of Fern's goals in challenging gender roles has not been fully appreciated. David Reynolds, in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, asserts that "conscious manipulation of attitudes and gender roles is sought by Parton for its own sake," and that she suggests through her writing that "woman's highest power is the ability to manipulate others while eluding definition, and that the highest manipulative act is that of flexible writing."[116] Fern's

---

[115]Ibid., p. 219.

[116]David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 403.

articles describe conditions which inhibit or prevent feminine self-definition. While Fern's feminism, for example, advocates the "Uriah Heep" policy in manipulating socially constructed attitudes, her advice reflects the need to circumvent masculine oppression to facilitate a feminine individualism. Fern's flexible writing in her descriptive and revealing portraits depict individuals and their problems from all stratas of American society. The snapshots of life presented in the articles of the New York Ledger define democratic artistry by validating the needs and worth of the everyday people in American society.

Chapter III

> *Take* your rights, my sisters; don't beg for them! Never mind what objectors say or think. Success will soon stop their mouths. Nothing like that to conquer prejudice and narrowness and ill-will. (Fanny Fern, *New York Ledger*, July 16, 1870.)

Ruth Hall represents a literary text of enormous artistic creativity. Fern uses literary art in a democratic society as a forum for disseminating the views of the people, listening to and often sorting through their needs and goals. Literary art also operates as a means of satisfying alternatives needs for self-definition. These aims necessitate an assessment of societal inequities and their root causes in offering reconstructive strategies. Finally, writing provides Fern with the opportunity to assert her own artistic individualism. Essentially, *Ruth Hall* operates as a unique literary text which synthesizes Fern's own goals and her readers needs in a manner which attempts to offer solutions to cultural problems.

In *Ruth Hall*, Fern extends the hitherto masculine perogative of individualism in the market place to women in their search for self-definition; if one is consumed by economic deprivation, one is unable to define themselves and his or her resultant role in society.[117] The issues which inhibit a feminine self-reliance, sketched in the

---

[117]Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 140. Brown identifies that Fern's *Ruth Hall* "discloses the economic and social insecurity of domestic individualism for women and advocates that women should pursue individualistic interests outside of the home."

individual portraitures of Fern's articles, become grafted together in *Ruth Hall*, articulating a radical re-envisioning of women's roles. The means by which Fern believes women can potentially effect such a transformation reflect both radical subversiveness and creative resourcefulness on her part. The issue of family is central in *Ruth Hall* as is the issue of female individualism and self-sufficiency, not only in establishing the right to enter the commercial realm, but also through a woman's active choice in doing so. Fern fuses these issues together through the theme of motherhood: Motherhood becomes not the barrier to the marketplace, but rather, the foundation of a moral capitalism.

In order to reach an audience with her radical re-envisionment of women's roles, Fern must employ flexible writing strategies in reaching a large audience. In her writing, she exposes the shams inherent in a hypocritical society and highlights both the unfair constraints with which society binds women and the potentially harmful social ramifications which these constraints cause. The goals of her strategies, however, reach for far larger end results than mere exposure of societal inequities or manipulation of gender-roles. Fern employs a myriad of techniques and strategies not merely for the pleasures of manipulation; but rather she manipulates conventions to make feminine gains. She seeks to extend the privileges of a democracy to women and in order to do this, she must first reach a large audience and educate the audience. As discussed earlier, Fern's choice in utilizing the newspaper reflects her intent to garner a mass audience. Fern's exploitation of the novel as a popular means of rhetorical entertainment also represents her intent of procuring an

exceptionally large audience. Her primary intent, however, is not to entertain, but to educate and present a restructuring of society. Fern openly states in her preface that *Ruth Hall* should not be read as a novel; she merely uses the form to attract a large audience: "I present you with my first continuous story. I do not dignify it by the name of "A novel"...Still, I cherish the hope that, somewhere in the length and breadth of the land, it may fan into a flame, in some tried heart, the fading embers of hope, well-nigh extinguished by wintry fortune and summer friends."[118]

Fern employs dual narrative voices in *Ruth Hall* in depicting a deeply feminine heroine while leading this heroine on a journey towards independence. She uses a sentimental voice to describe and address Ruth at the beginning of the novel. This voice has several functions. The sentimental voice operates as a descriptive instrument depicting Ruth's helplessness as a young woman. Fern also exploits the sentimental voice to disguise her primary goal of espousing Ruth's journey towards self-assertion and power. In this way, Fern alleviates cultural tensions by creating a domestic atmosphere and feminine author that her Victorian audience can identify with. Fern's association of Ruth with flowers appeals to an audience's constructed perceptions of womanhood: "by associating Ruth with flowers and piety Fern creates a protagonist her readers will recognize as deeply feminine, a woman who feels as a woman should feel, and who therefore qualifies as a heroine the general

---

[118]Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, p. 3.

culture can accept."[119] In this way, Fern uses the same strategy that she frequently employs in her articles. She manipulates middle-class ideas of womanhood to draw in a specific (middle-class) audience.

After she has lured in an audience, Fern then uses sentimental language to attack her society's idealized version of femininity. As Susan Harris's *19th-Century American Women's Novels* points out, "in exploiting and subverting a rhetorical mode not only closely associated with women's writing but also commonly held to be reflective of woman's nature itself, Fern was actively challenging the prevailing nineteenth-century view of the ideal woman."[120] Many nineteenth-century women writers used the novel to uphold the socially sanctioned image of the true woman. Barbara Welter describes the attributes of the true woman as "divided into four cardinal virtues--piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."[121] *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner exemplfies this trend. Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs* describes Warner as using submission as a means of increasing feminine power: "submission is first of all a self-willed act of conquest of one's own passions," one that is solely a woman's perogative. Further, the act of doing God's will, through "ceding themselves to the source of all power, they bypass worldly (male) authority and, as it were, cancel it out."[122] Despite the limited gains such ideology offered middle or upper-class

---

[119]Harris, *19th Century Women's Novels*, p. 113.

[120]Ibid., p. 112-113. For more, see Chapter 4; "Inscribing and Defining the Many Voices of Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall.*"

[121]Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* , 18, (1966). pp. 151-174. p. 152.

[122]Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, p. 162-163.

women, as Fern points out in her articles, the ideology of true womanhood perpetuated class conflict rather than fostered a universal sisterhood.

The use of one's own voice represents a crucial first step towards self-definition, and Fern also uses the sentimental narrative voice to highlight her protaganist's muteness. Ruth's attitude during the early, discordant days of her marriage provides an example of her passive voicelessness, precipitating the narrator's intervention:

> Still, Ruth kept her wise little mouth shut; moving, amid these discordant elements, as if she were deaf, dumb, and blind.
>
> Oh, love! that thy silken reins could so curb the spirit and bridle the tongue, that thy uplifted finger of warning could calm that bounding pulse, still that throbbing heart, and send those rebellious tears, unnoticed, back to their source.
>
> Ah! could we lay bare the secret history of many a wife's heart, what martyrs would be found, over whose uncomplaining lips the grave sets it unbroken seal of silence. [123]

Ruth, powerless to change her situation, can only resort to tears as a means of emotional release. Silently enduring mistreatment from her in-laws and servants, she represents the type of sentimental heroine commonly found in nineteenth-century domestic literature. The sentimental language, depicting a helpless, victimized protagonist, reflects Fern's own scathing critique on not only the plight of such victims, but also the conventional portrayal of women through literature.

Fern juxtaposes the sentimental voice with a cynical one, and as Ruth matures into an assertive mature woman, the narrative sentimental voice intercedes less often. Indeed, Ruth having found her voice, speaks more often, replacing the narrator. As Ruth

---

[123]Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*. p. 23. Hereafter cites for *Ruth Hall* will appear in text.

confronts the harsh reality of her economic plight, thereby conquering both the internal problems of her own emotional state and the external forces in the business world, the narrative voice becomes abbreviated, business-like and forceful, reflecting a new, not easily intimidated woman.

Fern carries this strategy of using dual voices to undermine conventions into her use of nature, always marking pastoral descriptions with some hint of darkness. Just as Fern undercuts the sentimental voice with the cynical one, so she juxtaposes the life-giving qualities of nature with reminders of death. Fern's luxurious descriptions of nature reflect her intent of dispelling any false sense of security the reader might have, exemplified in the following passage describing the woods and fields where Ruth and Daisy "love to linger":

> ...where the pretty clematis threw the graceful arms of youth 'round the gnarled trunk of decay; where the bearded grain swaying to and fro, tempted to its death the reaper; where the red and white clover dotted the meadow grass; or where, in the damp marsh, the whip-poor-will moaned and the crimson lobelia nodded its regal crown; or where the valley smiled in its beauty 'neath the lofty hills, nestling 'mid its foliage the snow-white cottages; or where the cattle dozed under the broad, green branches, or bent to the glassy lake to drink; or where, on the breezy hill-tops, the voices of childhood's came up, sweet and clear, as the far-off hymning of angels,--there, Ruth and her soul's child loved to linger. (30).

This passage evokes images of purity with its descriptions of the graceful arms of youth, the lofty hills, and the snow-white cottages. Fern essentially paints a scene of heaven on earth, complete with saintly children and singing angels. Fern herself places no faith in finding such a haven, however, and she deliberately, if subtly, distorts the peaceful image with buried harshness. Fern juxtaposes

the image of youth's gracefulness with the image of decay. She describes the peaceful sway of the "bearded grain" only to remind the reader of its imminent death by the reaper. While the angels sing hymns, the whip-poor-will moans. Fern definitively places a serpent in her Eden. She aligns descriptions of society with these pastoral scenes, seemingly warning the readers to be wary of deceptive appearances.

After each death in the novel, Fern, as the sentimental narrator, intercedes with descriptions that mar the beauty of nature with tragedy. Just as Harry and Ruth find contentment after their daughter Daisy dies, Fern undercuts the possibilities for peace and happiness in description of nature ostensibly reflecting the fullness of their married life. Harry and Ruth linger in the countryside, enjoying the beauty in "the circling leaves, that came eddying down in brilliant showers on the Indian summer's soft but treacherous breath." (52). However, Fern implies that one cannot and must not be naively trusting. Just as nature in all its beauty remains inexorable and indifferent to sorrow, so the deceptively glittering human society often turns away indifferent to the plight of less fortunate persons. Just as Ruth finds happiness, this passage foreshadows larger tragedy yet to come.

Harry, of course, also dies, leaving Ruth and her two daughters penniless. Equally expected, neither Harry's parents, nor Ruth's family offer much in the way of financial help or even emotional support. After Harry's death, Fern herself relentlessly intercedes with another narrative commentary:

> Oh, Earth! Earth! with thy mocking skies of blue, thy placid silver streams, thy myriad, memory-haunting odorous flowers, thy wheels of triumph rolling--rolling on, over bleeding hearts and prostrate forms--maimed, tortured, crushed, yet not destroyed. Oh, mocking Earth! snatching from our frenzied grasp the life-long coveted treasure! Most treacherous Earth! are these thy unkept promises? (64).

Nature's beauty, similar to the beauty Ruth finds in her marriage, remains unreliable and unpredictable. Death, an inexorable part of nature, destroys the illusory peace Ruth had found in her refuge with Harry. Just as the blue skies and fragrant flowers haunt Ruth in her grief, so society taunts her in her despair. Fern, in asking why nature cruelly refuses to honor promises of happiness, highlights the cruelty of an indifferent society turning their backs on an impoverished, grieving widow with two young daughters. These descriptions reflect Fern's intent to awaken and educate her audience to naiveté which prohibits feminine self-reliance.

Fern particularly warns her feminine readers to beware of so-called natural options for women. Marriage, the primary option for women offers little protection and fulfillment. Ruth finds marriage easily in the devoted guise of Harry Hall. While most sentimental novels culminate in marriage, *Ruth Hall* begins with the union of Ruth and Harry. Fern, however, refuses to allow her readers to rejoice easily in Ruth's impending marriage. Ruth, on her bridal eve, questions the "dim, uncertain future." (17). Even as Ruth yearns for an "ark of refuge," she feels fear. Fern, as the sentimental narrative voice, expresses her own reservations towards the future: "Tears, Ruth? Have phantom shapes of terror glided before those gentle prophet eyes? Has death's dark wing even now fanned those girlish temples?" (17). Fern describes Ruth's eyes as "prophet eyes"

insinuating that Ruth somehow has the ability to peer into the future, giving Ruth's fears credence. Fern already implicitly questions the validity of marriage as a haven for young women, insinuating through the sentimental voice that the "ark of refuge" is unreliable.

Ruth marries Harry Hall, and at first, enjoys a sort of independence, a "new freedom" in "being one's own mistress." (18). However, Fern crushes Ruth's illusions of her newly found independence rather quickly. Ruth, as a newly married wife, finds herself as economically dependent on others as she was before her marriage. The freedom she hoped to find with Harry turns into an unceasing effort on her part to bury her own desires. Harry seems oblivious to her pain: "he little dreamed of the self-conquest she had so tearfully achieved for his sake."(21). Ruth, constrained by prying and ruthlessly critical in-laws, fails to realize the potential fulfillment that she hoped to find in marriage.

Fern also displays mistrust of idealized views of motherhood. She refuses to view children as the sole means of providing emotional fulfillment for a woman. Reformers, politicians, and ministers alike placed an inordinate amount of emphasis on the child as a means of preserving a virtuous republic in the nineteenth-century. Many women saw their roles as child nurturers and teachers as a means of indirectly exercising power. Since the woman carried the burden of raising sons to be virtuous citizens, she vicariously participated in the maintenance of preserving democracy in America[124]. Many women, in emphasizing their roles as child

---

[124]A mass of literature flooded America from the 1830's addressing the problems of child-rearing and education. Catharine Beecher, Lydia Maria Child, And Almira Phelps are a few of the many reformers who attempted to

nurturers, ceased attempting to fulfill their own emotional and physical needs. Further, many female writers placed an inordinate amount of emphasis on women's exalted roles as mothers and the saintliness of children.

Fern exploits these commonly held nineteenth-century views to introduce Ruth to motherhood, using sentimental and idealistic language to describe the scene to the reader:

> Hark! to that tiny wail! Ruth knows that most blessed of all hours. Ruth is a *mother*! Joy to thee, Ruth! Another outlet for thy womanly heart; a mirror, in which thy smile and tears shall be reflected back; a fair page, on which thou, God-commissioned, mayst write what thou wilt; a heart that will throb back to thine, love for love. (24).

Fern presents the reader with the traditional and acceptable model of a mother with a "womanly heart." Women, conceived of by society as mothers, valued for their nurturing qualities, often find themselves recognized only in their roles as mothers. The reader must remember, however, that Fern uses this sentimental language to describe a dependent, silent and impotent Ruth, reflecting the imprisonment of many women in the nineteenth-century. Futher, this emphasis on woman's exalted motherhood and child-like saintliness precluded an understanding of working class women's dilemmas. Just as Fern's own children became a financial burden in her poverty-stricken years, Ruth's children later become another link in her feminine bondage. Although Ruth loves her children, her

---

resolve the contradictory desires to abolish old agencies of social control while consolidating new ties of social obligation and economic interdependence to preserve a virtuous democracy in America. Many of these reformers resolved this contradiction through the creation of a child rearing philosophy emphasizing character formation. By 1860, character formation dominated moral teachings in America, and women assumed the role of moral teacher. For more see: Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher*; A Study in Domesticity (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976).

initial inability to provide adequate care causes great emotional suffering.

Fern immediately dispels any sentimental images of sainted motherhood that the reader might have accrued. Fern, always a realist, unhesitatingly juxtaposes this vision with a more revealing scene, one which hints at the burdens mothers cope with: "But Ruth thinks not of all this now, as she lies pale and motionless upon the pillow, while Harry's grateful tears bedew his first-born's face. She cannot even welcome the little stranger."(24) Ruth finds her "most blessed of all hours" exhausting and painful. Fern relentlessly forces on the reader a glimpse of a mother, too tired to hold her child, looking more dead than alive.

Further, although Fern portrays Harry as a tender, grateful husband, she implicitly condemns the societal attitudes which value a woman's role as a mother more than the woman herself. "Harry thought her dear to him before; but now, as she lies there, so like death's counterpart, a whole life of devotion would seem too little to prove his appreciation of all her sacrifices."(24) Harry, although he loved Ruth before she gave birth to Daisy, feels even more devotion towards her through his gratitude that she made him a father.

Fern renders an explicit message to both Ruth and the reader, warning both of the personally dangerous consequences of living solely for another:

> Ah, Ruth! gaze not so dotingly on those earnest eyes. Know'st thou not,
>
> > The rose that sweetest doth awake,
> > Will soonest go to rest? (30).

Mothers who place their hearts solely within their children, neglecting their own needs and their own identities, are often destroyed by their consuming love. Ruth's daughter Daisy dies, and she finds herself overwhelmed by grief.

After Harry's death, Ruth's two children become not only the point of contention for family disputes, but also the cause of economic deprivation. Ruth cannot take care of her children, and yet she cannot bring herself to give them up. While Harry's parents and Ruth's father clearly "wash their hand of her,"(66) the Halls express their desire to take Ruth's children. Ruth collapses after the funeral, while "the frightened children huddle breathless in the farther corner."(67) Fern says that Ruth's "bitter cup was not yet drained," (67) for she has no knowledge of the Hall's scheme. Ruth's father informs her that the Halls most generously offered to take both children and support them(68)

The fear of losing her children pushes Ruth to stand on her own: "I can never part with my children," replied Ruth, in a voice which, though low, was perfectly clear and distinct.(68) Fern points to this as a first, though somewhat faltering step towards independence, through both the overt action of Ruth standing up to her father, and less directly through her brief, concise use of language. However, Ruth still has a long journey towards self-support and her confrontation with her father once again renders her impotent. Ultimately, Ruth can only reply to her father with tears. She asks for his pity, and receiving none, finds herself unable to take any decisive action.

> It was sight to move the stoutest heart to see Ruth that night, kneeling by the side of those sleeping children, with upturned eyes, and clasped hands of entreaty, and lips from which no sound issued, though her heart was quivering with agony; and yet a pitying Eye looked down upon those orphaned sleepers, a pitying Ear bent low to list to the widow's voiceless prayer. (69)

Although Ruth's fear of losing her children pushes her towards self-assertion, she is still passive, still mute, and dependent on those who will not help her.

At this point, the children become the catalyst for Ruth's transformed goals. They provide her with the motivation to assert herself and pursue self-sufficiency through the marketplace. The final rejection of Ruth by her family sparks her decision to live. Her decision to write newspaper articles for wages provides a literal and figurative representation of survival. Through her writing, Ruth finds her voice, and thus takes control over her own life. The wages she earns ultimately provide her with the means of economic freedom. Ruth asks her brother, Hyacinth, a prosperous editor of the Irving Magazine, to help her begin a literary career. Instead, he writes that she should seek some other "unobtrusive" form of employment. Fern describes the "bitter smile" that "struggled with the hot tear that fell upon Ruth's cheek." (116) The bitter smile won out over the useless tears this time, and Ruth finds the resolve to stand up to the odds stacked against a woman in the nineteenth-century. Her words reflect her resolve: "No talent!" "At another tribunal than his will I appeal."

> But they shall be heard of;" and Ruth leaped to her feet. "Sooner that he dreams of too. I *can* do it, I *feel* it, I *will* do it," and she closed her lips firmly; "but there will be a desperate struggle first," and she clasped her hands over her heart as if it had already commenced;...*Pride* must sleep! but--" and Ruth glanced at

> her children--"it shall be *done*. They shall be proud of their mother. (116)

Katy, Ruth's daughter, notices the sudden change in her; she notices her uncharacteristic animation and energy. Ruth tells her daughter that she will remember this day when she becomes a woman. Ruth has become a woman and in doing so, provides a positive example for her daughters. However, Fern has revised the model of womanhood from submissiveness to aggressiveness. Ruth finds her voice, and Fern, from this point on in the novel, speaks for Ruth less and less. Further, Fern's use of sentimental language diminishes. Ruth speaks out for herself, and in a strong and abbreviated manner. This incident exemplifies Fern's transformed definition of motherhood. Mothers who act aggressively and assertively in their pursuit of economic independence provide positive examples for their daughters.

Ruth, in order to attain the economic independence she desires and needs, thrusts herself into a male dominated business world. After many rejections, she finds a small newspaper, The Standard, willing to print her articles. She wonders whether the future will be brighter, and as she thinks of her children, "said again with a strong heart--*it will.*" (121) Ruth refuses to let herself slide back into despondency; she keeps her thoughts firmly on the tasks ahead and her will strong enough to pursue the work. Ruth intends to "earn that crust" of bread for her children. Ruth finally finds the determination to earn autonomy; her children provide the motivation for her struggle. Ruth's determination reflects Fern's message that identity and autonomy are not freely handed out to all; one must actively work to obtain a state of self-reliance. Further, self-reliance

and individualism operate hand in hand; although women lead restricted lives, autonomy can be earned. Women must not, however, wait for others to act, but should actively pursue personal goals.

Fern, through Ruth, demonstrates that women innately possess the qualities necessary for successful capitalistic enterprise. Although Ruth "was a novice in business-matters, she has strong common sense," (131-132) and this common sense enables Ruth to succeed as a writer and as a business woman. One editor, Mr. Tibbetts, shrewdly knowing her worth as a writer, attempts to coerce her into writing exclusively for his paper, or writing under another name. Ruth, just as shrewdly, rejects his offer:

> "With regard to your first proposal," said Ruth, "if I have gained any reputation by my first efforts, it appears to me that I should be foolish to throw it away by the adoption of another signature; and with regard to the last, I have no objection to writing exclusively for you, if you will make it worth my while." (132)

Ruth refuses Mr. Tibbetts exclusive offer, and agrees to furnish the paper with two articles a week under the same name that she uses in writing for *The Standard*. The episode exemplifies Ruth's ability to cope with the aggressive pressures of the business world.

Women also possess the aggressiveness needed to survive in the competitive business world. But, unlike their male counterparts, mothers find the motivation to succeed through their desires to help others, namely their children. Ruth finds her ability as a business woman tested when her publisher offers her eight hundred dollars outright or a percentage on the copyright. She wants to have her daughter, who is currently residing with the Halls, returned to her.

Without the immediate financial means to bring Katy home, accepting the percentage would necessitate separation from her daughter for a longer period of time. Although desiring the quickest resolution to her financial difficulties for her children's sake, Ruth refuses to give in the motherly urge which would demand a capitulation of the copyright. By putting her desires for immediate gratification aside, Ruth provides long term economic stability for her children. Further, in retaining the copyright, Ruth not only displays an astute business acumen, she begins to assert herself in an unwomanly manner. Fern extends the business feminine individualism by entering the masculine dominated marketplace. Further, as this episode describes her own personal experiences as a woman writer facing sexual bias and unfairness in the marketplace, she begins to revise the notion of artistic genius by making the private feminine realm public. In this way, she extends the definition of artistic individualism for women writers by writing in an unfeminine manner about unwomanly subjects through the publification of her personal life.

Ruth shrewdly perceives that she could make more money in the long run by retaining the copyright, and at the same time, she expresses the very unfeminine desire to prevent her money from lining publisher's pockets: "$800 *copyright money*! it was a temptation; but supposing her book should prove a hit? and bring double, treble, fourfold that sum, to go into her publisher's pockets instead of hers? how provoking!" (153) This self-assertion represents a new behavior for a sentimental heroine. Most sentimental protagonists never indulge in assertive behavior,

particularly if this behavior contains even a hint of self-interestedness.

> No, I will not sell my copyright; I will rather deny myself a while longer, and accept the per-centage;" and so she sat down and wrote her publishers; but then caution whispered, what if her book should *not* sell? "Oh, pshaw," said Ruth, "it *shall*!" and she brought her little fist down on the table till the old stone inkstand seemed to rattle. out "it *shall*!" (153)

Ruth has become a different woman. The passive, helpless Ruth resorted to tears. The new, assertive Ruth forcefully slams her fist down on the table.

Finally, Fern leaves no doubt in the minds of her readers that marriage is not a viable solution for security. Ruth receives many proposals of marriage through her fan letters, all offering to provide financial security. Ruth waves off all of these offers with indifference at the least, and sometimes with contempt. She tosses one letter offering marriage to Nettie to play with saying "Oh, pshaw!"..."Make anything you like of it, pussy; it is of no value to me." (181) At one point, Ruth, dreaming of her husband, appears to fall back into idealizing the marital union:

> She dreams that she roves with them through lovely gardens, odorous with sweets; she plucks for their parched lips the luscious fruits; she garlands them with flowers, and smiles in her sleep, as their beaming eyes sparkle, and the rosy flush of happiness mantles their cheeks. but look! there are three of them! Another has joined the band--a little shadowy form, with lambent eyes, and the smile of a seraph. Blessed little trio. Follows another! He has the same shadowy outline--the same sweet holy, yet familiar eyes. Ruth's face grows radiant. The broken links are gathered up; the family circle is complete! (198)

Fern, once again uses the sentimental language and the flowery descriptions of nature to signal a fall back into feminine dependency, emphasizing the unreliability for survival created by this dependency. She refuses to allow either Ruth or her reader to

wallow in sentimental visions; Fern shocks both Ruth and the reader awake with the sudden cry of "fire!" (198) Ruth, dreaming of her completed family circle, finds herself and her family suddenly threatened with death.

The end of *Ruth Hall* completely rewrites feminine individualism. Ruth rejects numerous marriage proposals for which she has no financial need, having earned ten thousand dollars in bank stocks through her own hard work and talent. Yet, as the numerous marriage proposals show, Ruth retains her desirability as a woman. To highlight this, Fern portrays Ruth as the only likable female character in the novel. Two other characters, Mrs. Skiddy and Mary Leon, exemplify the destructive paths that women's lives often take as a result of societal morays which inhibit or prevent a feminine self-reliance. Through these characters, Fern delineates the damaging reverberations of feminine dependency within society.

Mrs. Skiddy, a no-nonsense boarding housekeeper, manages to obtain economic independence, but Fern leaves no doubt in her readers minds that Mrs. Skiddy fails to provide a positive example of womanhood. While her business provides for the family, Mrs. Skiddy sees her role as a provider as a means of controlling her husband. Tired of her husband's incessant threats of deserting her for the freedom of gold-digging in California, Mrs. Skiddy simply leaves her husband to care for their infant and run the boarding house. Needless to say, the situation presents Mr. Skiddy with many difficulties: "the premeditated malice of Mrs. Skiddy in leaving the baby, instead of Sammy or Johnny, was beyond question. Still, he could not believe that her desire for revenge would outweigh all her

maternal feelings." (94) Ultimately Mr. Skiddy manages to reach California, and after his luck runs out, he begs his wife for return passage fare. He wants to come home. Fern unambiguously leaves Mrs. Skiddy with the power in their household:

> Mrs. Skiddy's picture should have been taken at that moment! My pen fails! Drawing from her pocket a purse well filled with her own honest earning, she chinked its contents at some phantom shape discernible to her eyes alone; while through her set teeth hissed out, like ten thousand serpents, the word
> "N-e-v-e-r!" (108-109)

Significantly, Fern uses no sentimental language in describing the down-to-earth and independent Mrs. Skiddy. Instead, Fern paints this woman as hardened by her desire to control her husband. By presenting role reversals in the Skiddy household, Fern demonstrates that desirable and undesirable behaviors indiscriminately characterize both sexes. In her unceasing struggle to overcome economic deprivation, Mrs. Skiddy fails to act as a positive force in the domestic arena.

The beautiful Mary Leon depicts an example of the opposite extreme; a dutiful, submissive wife destroyed by her husband. As Ruth and Mary become friends, Mary reveals the depths of despair her marriage causes:

> Oh, Ruth!" and the tears streamed through her jeweled fingers--"love me--pity me; you who are so blessed. I too *could* love; that is the drop of poison in my cup. When *your* daughters stand at the altar, Ruth, never compel them to say words to which the heart yields no response. The chain is none the less galling because its links are golden. (52)

This passage intimates the dangers women potentially face in marriage. Mary's fate bears out the veracity of this admonition; Mary's husband tires of her and leaves her to die, alone and unwanted in an insane asylum. Women like Mary Leon cannot

adequately fulfill the duties of motherhood, and consequently, cannot act as a role model in raising children. In this case, feminine dependence ultimately collectively damages society.

Fern's *Ruth Hall* differs from other sentimental fiction not only in advocating complete financial autonomy for women, but in the scope of power women exert over men. Fern's heroine obtains financial independence and achieves this independence by succeeding in a male dominated business world, often getting the better of businessmen. Fern's snapshots of stratefied classes, grafted with her own personal experiences of deprivation, come together to create a novel which revises the notion of artistic genius. Her book sales attest to a popularity which not only speaks from, but also to, a diverse audience of readers. She performs a useful service by not only contributing to the democratization of literature, but also by potentially offering democracy to all through a re-envisionment of power structures in American society in a fictional venue.

CONCLUSION

> On they go. On, how much of joy--how much of sorrow, in each heart's unwritten history. (Fanny Fern, "Steamboat Sights and Reflections," *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series*, 1854.)

> I am weary of this hollow show and glitter--weary of fashion's stereotyped lay-figures--weary of smirking fops and brainless belles, exchanging their small coin of flattery and their endless genuflexions: let us go out of Broadway--somewhere, anywhere. turn round the wheel, Dame Fortune, and show up the other side. (Fanny Fern, "This Side and That," *Second Series*, 1854)

Some nineteenth-century writers used literary art to answer needs which were not met by the majority culture. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Oldtown Folks* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* numbered among the literary texts which sought, in some way, to re-configure society. These authors, in these texts, sought to satisfy subcultural needs for a revised definition of individualism. This revised definition of individualism operated on both social and artistic levels. While all three of these authors potentially offered avenues of self-definition to their audiences, they nevertheless were more concerned with increasing personal opportunities for more autonomy in carving out a definition of individualism which worked well for the *self*. Fern's scope of revision aimed at larger goals; she sought to extend autonomy on a broader level by creating a definition of individualism which crossed class and gender lines.

Fern's recognition of the often futile attempts by the voiceless in her society to stand for themselves directly anticipates the early realists preoccupation with social inequities fostered by a ruthless capitalism and their depiction of the failure of individualism in this context. The tension that Fern identifies between the morality of the private life and the competition within the public sphere was not new. Anne MacLeod emphasizes in *A Moral Tale* that "Americans of the period lived with the paradox that the virtues of selflessness, generosity, and cooperation such literature was meant to inculcate were at odds with much of the social and most of the economic behavior of the society: The material success so prized by Americans...was plainly the reward of activities different from the ideal behavior of a Christian. The drive for economic success encouraged ambition, aggression, and a competitive spirit."[125] The sense of confinement due to the enclosure within the domestic realm, and sense of exclusion due to unfair barriers to the business world, leads Fern to re-envision gender roles and literally recreate American society by changing the rules for participation. In this way, she directly anticipates Charlotte Perkins Gilman's response to glaring societal inequities in *Herland* (1915).

Herland, a utopian novel serialized in Gilman's monthly publication *The Forerunner*[126], re-evaluates gender roles and re-envisions social relationships through the creation of a society composed entirely of women and female children. The discovery of Herland by three male explorers provides Gilman with an avenue for

---

[125]Walker, *Fanny Fern*, pp. 84-85.

[126]Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland*, Edited with an introduction by Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), p. v.

her playful and humorous social commentary. Like Fern, Gilman uses the theme of motherhood to offer alternative possibilities to the crass individualism of the competitive business world. Motherhood acts as a catalyst in transforming greedy individualistic enterprise into the humanistic conception of Brotherhood, or rather, Sisterhood. Gilman alters the concept of society by using motherhood as an instrument of transcending class and racial boundaries to achieve a state of collectivism. The society Gilman creates, based on a true sense of community, completely overturns existing social, economic and political structures in democratic America. Her revised concept of society envisions a return to the type of spiritual and intellectual gains that Thoreau sought, but through the radically different means of collectivism.

Gilman follows Fern's lead in deliberately manipulating, and subsequently rejecting, her society's definitions of gender roles. In Herland, where men have been absent for 2000 years, women take on a myriad of roles. Human qualities lack gender specific connotations: "Here we found that the pressures of life upon the environment develops in the human mind its inventive reactions, regardless of sex."[127] Men's roles and women's roles have no place in Herland where women shoulder all aspects of labor. Further, like Fern, Gilman views motherhood as the catalyst for positive growth in all arenas of human life: "a full awakened motherhood plans and works without limit, for the good of the child...that the children might be most nobly born, and reared in an environment calculated to

---

[127]Ibid., p. 102.

allow the freest growth..."[128] Through this collective effort on the part of mothers, children are raised to reap the benefits of true intellectual and spiritual growth, free to develop individual interests, As Gilman presents Herland, "the most impressive part of this whole culture beyond this perfect system of child-rearing was the range of interests and associations open to them all, for life."[129]

Gilman emphasizes that the infiltration of maternal influence into the larger economic and political arena reaps positive benefits on a national level. Motherhood, not merely important for fulfilling the biological need for reproduction or acting as a social symbol for morality, plays an active role in nation building: "...with their sublimated mother-love, expressed in terms of widest social activity, every phase of their work was modified by its effect on the national growth. The language itself they had deliberately clarified, simplified, made easy and beautiful, for the sake of the children."[130] The concern for the well-being of children directs every action of the women in community-building. Motherhood effects such widesweeping consequences that even the language revolves around the potential intellectual development of children.

The clarification and simplification of language by a nation of mothers carries profound artistic as well as social implications. Gilman re-envisions both the form and use of literature in *Herland*. The children's literature "had the same gradation of simple repetitive verse and story that we are all familiar with...but where, with us,

---

[128]Ibid., p. 102.
[129]Ibid., p. 102.
[130]Ibid., p. 102.

these are the dribbled remnants of ancient folk myths and primitive lullabies, theirs were the exquisite work of great artists; not only simple and unfailing in appeal to the child-mind, *but true*, true to the living world about them."[131] Gilman re-defines the place of literature in a democratic society by emphasizing that literary works of art are characterized by their simplicity, truthfulness and usefulness as an instrument of education. Her evaluation of the function of literature stems directly from Fern's earlier emphasis of truth in writing. Further, Gilman's assertion that literature can educate through the captivation of an audience reflects Fern's resourcefulness in employing strategies aimed at entertaining a mass audience in order to ensure the largest possible audience for her social criticism.

Literary genius in democratic America resides in a true reflection of the people who compose the nation and the problems which characterize their lives. Fern's drive to write truthfully formulates the basis of her revised notion of genius. Her success as an entertainer is measured in part by her remarkable book sales and public acclaim.[132] The wide scope of issues that Fern addresses in both her articles and novels delineate a revised concept of the role of literature: literary genius can be measured by the ability to reach a large audience and the usefulness of bringing benefits to the masses of readers captivated by the literary work. In this sense, Fern is a

---

[131]Ibid., p. 102,

[132]Warren, Fanny Fern, *An Independent Woman*, p. Combined sales from *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio* (1853), *Little Fern's for Fanny's Little Friends* (1853), and *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series* (1854) reached 180,000 by 1854. Sales of *Ruth Hall* climbed to 70,00 in the first six weeks. For more, see Warren's *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman.*

true contributor to the democratization of literature. Further, she provides a new model for later writers to follow in using literature, and particularly humorous literature, as a tool for social criticism. Finally, Fern's example as a woman who refused to be silenced and a successful artist remains inspiring today in encouraging the active pursuit of self-definition through the articulation of one's own voice.

Fanny Fern held a unique place in American society. She experienced first-hand both harsh economic deprivation and phenomenal financial success. Her experiences in both the working-class and upper-class cultures, coupled with her literary skills, rendered her capable of creating a new medium of literary entertainment. Fern's articles represented a link between the democratization and commercialization of literature and leisure because she offered a form of literary entertainment promoted to a large audience through a medium specifically marketed to provide enjoyment.

James Parton, Fern's third husband, summed up the most significant aspect of her writing--her originality: "Fanny Fern is a voice, not an echo."[133] Fern's fearless championship of America's unrecognized citizens and her originality in vindicating the culture of "everyday" America attracted many new readers to an already ubiquitous medium of print. Fern particularly appealed to feminine readers because she wrote about their lives. She offered practical advice in obtaining more autonomy, she attempted to foster a sense of feminine consciousness that reached beyond class boundaries, and she empathized with their plight as subordinated members of

---

[133]Ibid., p. 104.

American society. Fern offered women vicarious power in articles that openly emasculated male hegemony. She extended the opportunity to vicariously participate in the creation of American culture through her continuing efforts to perpetrate a democratic ideal in America. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she allowed her readers to laugh. Fern's witty and biting prose humorously captured in print the foibles of the upper-classes. Fern's exposure of their hypocrisies allowed the "common" people a laugh at the expense of the elite who attempted to maintain control over working-class lifestyles.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alcott, Louisa. May. *Alternative Alcott.* Edited with an Introduction by Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988.

Alcott, Louisa. May. *Little Women.* Edited with an Introduction by Elaine Showalter. New York: Penguin Books, 1989.

Baym, Nina. *Woman's Fiction, A guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Brown, Gillian. *Domestic Individualism.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Carpenter, Lynette. "'Did They Never See Anyone Angry Before?' The Sexual Politics of Self-Control in Alcott's 'A Whisper In The Dark.'" *Legacy.* Fall, 1986. Vol. 3:2.

Caskey, Marie. *Chariot of Fire.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978.

Cheney, Ednah. *Louisa May Alcott, Her Life, Letters, and Journals.* Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889.

Davidson, Cathy N. *Revolution And The Word: The Rise of the Novel in America.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Fern, Fanny. *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio, First Series.* Auburn, New York: Derby and Miller, 1853.

Fern Fanny. *Fern Leaves From Fanny's Portfolio, Second Series.* New York: Mason Brothers, 1854.

Fern, Fanny. *Folly As It Flies; Hit at by Fanny Fern.* New York: G.W. Carleton, 1868.

Fern, Fanny *Fresh Leaves.* New York: Mason Brothers, 1857.

Fern, Fanny. *Ruth Hall and Other Writings.* Edited with an Introduction by Joyce Warren. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1986.

Garber, Frederick. *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination.* New York: New York University Press, 1977.

Gilman, Charlotte. Perkins. *Herland.* Edited with an Introduction by Ann J. Lane. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.

Harris, Susan. K. *19th-century American Women's Novels, Interpretive Strategies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Kasson, John. F. *Amusing the Million, Coney Island at the Turn of the Century.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1978.

Kelley, Mary. *Private Woman, Public Stage. Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Matthiessen. F. O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression In The Age Of Emerson And Whitman.* London: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Peiss, Kathy. *Cheap Amusements.* Philadelphia: Temple Universtiy Press. 1986.

Reynolds, David. S. *Beneath The American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination In The Age Of Emerson And Melville.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Sklar, Kathryn. Kish. *Catharine Beecher, A Study in American Domesticity.* New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976.

Stansell, Christine. *City Of Women, Sex and Class In New York 1789-1860.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Stowe, Harriet. Beecher. *Oldtown Folks.* Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869.

Stowe, Harriet. Beecher. *Oldtown Folks.* Edited with an Introduction by Henry F. May. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966.

Thoreau, Henry. David. *Walden and Civil Disobedience.* Edited with an Introduction by Michael Meyer. New York: Penguin Classics, 1983.

Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs, The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Tyler, Alice Felt. *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War.* New York: Harper & Row, 1944.

Walker, Nancy. *A Very Serious Thing, Women's Humor and American Culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Walker, Nancy. *Fanny Fern.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993.

Warren, Joyce. *Fanny Fern, An Independent Woman.* New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*: 18, 1966. (151-174)

General References

Adams, Florence Bannard. *Fanny Fern or A Pair of Flaming Shoes.* New Jersey: Hermitage Press, Inc., 1966.

Cameron, Sharon. *Writing Nature, Henry David Thoreau's Journal.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Cott, Nancy. *The Bonds of Womanhood.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977.

Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture.* New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1988.

Fields, Annie. *Life and Letters of Harriet Beecher Stowe.* Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899.

Herrnstadt, Richard. *The Letters of A. Bronson Alcott.* Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1969.

Miller, Perry. *The Raven and the Whale. The War of words and wits in the Era of Poe and Melville.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1956.

Myerson, Joel. Shealy, Daniel. Stern, Madeleine. *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott.* Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1987.

Myerson, Joel. Shealy, Daniel. Stern, Madeleine. *Louisa May Alcott, Selected Fiction.* Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1990.

Strickland, Charles. *Victorian Domesticity, Families in the Life and Art of Louisa May Alcott.* Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985.

Wilentz, Sean. *Chants Democratic. New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.