THE PROGRESSION OF AGENCY OF THE FEMALE ROLE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

STEPHANIE PRYSIAZNIUK. The Progression of Agency of the Female Role in Nineteenth-Century American Children's Literature.
(Under the direction of DR. MARK WEST)

This thesis will analyze four American children's novels written during the mid to latter part of the nineteen century and demonstrate how a progression of agency of the female role took shape in girls' fiction during this period in history. With the novel *The Wide, Wide World,* readers observe a protagonist who is primarily being acted upon by others, but soon learns to acquire agency and independence by employing feminine virtues or qualities of "true womanhood." According to Barbara Welter, the "Cult of Domesticity" was the prevailing value system among the upper and middle classes during the nineteenth-century, which held the central belief that women were supposed to possess four cardinal virtues (piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness) to be considered respectable females. In Susan Warner's novel, *The Wide, Wide World,* the character of Ellen Montgomery learns to wield feminine principles to attain respect and agency. The novel *Elsie Dinsmore* by Martha Finley builds onto this idea and features a protagonist that is also being acted upon, and whose decisions are reflective of others. However, the heroine of the story, Elsie Dinsmore, is steadfast in her spiritual beliefs, and it is her possession of an inherent belief in her faith that soon permits her greater autonomy and veneration from others. By being devoutly religious, Elsie is extolled for her pious behavior, which in the end, permits her agency to act freely and make decisions on her own. Shortly after the release of Finley's story, came a novel that changed the course of children's fiction forever. In Louisa May Alcott's novel *Little Women,* we

observe the heroine Jo March, an ambitious adolescent who longs to do something great with her life. Similar to Elsie, nothing will stop Jo as she empowers herself to forge her way into the male-dominated, public sphere to pursue her dreams of becoming a published author. In the process of making decisions on her own, Jo claims agency, and by the end of the novel, is living a life she desires. The last children's story discussed in this essay is a novel by Helen Hunt Jackson. In the story *Nelly's Silver Mine,* we observe a heroine who possesses the independence and a natural ability to act freely. Her character not only makes decisions on her own but also has an established sense of self. By examining the role of the female protagonist in all four novels, readers can observe how a shift or progression of agency occurred in American girl's books towards the later part of the century and set the stage for future novels.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century was a time in American history when the form of the nation was changing dramatically, and American children's literature was successfully coming into its own. Writers of American girls' fiction had begun authoring stories that rivaled the didactic conduct manuals of the past and began to present female characters with agency and independence. From the beginning of the century to its middle, writers demonstrated heroines that sought agency by holding steadfast to feminine principles. As the century progressed, however, writers displayed heroines that forged their way beyond the domestic setting, which gave rise to a newly formed identity or role for females.

Throughout much of the first part of the period, however, society held the central idea that men and women belonged in two separate spheres. While it was suitable for men to exist in the public sphere (the domain of paid work, commerce, politics, and law), the societal expectation for women was to be confined to a domestic sphere (the domain of childcare, housekeeping, and spirituality). Fundamentally, women were expected to uphold four essential virtues: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. In 1966, professor Barbara Welter developed a term known as "The Cult of Domesticity" (or 'The Cult of True Womanhood"), which helped to describe the patriarchal influence on the prevailing value system during the 1800s. This concept centered around the idea that the appropriate place for women was in a domestic setting, and the home was considered a space where women were expected to be devoutly religious, subservient to men, and free from immorality. Women were regarded as the 'light of the home' or the 'angel of the house' and held solely responsible for establishing a domicile, which was to serve as a spiritual sanctuary for the entire family. According to Welter, it was considered a place

where “brothers, husbands, and sons would be content, and not go searching elsewhere for a ‘good time’” (163). Household activities such as sewing, cooking, and caretaking were deemed suitable activities for young women, and educating oneself beyond religious doctrine was highly discouraged as women were considered too weak to work in public. Any female who did not adhere to being a “true woman” was considered “fallen” or one who has strayed from virtue. As further described by Janis Dawson, “The domestic ideal held that women should not work for wages but rather dedicate themselves to the creation of a nest, “where conjugal love and maternal care would nurture, secure, and protect the family from the outside” (114).

Nevertheless, at the height of the Civil War, the social order in America was making a remarkable transformation. During the middle of the century and onward throughout the latter part of the era, thousands of women were entered into the workforce. Their much-needed contribution to war efforts had a considerable impact at that time, and their exposure to public work-life provided them with access to opportunities outside of a private setting. After the war, the means of production continued to shift rapidly from an agricultural state to an industrial state, and the nation continued to experience tremendous growth in manufacturing and mechanization. Correspondingly, the expansion of the transcontinental railroad system had a profound impact on the development of the economy and further augmented the need for women to work in public. While most female immigrants obtained jobs working in factories, many middle-class women secured higher-paying positions as nurses, teachers, and caretakers for wealthier families. Hence, women’s entry into the public workforce proved was essential to a developing economy and ultimately helped to advance the concept of what was considered proper work for

females during the century.

Despite the societal expectation to achieve the status of true womanhood, the evolution of women's arrival into the workforce developed beyond this archaic notion and had a substantial influence on the era. Numerous colleges and universities began to spring up throughout the country, and women were encouraged to seek higher education and more professional roles. Although the women's rights movement continued to receive harsh criticism well into the later part of the century, societal transformation eventually endured. With its rise came a newly created female identity, which helped to further agency and independence of the female role in society (Fisher 7).

It is no surprise that during this time, authors also had begun to advance the role of females in children's literature. Authors began writing complex, realistic narratives that displayed heroines that began utilized their feminine status to attain agency. They also began to create heroines that acted with independence and charted their course. This thesis will take a closer look at the following four children's novels: *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner, *Elsie Dinsmore* by Martha Finley, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, and *Nelly's Silver Mine* by Helen Hunt Jackson, and demonstrate how a progression of female agency took shape in American girls' fiction during the mid to latter part of the nineteenth century.

1.1 The Wide, Wide World by Susan B. Warner

Susan Bogert Warner was born in New York City on July 11, 1819. She was a fervent Christian as well as a prolific writer of both religious fiction and children's fiction. She is best remembered for her novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, one of the most widely acclaimed stories in American children's literature. The story was published in

1850, the same year as the first National Women's Rights Convention held in Worcester, Massachusetts when the women's movement was beginning to gather steam. Her father, Henry Warner, was an attorney from New England, and her mother, Anna Bartlett, came from an aristocratic family in New York. Warner's mother died when Warner was a child, and her father raised both her and her sister, Anna. In the Panic of 1837, the family lost much of their wealth in the recession, which forced them to abandon their home in New York and move to a rural farmhouse in upstate New York. In 1849, Warner began writing to gain a much-needed income for her family. She frequently wrote under the pen name, Elizabeth Wetherell. Before long, her published stories began receiving praise for their moralistic outlook and principled tutelage.

The Wide, Wide World is an engaging bildungsroman that tells the story of a young girl, who after losing her mother tries all she can to stay steadfast and loyal to her Christian faith. As the heroine matures from childhood into her early adolescence, she learns to utilize feminine virtues to gain agency and independence. Although multiple publishers rejected the story at first, the didactic story eventually had an astounding breakthrough, and its relevance to readers brought it an enormous success.

By the early 1900s, many critics viewed her work as sappy and sentimental. Hence, it never truly possessed a sense of scholarly or aesthetic credit and was considered lacking in real literary value. However, by the end of the century, feminist scholars revisited the work and reclassified it as the quintessential domestic novel for its accurate portrayal of gender dynamics. While the book shows parallels to Warner's life and aimfully promotes religious principles, it also provides readers with an accurate representation of the social limitations imposed upon females during the time. More

pointedly, readers observe ways in which the narrative's heroine circumvents societal limitations by embracing the feminine ideal. In 1987, the Feminist Press published an edition of Warner's novel, which included the novel's concluding chapter that had been previously omitted by her publishers. Susan Warner died on March 17, 1885, in Highland Falls, New York ("Susan Warner").

1.2 Elsie Dinsmore by Martha Finley

Martha Finley was born in Chillicothe, Ohio, on April 26, 1828. She became a teacher and a widespread writer of both children's literature and fiction. The daughter of a Presbyterian minister, Finley came from a prominent military family and frequently used her family clan name (Farquharson), the Gaelic form of Finley, as her pen name when writing. Both her maternal and paternal grandfathers had amassed a significant amount of wealth and land, and as a child, she was educated by private tutors and later attended elite parochial schools in the northeast. Similar to Warner, Finley's religious upbringing served as the primary source of inspiration for her life's toil. She is best known for her book *Elsie Dinsmore* (a series), which was published during the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era in 1867, as the women's rights movement had begun to regain momentum.

Elsie Dinsmore was Finley's first novel, and it had tremendous appeal both in America and in Europe. Similar to *The Wide, Wide World*, the narrative and its sequences have been classified as a sentimental novel series and had taken Finley thirty-eight years to complete (1867-1905). The tale chronicles the coming-of-age of a good-natured young girl, who relies heavily on principles of faith to conduct her life. At first, Elsie's spiritual convictions cause difficulties with her family, but eventually, they

strengthen the relationship she shares with her beloved father. The 28-volume series transports readers on a journey of Elsie's life from childhood onward into her senior years. This essay will focus on the first novel of the series. Although much is unknown of Finley, like Warner, she never married and lived with her sister and aunt for several years before she eventually moved to Elkton, Maryland, where she died on January 30, 1909. ("Martha Finley").

1.3 Little Women by Louisa May Alcott

Louisa May Alcott was born on November 29, 1832, in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She is best known for her story, *Little Women,* a semi-autobiographical novel, which changed the course of girls' fiction forever. Alcott's abolitionist parents, Amos Bronson Alcott and Abigail May were well-known transcendentalists, a nineteenth-century philosophical movement, which held the fundamental belief that individuals are at their best when functioning absent from the direct control of societal institutions that corrupt the moral decency of the individual. Despite their association with the upper echelon of society, however, the Alcott family struggled regularly from financial difficulties. Alcott's father, also known as Bronson, embarked on several projects such as the Salem Street Infant School as well as a utopian agricultural cooperative known as Fruitland's, but the ventures never achieved much success. His idealistic approach never ceased to endure, however, and he opened an institute for learning shortly before passing away.

Pecuniary worries from early on in her life, as well as a broadminded, progressive view, set Louisa May Alcott on a path for self-improvement. At various stages of her young adult life, she obtained employment as an instructor, a domestic servant, and a nurse. She took on each of these roles to earn a wage and help support her family. While

still in her adolescence, however. Alcott began sending her writing to publishers. Taking a liking to her work, it was not long before her sensational stories appeared in print. According to Cherie Ross, it was Alcott's earlier works that provide invaluable insight into her progressive feminism (911). Although *Little Women* is not classified as one of her sensational thrillers, readers can observe ways in which it shows signs of progressive, feminine thought, which helped to facilitate the advancement of the female role in girl's fiction.

According to Robert Settelmeyer, it was at the direct request of her longtime publisher that she Alcott write a story for 'little girls' that *Little Women* came to be. Fascinatingly, Alcott had no interest in writing a girl's book at the time and was only allowed a brief period to pen the story. Nevertheless, she wrote fastidiously day and night and completed the novel in only ten weeks. *Little Women* was published in the same year it was written, 1868, and earned Alcott tremendous literary recognition and extraordinary success (Sattlemeyer). The novel turned out to be a far departure from the principled, didactic narrative her publisher had requested her to write. Instead, it is a narrative comprised of complex character relationships along with an intricately woven plot. Alcott provides her audience with a dynamic female character who realistically destabilizes social constructs of middle-class Victorian life in America.

In the story, readers discover the lives of four sisters who make the shift from innocence to awareness as they journey from their adolescence into young adulthood. The heroine of the novel is Jo March, an ambitious and adventurous adolescent that longs to do something great with her life. On a voyage of self-discovery, Jo takes claim of her agency and learns to find balance and success in both public and domestic life. With its

widespread success, *Little Women* is considered one of the most groundbreaking fictional works in all of American literature, and since its release, numerous adaptations have been recreated. On March 6, 1888, only two days after her father had died, Alcott passed away from what historians believe to have been mercury poisoning. She is buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, MA, where other significant American literary figures such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau are also buried. ("Louisa May Alcott").

1.4 Nelly's Silver Mine by Helen Hunt Jackson

Helen Hunt Jackson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on October 15, 1830. She was an American poet and novelist who became recognized for her activism of Native American Indian policy reform. Her mother, Deborah Waterman Vinal Fiske, was a devout, orthodox Congregationalist. Her father, Nathan Welby Fiske, was a prominent minister and a longtime professor at Amherst College. While still in her adolescent years, both of Fiske's parents died, and the angst from the loss of her parents left her in a mild state of rebellion (Sturdevant 131). Before their death, her parents had provided her with a means to be educated, and she eventually became a student at the Abbott Institute, a boarding school in New York. While there, she befriended renowned writer Emily Dickinson, who was also a student at the time, and the two famed authors corresponded for many years, remaining lifelong friends.

At the age of 22, she married United States Army Captain Edward Bissell Hunt and bore two sons. Their son, Murray Hunt, tragically died of a brain disease while still an infant, and nine years later, their son Warren Hunt, who they affectionately referred to as "Rennie," died of diphtheria at the age of ten. Shortly before Rennie's death, she also

experienced the devasting loss of her husband, who was killed in an accidental marine experiment. In poor health and overcome with profound sadness, Hunt's doctor advised a move out West to Colorado Springs, Colorado. Initially, she was not content with the scenery of the vast flatlands of the Great Western Plains but soon found peace and serenity in the cattle ranches and mining towns that surrounded the mountainous landscape (West 71). While staying at the Seven Falls Resort, she met William S. Jackson, a prominent railroad executive. They fell in love and married in 1875.

Although Jackson is best known for her books *A Century of Dishonor* and *Ramona*, it is her absorbing children's tale, *Nelly's Silver Mine*, which features a well-grounded, female protagonist who not only possesses independence but a solid sense of self. As a purposeful representation of the social change observed in American girl's fiction towards the latter part of the century, Jackson's novel is "surprisingly free from didactic moralizing" (West 71). Along with her family, Nelly March travels vis a vis railway on a transcontinental journey to Colorado, and the story details the adventure the coming of age journey she discovers along the way. Seven years after the book's release, Jackson died of stomach cancer in San Francisco, California. Her husband William Jackson arranged for her to be buried in Seven Falls at Inspiration Point, returning her body to be laid at rest, overlooking the Colorado landscape she grew to hold dear. ("Helen Hunt Jackson").

With a brief description of each of the four novels now provided, the first two chapters of this thesis will speak to the narratives, *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner and *Elsie Dinsmore* by Martha Finley, where audiences are introduced to female characters who concern themselves with upholding the domestic ideal. As explained by

LuElla D'Amico, "Sentimental novels such as *The Wide, Wide World,* were created to offer a metaphorical roadmap to white, middle-class female readers to help them navigate their struggles; the authors of these novels, including Warner (and her later counterpart Finley), took their task seriously" (D'Amico 6). While both heroines remain mostly static throughout their respective stories, they do demonstrate pockets of agency, and this essay will show how each character expresses agency by utilizing the status of true womanhood. The last two chapters of this thesis will speak to the narratives *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Nelly's Silver Mine* by Helen Hunt Jackson, where the leading characters express agency by acting freely and making decisions on their own. By disrupting the social construct for females, this essay will demonstrate how each novel builds on the previous, helping to redefine the female role in American children's literature.

CHAPTER 2: THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD BY SUSAN WARNER

The mode of sentimentalism was a method practiced amongst nineteenth-century writers. The emotive style was so well received during this time in history, the style dominated the American literary scene throughout much of the century and became an emblem of the nation's first bestselling novels (Sanders 42). This approach in writing style also gave rise to a new sub-genre of literature referred to as domestic fiction, which focused primarily on the daily domestic lives of young, middle-class girls as they matured into young adulthood. These stories often delivered life lessons that audiences found valuable. Up until the mid-1800s, the aim of most American girl's books was to provide a specific set of moralizing standards, which was to serve as a learning tool for young females. With an exceedingly dramatic plotline as well as a sentimental heroine, Warner's famous novel did just that. In the process of successfully promoted an overarching message about Christian ethics, it also greatly influenced a broad audience of readers.

As this essay takes a closer look at Warner's story, however, we also observe a protagonist who, despite her limitations, learns to circumvent her constraints and act with agency. Through her choices, Ellen Montgomery eventually gains the admiration and empathy of others, which, by the end of the story, permit her greater freedom. According to Mary Hiatt, the reason for the novel's astounding success was due to its "overt advocacy of piety, patience, and submission, themes familiar to woman readers, which were perceived along with a subtext proffering the more subtle, less acceptable, but more attractive themes of feminine independence, self-reliance, and sexuality" (250). These themes, in both Warner's text and subtext, are continuously at tension in the novel and

have been the subject of debate for literary scholars. Even though it is principally the choices of others that reflect the values which govern Ellen Montgomery's life, this essay demonstrates how Warner's protagonist empowers herself by performing at the feminine role, and in the process of doing so, gains independence.

At the opening of the narrative, we are introduced to Ellen Montgomery, the young heroine of the story, who is told the heartbreaking news that she will be separated from her mother, who is unwell and must leave for Europe to improve her health. Ellen's negligent and domineering father, Captain Montgomery, has just suffered the loss of a lawsuit, which brings financial strife to their family. With this loss, the Montgomery's elect to depart their home in New York and relocate abroad. Ellen, whom they believe is too young to be exposed to the reality of her mother's fate, is separated from her parents, and sent to live with her relative in a remote country town. *The Wide, Wide World's* protagonist is characteristic of the classic nineteenth-century girl's novel. Or, as Alice M. Jordan aptly describes its reoccurring theme, "The theme (genre) is a favorite one. In Ellen Montgomery, we have youth and innocence subjected to the hard knocks by which a cruel world is aft to buffer children deprived of the natural protection of their parents and more or less at the mercy of the indifferent" (85).

Captain Montgomery, Ellen's father, is the authoritative figure of the family and continually imposes his rule over Ellen and her mother. Mrs. Montgomery, who possesses as much ascendancy as her daughter, is not permitted to take their daughter with them to France and must dutifully abide by her husband's wishes. Ellen is soon sent to live with her scornful and unsympathetic aunt in Thirwall. In addressing matters of authority, Isabelle White makes the following assertion, "*The Wide, Wide World* accepted

and reinforced the authority of the family, which was located primarily in the husband and father as the authority of the patriarchal God of evangelical Protestantism" (33). Neither Mrs. Montgomery nor Ellen is made aware of when the separation from one another will occur and, therefore, must wait in apprehension for the day of their dreadful parting.

At this stage in the novel, Ellen is at a tender age, and quite naturally, is devasted at the thought of being separated from her mother. Mrs. Montgomery makes her wishes known to her daughter and requests that, while in her absence, Ellen remains dutiful to her Savior, placing Him first in her life. Striving to please her mother, Ellen commits to her plea but grows concerned that she will not be capable of loving God the way in which her mother loves Him. Anxiously doubting her ability, Ellen clings to her mother for guidance, "But, mamma," said Ellen, her eyes filling instantly, "you know He is not my friend in the same way that He is yours." Moreover, hiding her face again, she added, "Oh, I wish He was!" (Warner 23). Although Ellen desires to have the same closeness to God that her mother possesses, she is challenged by emotional innocence. However, she is wise enough to comprehend that she will no longer have her mother's guidance and support. Entering into a world of uncertainty, Ellen has come to the daunting realization that she must now make decisions on her own.

While en route to Thirwall, Ellen cries to herself, "…who is there to teach me now? Oh, what shall I do without you? Oh, mamma! How much I want you already" (Warner 69). Before long, Ellen encounters a gentleman on the riverboat, who notices she is alone and distraught. When he approaches Ellen to ask her about her troubles, she shares her worry about her mother's illness. In efforts to try to ease the young child's pain, the man

reads from his hymnal and speaks with Ellen about her faith in God. After a brief time passes, he notices Ellen sitting alone again. Passing by her, he gives her his book. Receiving it gladly, Ellen begins to recite the spiritual songs and soon takes comfort in their message. Just as her mother had requested of her to place God first in her life, so does this kind gentleman steer Ellen towards leading a life of faith.

In search of some level of connectedness, the isolated youngster affirms that she will be an obedient Christian and from this point forward, becomes resolved to lead a spiritual existence. This scene is essential to point out, as it is Ellen's first decision made in the absence of parental care. Moreover, this oath is of significant consequence in the story because it serves as her commitment to lead a life of morality and feminine virtue. This decision will inevitably impact her future decisions. By acting freely and choosing to do what is right by herself (as well as what is considered proper behavior by societal standards), Ellen not only expresses agency but makes a decision that matters. In the ensuing chapters, we soon discover how Ellen's virtues lead to her empowerment, or as Kevin Ball suggests, how choosing to be submissive and pious "serves first as a power for Ellen and later as a means of retaining (or regaining) power lost to any weakening of her faith" (Ball 11).

In the next scene, Ellen arrives at her aunt's home in Thirwall. Having never received the news of her niece's arrival, Aunt Fortune becomes resentful at having to care for her brother's child. Callous and stern, Aunt Fortune mistreats Ellen and ridicules her mother's spiritual upbringing. Gravely wounded by her aunt's insult, Ellen prays to God and waits in desperation for the day she can reunite with her tender-hearted mother. Not long after, Ellen discovers that her aunt has been holding her mother's letters from her.

Although she tries to turn to her faith to find solace, soon, an inter-turmoil begins to stir, and Ellen takes matters in her own hands.

In one scene in the novel, Ellen is having a conversation with Aunt Fortune about attending school. Although Aunt Fortune tells Ellen that she may attend, Ellen discovers there is no feasible way for her to walk the four-mile journey to and from school each day. Disheartened with her aunt's indifference, Ellen grows determined to surreptitiously educate herself, "Well, if I can't go to school, I know what I will do," she said, taking a sudden resolve, "I'll study by myself! I'll see what I can do; it will be better than nothing, anyway. I'll begin this very day!" (Warner 143). Although Ellen secretly asserts agency by finding a method to sidestep her aunt's authority, her control is soon fleeting as Ellen has not yet learned how to yield to her aunt's authority to gain independence. In other words, submitting to her aunt's whims would offer her greater freedom, as her aunt would be less inclined to challenge her if she were acting appropriately. Since submissive behavior was the height of perfection for females, it would be difficult for men or women to criticize a person for extolling its virtues.

In chapter sixteen, readers continue to observe Ellen making decisions on her own. When Aunt Fortune asks Ellen to share information about Alice, Ellen refuses to provide information about her new friend which greatly vexes her aunt. Lashing out excitedly, Ellen demands her aunt to cease her relentlessness, "Stop! Stop!" said Ellen wildly, "you must not speak to me so! Mamma never did, and you have no right to! If mamma or papa were here, you would not dare talk to me so" (Warner 161). Immediately following her outburst, Aunt Fortune gives Ellen a sharp box on the ear. Bellowing in a fit of sadness and humiliation, Ellen runs to her bedroom to seek guidance from her savior. With a

temperament in direct contrast to that of her caring mother, Isabelle White describes how the character of Aunt Fortune serves as a replacement to authoritative control, "The aptly-named (Mis)Fortune is a stand-in for Ellen's domineering father, "she is single and has property, she is identified with the masculine world of power" (White 33). At this point in the novel, readers cannot help but empathize with the young child, who has been torn apart from her loving mother and forced to live under the rule of a spiteful aunt. When Ellen acts out without considering her situation and standing with her aunt, it gives rise to her expression but not her independence or control. Repeatedly defeated by her overbearing aunt, the reader is acutely aware of Ellen's limited freedom. Readers soon discover how Ellen learns to utilize feminine principles in order to acquire greater independence.

As the story develops, Ellen finds friendship in Aunt Fortune's friendly farmhand, Mr. Van Brunt, and becomes better acquainted with her new friend, Alice Humphrey's. Like a caring older sibling, Alice nurtures Ellen and teaches her to be devout in her faith. Not long after, Ellen is introduced to Alice's father, the local minister in Thirwall, as well as Alice's brother, John, who is a student studying to be a minister. Alice, John, and Mr. Humphreys are hospitable towards Ellen, and for the first time since leaving her home in New York, Ellen feels a sense of belonging. The kind-hearted Alice teaches Ellen about the importance of forgiveness and obedience, and John Humphreys provides her with daily lessons from the Bible. While in their presence, Ellen's faith grows increasingly robust, which soon prompts her to ask for her aunt's forgiveness.

Putting into practice all she has learned while with the Humphrey's, Ellen builds up the courage to ask her aunt for forgiveness. But the cold-hearted woman dismisses

Ellen's pardon as foolishness, and requests her to admit to Mr. Van Brunt that she was in the wrong for getting angry with her over her mother's letters, "I said I was wrong," said Ellen, "and so I was; but I never said you were right, Aunt Fortune; and I don't think so" (Warner 181). In this passage, Ellen expresses agency by admitting fault in herself; however, she is left feeling discontent for not being completely repentant. As the scene closes, Warner leaves her readers to wonder if Ellen will ever find a way to be content, "Strong passion—strong pride—both long unbroken; and Ellen had yet to learn that many a prayer and many a tear, much watchfulness, much help from on high, must be hers before she could be thoroughly dispossessed of these evil spirits" (Warner 183). What Warner is suggesting in this passage relates to what Barbara Welter summarizes in her article "The Cult of Domesticity," "No matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes. With them, she is promised happiness and power" (152). In other words, only by possessing feminine virtues and surrendering to God can Ellen overcome her suffering and obtain freedom. The guidance she receives while in the company of Alice and John eventually provides her with this knowledge and Ellen grows determined to be submissive and act obediently. Ellen acts dutifully to God because she trusts it is the role her Savior expects of her, and before long she comprehends the sacrifices and rewards associated with performing at that role. According to Joe Sanders, "Such fiction offers girls dreams of power and a roadmap to achieving that power through what would later be called 'sympathy.' However, to exercise that power, girls would have to accept profound limitations" (41). We soon learn that achieving feminine independence comes at a cost to Ellen and attaining self-governance by way of sympathy can become a life of self-sacrifice. Hiatt also suggests, "successful 'virtue' is a mission, and hence a matter of

active, purposeful assertion" (252). At first, achieving the feminine ideal is challenging for Ellen, but soon she follows Alice's advice in helping to guide her way.

Near the end of the novel, Alice becomes fatally ill, and Ellen moves into the Humphreys home to care for her friend. Assisting with duties around the house, Ellen finds comfort and usefulness in assuming a feminine, domestic role. After Alice dies, John undertakes the responsibility of being a guardian to Ellen and continues to teach her lessons from scripture. One day, Nancy Vawse, a girl who befriends Ellen while at her aunt's house, brings Ellen the stack of letters from her mother that her aunt had kept hidden. Upon reading the letters, Ellen discovers that both her mother and father are deceased and that their final wish is for her to reside in Scotland with her mother's relatives. Afflicted with the news of having to depart from the Humphreys home, Ellen must set her desires aside and honor her deceased parents' request. John, who serves as the new authority in Ellen's life, helps reinforce her decision to depart for Europe. In leaving for Scotland and abiding by her deceased parents' authority, Ellen remains the obedient and submissive subject. (White 34). As explained by Joe Sanders, "girls of stories in the sentimental tradition make it impossible for the people around them to think about anything else. Sympathy, therefore, creates a network of guilt and affection that forces the healthy and powerful to obsess over the weak" (44). By giving up her desires to satisfy the needs of authority, Ellen becomes the sentimental subject and earns the admiration and empathy she seeks from John.

Upon arriving in Scotland, Ellen is introduced to her mother's relatives, the Lindsay Family. At first, they treat her affectionately, but before long, they begin to ridicule her American 'backwoods' behavior. Her uncle, Mr. Lindsay, egotistically tries to control his

new charge and requests Ellen forget her American identity, “Ellen, you belong to me; your name is not Montgomery any more, it is Lindsay; and I will not have you call me 'uncle'—I am your father; you are my own little daughter and must do precisely what I tell you" (Warner 514). On one occasion, her overbearing uncle forces her to consume wine. Admitting a foreignness to drinking wine, she rejects his offer but soon is forced to comply, “It is of no sort of consequence what you have been accustomed to," said Mr. Lindsay. "You are to drink it all, Ellen" (Warner 522). Since refusing to drink the wine would be considered disobedient, Ellen decides to submit to her uncle’s demand and consume the wine. Near the end of the novel, Ellen is speaking with Mr. Lindsay about historical figures of honor. In explaining how the Bible enlightens people to do what is proper and just, Ellen earns sympathy and admiration which in the end permits her independence:

> "From the Bible, sir," said Ellen quickly, with a look that half-amused and half abashed him.
>
> "And you, Ellen, are you yourself good after this nice fashion?"
>
> "No, sir, but I wish to be."
>
> "I do believe that. But after all, Ellen, you might like Nelson; those were only the spots in the sun."
>
> "Yes, sir, but can a man be a truly great man who is not master of himself?"
>
> “That is an excellent remark."
>
> "It is not mine, sir," said Ellen, blushing; "it was told me; I did not find out all that about Nelson myself; I did not see it all the first time I read his life; I thought he was perfect."

"I know who I think is," said Mr. Lindsay, kissing her (Warner 521).

Again, this passage demonstrates Ellen's performance at being the sentimental subject. By indicating her devotion to God, she gains approval and respect. Or, as LuElla D'Amico otherwise suggests, "Ellen is a socially savvy young woman who understands patriarchal expectations of female submissiveness and overcomes them through managing her emotions and her performance of them, consequently managing how others perceive her" (D'Amico 6). Despite his secular viewpoint, Mr. Lindsay views Ellen's virtues as pure and ideal. Her piousness and morality allow her to passively challenge his control. Hence, "Christianity serves once again as Ellen's mechanism for dissenting against authority without seeming unbecoming rebellious" (D'Amico 18).

In the concluding chapter of the novel, the Lindsay's are having a New Year's Eve celebration at their home. Although Ellen desperately wishes to return home to America to be with John, she recognizes that she must be selfless and bide her time to reap God's rewards. When John surprises her in Scotland, the Lindsay's try to keep them apart from one another, but Mr. Lindsay grows impressed with John's dignity and manners and allows John into his home. Ellen and John finally reunite, and she confesses her longing to return to America to be near him. Expressing empathy and compassion towards Ellen, John releases her from her apprehension in waiting a few years, and expresses how much she has matured, "You are grown, Ellie," said John, "you are not the child I left you" (Warner 566). By the end of the novel, Ellen is a young adult and has matured. For Ellen, agency, and independence is more about self-awareness and self-control than it is about self-satisfaction. Wielding feminine principles to her advantage, Ellen empowers herself to act like a 'true woman' and establishes her own identity. Or, as suggested by

Grace Ann and Theodore Hovet, “Ellen's belief that the highest form of Christian behavior is "self-denying performance," is the one that best protects and stimulates her sense of self” (10).

Helping to serve as a basis from which change could be cultivated, the underlying theme of feminine independence helped to set *The Wide, Wide World* apart from any other children’s novel of its time. In the next chapter of this essay, we will take a closer look at the story of *Elsie Dinsmore*, which also demonstrates how adhering to the feminine ideal helped to advance the female role in girl’s books during the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER 3: ELSIE DINSMORE BY MARTHA FINLEY

Published in 1867, nearly two decades after the release of *The Wide, Wide World*, the narrative *Elsie Dinsmore* became yet another widely venerated novel during the century. With a strikingly similar plotline and literary style to *The Wide, Wide World*, it is clear that Finley had chosen to model her novel after Warner's by promoting Christian ethics. In both novels, the protagonists become deprived of the guidance and security of their parents and are required to leave their homes and live amongst relatives who mistreat them. While many twentieth-century scholars discredited Finley's twenty-eight-volume episodic series for its mawkishness, more recent examination has regarded the novel as having advanced the female role in American girls' fiction during the period.

According to Annis Pratt, "This collision between the hero's evolving self and society's imposed identity appears consistently throughout the history of women's fiction" (30). In both novels, however, the protagonists align with the traditional female role to gain further agency and independence. However, there is one primary distinction between how Elsie Dinsmore demonstrates an evolving self, compared to that of Ellen Montgomery. The decisions made by the heroine of Finley's novel are based on an unwavering faith, and it is through Elsie's firm commitment to her belief system that she can resist authority and express agency.

The story is set at Roselands, a plantation home located somewhere in the American South. The leading character of the novel is eight-year-old Elsie Dinsmore, who is living with her paternal grandparents. Early in the story, readers discover that Elsie's parents secretly marry at an early age, but the couple are forced to separate due to their parents believing it to be an imprudent union. Elsie's father, Horace Dinsmore, is sent north to

attend college while her pregnant mother, Elsie Grayson, is left abandoned, and in grave despair. One week after giving birth to their daughter, her mother dies leaving her daughter in the care of a pious housekeeper and Christian caretaker, known throughout the story as Aunt Chloe. At the dying mother's request, the caretaker is charged with the task of instilling a religious upbringing in Elsie. After four years pass, the Scottish housekeeper dies, and Elsie and Aunt Chloe are sent to live at Roselands with her paternal grandparents. Aptly describing Elsie's character, Hamilton-Honey describes Elsie in the following words, "Having been reared by two godly women, Elsie as a most passive, submissive, domestic, and pious figure—the epitome of the so-called True Woman" (303). Elsie's spiritual rigidity soon causes friction in the Dinsmore home, however. As the sole beneficiary of her maternal grandfather's fortune, the Dinsmore family become resentful of her wealth as well as to the association of the Greyson family name. Several members of the Dinsmore clan begin to ridicule her strong Christian principles and exploit her innocence.

Elsie's father, who has been in Europe since college, writes letters home to his family to inquire after his daughter's welfare. When he receives word of her troublesome nature and strong spiritual convictions, he grows upset that her stanch impertinence is the source of conflict at Roselands. As a man of secular views, he develops a preconceived notion that Elsie's beliefs are causing trouble in the home. Upon returning to America and his father's estate, Horace is severely strict and harshly disciplines Elsie's minor transgressions. Although he is an overly domineering parent, he cares deeply for the welfare of his daughter and desires to raise Elsie in a secular and structured environment. In the process of trying to instruct his daughter, he subjugates her will, and a moral

conflict arises for Elsie, who, throughout the story is at conflict of obeying her father and remaining devoted to her faith.

According to Jacqueline Jackson and Philip Kendall, one major flaw in the novel is everyone believing that Elsie has a will, when in fact she has none, “In everything and to everyone, from Arthur to her father, Elsie is totally submissive - except when their will conflicts with the will of God" (Jackson, Kendall 56). While it is true that Elsie is submissive to others, this essay argues that she does possess a will; one that is inherent to who she is. Elsie’s faith is fundamental to her basic value system, and it is her Christian principles that empower her to resist authority, act freely, and make decisions independently. It is all these factors that contribute to her identity and sense of self.

As the story begins, readers observe the humble and obedient Elsie working arduously at her lessons for school. Before long, her slightly older, ill-behaved uncle begins tormenting her before their lesson. Fidgeting with her book and tugging at the curls of her hair, Arthur bumps Elsie's elbow, which causes an inkblot in her copybook, which prohibits her from concentrating on her assignment. Elsie, who is too self-effacing to snitch on her uncle Arthur, turns in her ruined copybook at her governess's request. When Miss Day notices that the assignment is covered in ink stains, the harsh instructor punishes Elsie for being careless and insubordinate. Overcome with frustration, Elsie returns to her desk and tries desperately to complete her tasks and silence her irritation. Proceeding to torment the child, Miss Day shakes Elsie violently by the arm, demanding an answer for her transgressions. Sobbing uncontrollably, Elsie indignantly blurts out an impertinent response, "I have tried hard to do my duty, and you are punishing me when I don't deserve it at all" (Finley 17). Receiving a swift box on the ear, Elsie is scolded by

the governess and not permitted to attend the fair with the other family members. Left alone to her troubles, Elsie turns to the Bible in search of consolation.

From the onset of the narrative, we learn that Miss Day and other members of the Dinsmore family display cruel, selfish behavior towards Elsie. Their behavior impresses upon the governess, who believes that she too is at liberty to severely punish the young girl. Elsie continually desires to do what is right in the eyes of her Savior, and in this circumstance of acting out, believes she has fallen short of her feminine virtues and religious principles. Wishing to have held her tongue and suffered the unjust punishment better than she had, Elsie grows forlorn and turns to her Savior for strength.

This scene is essential to remark upon because it not only provides insight into the central conflict of the story, but it also establishes a pathway for the protagonist's moral development. In this example, Finley uses realism to demonstrate the challenge young girls face in trying to remain in a proper feminine sphere. Attaining the virtues of 'true womanhood' was a goal not easily achieved by many girls, but one way in which women could achieve feminine power. Hence, there is a direct link between Christian obedience and female empowerment. By possessing the responsibility for her moral development, Elise can attain the strength of will to resist the moral depravity of those that surround her (Mehl 89). By being faithful and obedient to God and doing what is deemed as proper or as a true woman, Elsie gains power, which we soon observe as the story progresses. In speaking of The Elsie Series, Rebekka Mehl suggests:

> The Elsie books are generally disregarded as didactic and sentimental and are considered too old-fashioned for modern sensibilities. However, a critical examination of Elsie's life and faith highlights that she and her daughters (both

> literal and figurative) possess a sense of independence that is inspired by their religious faith and which demonstrates a shift in thinking regarding women's identity and independence. (Mehl 88)

As we have observed in both narratives, each protagonist reaches a point where there is a lack of parental presence to help guide their lives. One notable difference between both stories, however, is that Elsie never truly experiences the loss of her guardian. The only love she knows is that of her Aunt Chloe, who remains close by her side throughout the novel. As we have previously discussed in the first chapter of this essay, the critical figure in Ellen Montgomery's life is taken away from her, and she must leave her mother behind and enter into a world of uncertainty. Despite being Elsie's enslaved black housemaid, Aunt Chloe remains an active part of Elsie's life, and Elsie never experiences the loss of a support system. Paradoxically, in this example, the very person that is being deprived of agency is successful in providing support and independence to the individual that is subjugating them. The continual love, guidance, and spiritual support Aunt Chloe provides is paramount to Elsie's upbringing and significantly factors into Elsie's ability to act of her accord. Moreover, Aunt Chloe is also in a role of subservience to Elsie, who possesses considerable wealth. Consequently, her privileged circumstance provides her with a sense of entitlement to be firm in her convictions and act with agency.

Before long, Elsie is introduced to a family friend from up North, Miss Rose Allison, who is visiting the Dinsmore's plantation home for the winter. Much like the relationship between Ellen and Alice Humphreys in *The Wild, Wide World*, Elsie and Rose Allison share a similar spiritual bond. As the third spiritual female in Elsie's life

(Mehl 91), the sympathetic and devoutly religious Rose spends time reading the Bible with Elsie and sharing her faith in Jesus. Like a brilliant light illuminating the pathway to Elsie's salvation, Rose teaches young Elsie how to give of herself and be yielding to the needs of others. In the subsequent chapter, we discover Elsie has knit a purse for her friend Rose, but Enna, the youngest daughter of the Dinsmore family, demands Elsie give her the purse. Elsie tries to explain to Enna that the gift is for her friend Rose, but her refusal to give in to Enna soon causes an upheaval in the Dinsmore home. Mrs. Dinsmore, who hears Enna wailing from a distance, enters into the room and demands Elsie hand over the purse to her daughter. Taking full advantage of Elsie's innocence, the heartless grandmother snatches it from her hand and orders; Elsie submits to her plea, "There, my pet, you shall have it. Elsie is a naughty, mean, stingy girl, but she sha'n't plague you while your mamma's about" (Finley 51). Troubled with the thought of no longer having a purse for Rose, Elsie laments to her godly caretaker, who helps Elsie find a way to prepare a handmade parting gift for Rose. Regarding this scene in the novel, Stallcup makes the following assertion,

> Her desires (Enna's), thus, are outward manifestations of economic power battles rooted in spiritual emptiness and lack of rational self-control. Insatiable demands become a way of exerting control over those around her but result in an empty and ineffective power that neither satisfies nor lasts. Elsie gives, and when she does, she gains power. (Stallcup 308)

What Stallcup is suggesting in the quote above is synonymous with control and freedom. Towards the end of the chapter, Elsie seeks the advice of Aunt Chloe, who assists Elsie in finding a solution for Rose:

> "Oh! Yes, that will do; dear old Mammy, I'm so glad you thought of it," said Elsie, joyfully. And rising she went to her bureau, and unlocking a drawer, took from it a beaded purse of blue and gold, quite as handsome as the one of which she had been so ruthlessly despoiled, and rolling it up in a piece of paper, she handed it to Chloe, saying, "There, Mammy, please give it to Pomp, and tell him to match the beads and the silk exactly" (Finley 52).

In this passage, Elsie expresses agency by taking matters into her own hands. By following Aunt Chloe's guidance, Elsie circumvents authority and gains control, which illustrates her ability to make decisions independently.

Once the Spring approaches, Rose returns home, and Elise longs for her friend's companionship. When Horace's sister Adelaide announces her brothers return to America, excitement fills the air at Roselands, and Elise anxiously awaits meeting her father for the first time in her life. Anticipating a warm reception upon his arrival, Elsie is wounded when her father acts aloof and is distant towards her. Overcome with grief and disappointment, Elsie turns to the comfort of Aunt Chloe, who advises her to place her faith in God. After a couple of days pass, Elsie bids her father good morning, but just at that moment, Enna enters into the room, and Horace gives Enna all his affection. With tears streaming down her face, Elsie swiftly hides her face to conceal the pain she feels and exits the room. Regaining her composure, Elsie calmly returns to the breakfast room and rightfully takes her place at the table. Although no words are exchanged, this act illustrates Elsie's ability to muster up the courage to act on her own and confront her fears. Despite her uneasiness, Elsie shows her sense of self-worth by managing her feelings maturely. This act of self-control demonstrates not only her commitment to

sharing in a relationship with her father but also her sense of self-respect.

At this point in the narrative and throughout much of the story, Elsie's thoughts are occupied with trying to gain her father's affection. His presence in her life is critical in the story because it represents a change in moral authority. An illustration of this may be witnessed when Horace explains to his daughter how to keep track of her daily allowance. Horace guides his daughter with how to manage her finances so that she may develop the skill of being prudent with her money. The life he demands of Elsie is strict and structured, but he is a man of morals, and his concern for her development is essential. As further explained by Stallcup:

> Finley suggests that to create adults with this high sense of self-worth and empowered relationship with money, it is vital to teaching children to control their desire and manage their material goods. Even such seemingly minor items as a homemade knitted purse or a small bag of candy purchased with a fraction of a weekly allowance take on considerable moral significance. (Stallcup 307)

In these examples, Finley is putting forth the idea that principles such as honesty, self-respect, and piety are more important than obedience and submission. Clearly, Horace does not fully understand Elsie’s Christian convictions, but he does care very much for his daughter and yearns to provide a structured domestic environment for her to develop from and base her life around. Even though others find him tyrannical, Elise does not permit anyone to speak ill of him. In the following scene in the novel, Lucy Carrington is speaking harshly of her father, but we observe Elsie running interference:

> "Papa only stopped us because we were talking too much at the table," said

> Elsie, apologetically; "…please don't say again that you think papa was unkind to keep me at home today. I'm sure he knows best, and I ought not to have listened to a word of that kind about him" (Finley 112).

Even though Elsie has insecurity about her father's affection towards her, in this scene, she acts with agency by standing up for what she believes in. Horace governs many aspects of his daughter's life, (from which foods she can consume, to which books she can read, to which meadows she can run and play). However, he permits a wide berth `when she speaks of her faith and never commands that she alter her beliefs. In speaking to Elsie's spiritual strength, Rebekka Mehl explains one of the least understood forms of power in children's literature:

> She establishes her power, not only economically (by using her wealth as an expression of influence) and materially (by impressing her taste upon those around her), but also spiritually, by developing her interpretations of right and wrong and encouraging others to do the same. (Mehl 89)

There are several other scenes when Elsie acts on her own. Although Horace is under the impression that his daughter is acting in disregard to his authority, she is not performing in rebellion but rather in individuality and goodness. Examples of this may be seen when she goes into the forbidden meadow to chase after Herbert's arrows as he is unable to search for them himself, or when she releases her father's hummingbird from its container without knowing to whom the bird belongs. In both instances, Elsie aims to be accommodating and helpful, but more pointedly, these incidences are not of little consequence for young Elsie. They demonstrate her ability to think on her own and

consider the needs of others. By empowering herself to help others, Elsie acts with agency.

In chapter seven, troubles continue for Elsie, but a turning point occurs in the story. Scolding Elsie once again for not being on-task with her assignment, the heartless governess belittles Elsie during lesson time. When Elsie attempts to answer questions from the assignment, Miss Day ridicules her and desists her from speaking. In the following dialogue exchange, we observe Elsie rightly defending herself,

> "Miss Day, I did know my lesson, every word of it, if you had asked the questions as usual, or had given me time to answer."
>
> "I say that you did not know it; that it was a complete failure," replied Miss Day, angrily; "and you shall just sit down and learn it, every word over."
>
> "I do know it if you would hear me right," said Elsie, indignantly, "and it is very unjust in you to mark it a failure" (Finley 189).

Even though she is continually reprimanded by Miss Day, Elsie's principles provide her with the self-assurance in knowing that she has behaved appropriately in the eyes of her Savior. Therefore, her faith is what empowers Elsie and gives her the courage to stand up for what she believes in and act with agency.

Immediately following this occurrence, another unfortunate incidence arises with Arthur, who seeks revenge against Elsie for refusing to loan him money. Sneaking into her room, Arthur sabotages her copybook with ink stains yet again. When Horace hears the news that Elsie has turned in yet another untidy homework assignment, he becomes intensely irritated at her insubordinate behavior. However, upon listening to his sisters Lora and Adelaide share about the injustice Elsie endures from Miss Day and others in

the family, Horace immediately realizes he was mistaken to think negatively of his daughter. Now having the exposure to better knowing his daughter, Horace can judge for himself and no longer have misgivings of tales he has heard from his family. In the following exchange, Horace confesses to a lapse in judgment:

> "I do, my darling, my precious child," he said, caressing her again and again. "I do love my little girl, although I may at times seem cold and stern; and I am more thankful than words can express that I have been saved from punishing her unjustly. I could never forgive myself if I had done it. I would rather have lost half I am worth; Ah! I fear it would have turned all her love for me into hatred, and justly, too" (Finley 205).

The validation of her father's trust and love provides Elsie with the confidence in knowing that her father genuinely cares. It also provides her with the certainty in knowing that being firm in her convictions has led to her triumph, which further builds onto her agency as well as her sense of self.

Perhaps the most memorable scene of the novel occurs near the end of the story when Elsie refuses to break the Sabbath. In chapter ten, the Dinsmore's are hosting an event at Roselands, and one of the attendees, Mr. Eversham, gets word of Elsie's musical talent. Requesting to hear the young child sing and play the piano, Horace agrees to his guests' request. Summoning Elsie's presence in the drawing-room, he asks his daughter to sing a song. Unwilling to break the Sabbath, Elsie denies her father's demand. Growing vexed at her disobedience, Horace orders Elsie to sit at the piano until she is willing to concede to his command. With tears streaming down her face, Elsie sits at the piano in complete stillness. Soon, she grows weary from sitting for an extended period,

which causes her to faint and collapse. As soon as the sound of the fall is heard, Horace and others rush into the room and find Elsie motionless on the floor and a large gash on her temple. With blood on her face and dress, it becomes clear that the young child has hit her head on the furniture and has become unconscious. Fearing for his daughter's life, Horace becomes humiliated and deeply saddened that he has forced his daughter against her will. After some time passes, Elsie's regains consciousness, and Horace ashamedly carries Elsie to her room to tend to her needs. Bidding Elsie goodnight, the following words are exchanged between father and daughter:

> "Goodnight, daughter," he said.
>
> "Dear, dear papa," she cried, throwing her arm around his neck, and drawing down his face close to hers, "I do love you so very, very much!"
>
> "Better than anybody else?" he asked.
>
> "No, papa, I love Jesus best; you next" (Finley 248).

In exploring this scene, Allison Giffen argues:

> This scene depicts the second time Elsie refuses such a paternal command, and the confrontation between father and daughter is not resolved but merely deferred by her suffering. While Horace is horrified by the sight of her limp body and bloodied head, he also makes it clear that in the future he will demand perfect submission. (Giffen 10)

Although he does request that she listen to him in the future, what readers learn from Elsie’s near-death experience, is that she stays steadfast to her convictions and never succumbs to her father's secular demands. Instead, she expresses agency by standing up to authority and holding firm to her beliefs. Or, as Rebekkah Mehl suggests, “Finley is

portraying a powerful expression of independence in this young girl, who for the first time is exerting her sense of right and wrong against her father (94). Elsie willingly obeys her father and continually satisfies his demands but never places his needs above the duty she has to her Savior. By remaining the pious and virtuous subject, Elsie is viewed as respectable and feminine, which empowers her and gives her agency. From this point forward in the story, Horace treats Elsie with tenderness and affection; hence, Christian discourse becomes Elsie's "mode of power" (Stallcup 302).

It is essential to point out that Elsie's knowledge is not only based on what she has learned from the spiritual mentors in her life but also what she has attained by reading and studying the Bible. According to Hamilton-Honey, "While parents relied on reading to ensure the proper religious and moral behavior of their daughters, that same reading also allowed girls to glimpse a means for personal agency" (766). Hence, reading is a skill that also empowers the heroine of Finley's novel to act freely. In *Little Women*, the next chapter of this essay, we further identify ways in which reading and access to knowledge help to advance the female role.

CHAPTER 4: LITTLE WOMEN BY LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

Shortly after the release of *Elsie Dinsmore*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* was published. The first volume in 1868 and the second in 1869. The semi-autobiographical novel is loosely based on Alcott's adolescent years growing up in Concord, Massachusetts. The story is set in an unnamed New England town during the Civil War years and chronicles the life of a family of four young women living in genteel poverty and making the changeover from their adolescence into young adulthood. Accurately recounting the underpinning that presents itself in *Little Women*, Linda Kerber asserts, "Alcott offers us four young women engaged in the search for their own distinctive identities, each searching with varying degrees of intensity, intelligence, and seriousness, and each finding what she takes to be intelligible guidance in Bunyan's words" (165). Unlike *The Wide, Wide World*, and *Elsie Dinsmore*, the novel *Little Women* does not promote the wielding of feminine virtues but instead helps to indirectly guide the path for the characters of the story.

The heroine of Alcott's story is fifteen-year-old Jo March, who often finds herself at odds with the feminine role, "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster" (Alcott 42). With a tomboyish flare and stubborn willfulness, the outspoken Jo longs to do something extraordinary with her life but feels thwarted by the domestic limitations of her role. Or, as suggested by Annis Pratt, "Jo perceives the irony that growing up, according to contemporary gender norms, means growing down – an atrophy of the personality" (30). Leaving home life behind, Jo tenaciously enters into the world of work to earn a wage and further establish herself as an author. The experience of charting her own course brings her both joy and pain as she

transitions from a teenager into young adulthood.

The uniqueness of her character is unlike what we have observed in both Warner and Finley's stories. Both Ellen Montgomery and Elsie Dinsmore demonstrate signs of independence and agency but remain primarily static or acted upon throughout the maturation of their teenage years. Jo, however, is a character that evolves more greatly, and in the process of making her own decisions, claims her agency and develops a sense of self. In comparing both novels, Donna Campbell affirms:

> Both *Little Women* and *The Wide, Wide World* deal with their protagonists' moral education. …One major difference between the characters is that Ellen's temper derives from the Calvinist doctrine of man's natural depravity, whereas Jo's is an individual exuberance. (120)

Despite the disparity in age and circumstance between both protagonists, Ellen's life reflects those that guide her. She acquires feminine principles in order to possess agency and independence. Jo, however, empowers herself to seek the life she desires. When we compare Jo March to the character of Elsie Dinsmore, we observe a greater similarity concerning each protagonist's disposition. The relatable aspect to each of their nature is that fundamentally, both young females possess a resounding devotion to their belief system. Much like Elsie never strays from her Christian convictions, Jo remains steadfast in becoming a writer. Pushing beyond the boundaries of the domestic sphere, Jo ambitiously creates new experiences for herself, and in the process of forging her way, learns the importance of self-governance and self-sacrifice. The complexity and realism of the book's characters helped to set Alcott's *Little Women* apart from any other story during its time. It was also a novel that was relatable to its audience. There is a scene in

the chapter Experiments where Jo is sitting in the apple tree with Laurie, reading and crying over *The Wide, Wide World*. Alcott was demonstrating her purposeful response to this text so much that she wanted to include it in her novel so that her story would become more tangible to its reader. Clearly, the response was tremendously successful, as it remains a novel that that continues to convince its audience of its truth. To this day, scholars classify Alcott's novel as the most influential girls' book in all of American children's literature. By analyzing various passages in the story, this essay will further demonstrate how a progression of agency further developed throughout the century.

The narrative begins at the March family home at Christmastime, and the four sisters (Meg, Beth, Amy, and Jo) commiserating with one another about the discomforts of their impoverished lifestyle. Readers soon discover that their father, Mr. March, has lost his wealth due to an unfortunate circumstance, and now the girls are learning to adjust to the constraints of their less fortunate situation. With their father serving as a chaplain in the Union Army, it is up to Mrs. March, affectionately referred to in the story as Marmee, to steer and guide her daughters throughout their adolescence. With a Puritan leitmotif supporting her lessons, Marmee reads a letter from their father, and the girls decide to bare their 'burdens' more cheerfully, "Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City" (Alcott 48). After hearing these words, the sisters decide to give their holiday breakfast to the Hummel family, who are penniless.

This passage is noteworthy to remark upon because it allows readers to gain a general understanding as to the influence Marmee has on her daughters. While she does

not directly tell her daughters what to do, she does provide moral guidance so that each young woman can decide for themselves how to best conduct their life. Not long into the story, Jo is sharing a conversation with her mother about the hardships of being female, "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman,' and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else, said Jo" (Alcott 77). As the primary conflict of the story, the excitable Jo has challenges being something she is not. As suggested by Janis Dawson, “In the chapter "Burdens," readers learn that the two eldest March sisters, Meg and Jo, take their first steps towards independence, “Believing that they could not begin too early to cultivate energy, industry, and independence, their parents consented, and both fell to work with the hearty goodwill which in spite of all obstacles is sure to succeed at last (Alcott 73)” (115).

Meg and Jo are soon invited to a New Year's Eve party at the home of Meg’s friend, Sally Gardiner. Although the March family no longer has the same financial standing to others to whom they are acquainted, the March sisters are still able to affiliate in refined society. Meg, the sweet and mannerly oldest sister, aligns more with the traditional feminine role and longs to return to the days when their family possessed the means to supply them with pretty things to wear. In contrast to her eldest sister, Jo takes delight in reading books and writing theatrical plays where she can adventurously escape into exciting new worlds. Although Jo is challenged by the behavior of her feminine role, both she and Meg complement one another despite their differences.

In preparation for the party, Jo haphazardly stands too close to the fire and accidentally scorches the back of her dress, which now must be concealed throughout the evening's festivities. Later on, in trying to assist her sister in getting ready for the event,

Jo inadvertently burns Meg's hair with a hot iron, which causes a stir in the March home. Also, the two girls must share a pair of Meg's gloves as Jo's pair had been previously stained from lemonade. While at the holiday party, Jo tries her best to present herself as a proper young lady but longs to engage in conversation with the boys. The polite Meg forbids Jo to demonstrate any unladylike notions and devises a signal so that Jo may be made aware of acting unrefined. As boys approach Jo looking to partake in a dance, she swiftly ducks out of sight to avoid being asked. While hiding out behind the drapery, she unexpectedly encounters her high-spirited neighbor, Theodore Lawrence, otherwise known throughout the novel as Laurie, also hiding from others. For some time, Laurie has been interested in becoming better acquainted with Jo and her sisters. Soon, the awkwardness between first encounters vanishes, and the two adolescents get to know one another by sharing in conversation and dancing with one another away from view. Unlike other girls he has been met, Laurie is amused by Jo's boyish mannerisms and enjoys the naturalness of her personality. Likewise, Jo feels a sense of comfort in his presence and takes delight in engaging with someone akin to herself.

Towards the end of the evening, Meg sprains her ankle. Laurie, being the good-natured neighbor that he is, offers to take them home and ride in his carriage. At first, Meg regards it as an impertinence but eventually accepts his offer. The girls return home to share the details of the evening's events with Marmee, Beth and Amy and Jo asserts a decided viewpoint on behavior and status, "I don't believe fine young ladies enjoy themselves a bit more than we do, in spite of our burned hair, old gowns, one glove apiece and tight slippers that sprain our ankles when we are silly enough to wear them" (Alcott 73). Here, Jo voices her thoughts concerning the foolishness of keeping up

appearances, and by being vocal, openly challenges social constructs.

Although it is primarily an inherent nature that allows Jo to challenge societal norms of the feminine role, one critical factor that plays into Jo's agency is that she has experience working for her aunt. In chapter eleven, "Experiments," Marmee tells her daughters, "Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone; it keeps us from ennui and mischief; it is good for health and spirits and gives us a sense of power and independence, better than money or fashion" (Alcott 156). Earning an income not only provides Jo with a way to help support her family but more pointedly, it serves as a gateway to reading, learning, and discoveries. Tending to the needs of her wealthy aunt, Jo is tasked with small chores such as reading philosophical essays and performing minor duties such as winding yarn and bathing her poodle. When Aunt March falls asleep while listening to Jo read the compositions, Jo takes it upon herself to escape into her late uncle's library and read travel books, poetry, and fiction. Reading provides Jo with the opportunity to see other worlds and further expand her mind. Or, as LuElla D'Amico explains, "Reading can be interpreted as yet another mode of travel, permitting female readers to escape the confines of their daily lives" (D'Amico 5). It is not long before her aunt discovers that she has been sneaking into the library, and although she is not pleased at first, she soon enjoys listening to Jo read the dramatic tales aloud. Although a minor character in the novel, Aunt March is symbolic of power and authority. The attractiveness of possessing control over her own life further drives Jo to pursue her dream of becoming a famous writer.

Similar to the life of the heroine in her story, Alcott was raised by parents that played an active role in guiding her developmental years. Her father, Amos Bronson

Alcott, was a transcendentalist philosopher who advocated for the education for females. Her mother, Abigail May, was a social reformer and dedicated her life to the education of her children. Abba, as she was known, was also a supporter of the women's rights movement. Performing various jobs, she became the primary breadwinner in the family. According to Kathryn Cornell Dolan, the method of Alcott's work "makes the concepts of transcendentalism and feminist reform more focused and appealing to a wide audience in her domestic novels for children and adults" (Dolan 42), which is precisely what readers observe in *Little Women.* Jo's father, the 'male figure,' is absentee throughout much of the first part of the book. Marmee is the figure in Jo's life that continually introduces morals to her children so that they can determine a life that is best for themselves and actively helps keep the family afloat. As the most influential character to Jo, she encourages her daughters about the importance of productivity and self-reliance.

In chapter eight, "Jo Meets Apollyon," Laurie invites Jo and Meg to attend a play at the theater. Amy, who is the youngest of the March sisters, desperately wishes to join along. Meg offers to pay for a ticket for Amy, but Jo harshly refuses to let her younger sister accompany them. Amy, who is similar to Jo in temperament, becomes infuriated at Jo for not allowing her to attend. While Jo and Meg are attending the play, Amy tosses Jo's manuscript into the fire in retaliation for being excluded from joining along. The following morning, when Jo realizes her manuscripts are missing, Amy eventually confesses to destroying Jo's writings. Requesting her sister's forgiveness, Jo harshly declines Amy's apology. Unlike the relationship she shares with her sister Beth, whom Jo refers to as 'her conscience,' the relationship Jo shares with Amy provides considerable tension in the novel, as she is equally strong-willed and independent like Jo.

In the next scene, Amy follows Jo and Laurie as they go ice skating on the pond, but Jo ignores her presence. While Laurie informs Jo of the thin ice, Jo, who is still upset with Amy, does not advise her sister of the danger. In trying to catch up to Laurie and Jo, Amy falls through a hole and screams out for help. Dashing to Amy's rescue, Laurie and Jo hold out a rail and haul her out from the freezing water. Wrapping her up in their winter coats, Jo, and Laurie return Amy home to be cared for by Marmee. Feeling regret for mistreating her younger sister, Jo confesses to Marmee about her rage. This scene leads up to a significant turning point in the story, and readers soon find Marmee exposing her vulnerabilities to advise Jo about the importance of forgiveness, "I am angry nearly every day of my life" (Alcott 116). Unlike what we observe between the relationship of Elsie Dinsmore and her father, Marmee never commands Jo to behave in a particular manner but instead, highlights her flaws, using it as an example to help guide her daughter. During their dialogue exchange, Jo learns that anger is a natural emotion and Marmee's admission of the same struggle provides Jo with comfort in knowing that she too, can take control of her feelings and empower herself to find solutions, "the knowledge that her mother had a fault like hers, and tried to mend it, made her own easier to bear" (Alcott 116). Alternatively, as Keren Fite further explains:

> Marmee's confession about her anger empowers Jo by normalizing her rage. Her fiery temper is no longer a mark of freakishness, shame, and loneliness, but an emblem of resemblance to her beloved mother that strengthens her ability to bear the burden of rage" (439).

Therefore, possessing further awareness about herself allows Jo to govern her own decisions, possess agency and ultimately bridge the gap between adolescence into young

adulthood.

As the story progresses, several incidents occur where Jo continues to show agency and make decisions on her own. In chapter thirteen, "Castles in the Air," the March girls venture to a hilltop to diligently spend time sewing, drawing, and reading. Laurie, who is lazing about, desperately wishes to join his new friends. When he asks if he can join the group, they inform him that he must find something productive to do to be part of the Busy Bee Society. Laurie more than happily agrees to be a part of their outing and decides to take turns reading a book aloud with Jo. Not long after, they all discuss their dreams for the future, and Jo admits her ambitions to the group:

> I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won't be forgotten after I'm dead. I don't know what, but I'm on the watch for it and mean to astonish you all someday. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream. (Alcott 180)

At this point in the novel, readers observe the spirited side that is integral to Jo's disposition and temperament. While Jo shares with the group her desire to become a famous writer, Beth confesses how she yearns to see heaven. Serving in direct contrast to Jo, Beth rarely leaves the domestic setting; hence, she becomes the character that becomes the most acted upon in the narrative. In analyzing the dichotomous personalities of their characters, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that “Alcott addressed the benefits of feminine socialization yet, she also “depicted the terrible cost of feminine submission through Beth’s suicide” (483). Displaying a static character who never grows from exposure to external experiences, Alcott reverses the advantage of being the

sympathetic subject. Jo, on the other hand, openly expresses her life's ambitions and finds a way to put her aspirations into action. Dynamically striking out on her own and taking claim of her agency, Jo advances the female role.

In the following chapter, Jo musters up the courage to deliver two manuscripts to the local newspaper. After hesitating several times, she finally enters into the building to submit her stories. Upon exiting the building, she encounters Laurie, who, unbeknownst to Jo, has been observing her the entire time. Laurie is now aware that Jo has a secret, and they both confess to one another the confidences they know. While Jo confesses her secret of submitting her stories to the newspaper, Laurie admits that his tutor, Mr. Brooks has made him aware of his intentions for Meg. The news of Mr. Brook's interest in her sister instantly troubles Jo. As one who dreads the thought of anyone changing her beloved family unit, the lack of control over what she holds dear stifles her into feeling powerless over the inevitable prospect. This passage is noteworthy to mention because agency has much to do with managing personal aspects that cannot be controlled. Since Jo, who typically takes charge of things, and views herself as "the man of the family" (Alcott 43) has little governance over Meg and Mr. Brooks union, she must also learn how to best manage her feelings when others make choices that are not within her control. Hence, an ability to act maturely also represents agency and self-control. After waiting anxiously for one week to hear the news about the publication of her stories, the postman finally delivers the newspaper to the home, and for the first time, Jo sees her name in print. Confidently reading the story to her family, Jo reveals herself as the published author. Putting herself out there and taking control of her life, serves as yet another concrete step towards Jo’s passage into adulthood.

In the ensuing chapter, the family receives word that Mr. March is wounded, and Marmee must leave to tend to her husband. Unable to pay for the journey, Marmee must turn to Aunt March to help subsidize the trip. While shopping for medical items for her mother's journey to assist her father, Jo resolves to cut her hair and earn twenty-five dollars, which helps to pay for part of her mother's travels, "I didn't beg, borrow, or steal it. I earned it, and I don't think you'll blame me, for I only sold what was my own" (Alcott 199). Once again, by venturing outside the boundaries of domestic life, earning money, becoming a published author, and providing for her family, Jo claims agency. Even her appearance of shorter hair takes on a unique identity for Jo, who has further learned to make decisions on her own.

In Part Two of the novel, three years have passed, the war has ended, and Jo is now steadily earning an income writing a column for the newspaper. While attending a lecture on ancient Egypt, a boy sitting next to Jo offers to let her read the paper. Jo reads that the publication is holding a writing contest and offering $100 prize money for the best short story. Once again, Jo submits one of her stories in hopes of being published and winning the contest. After six weeks pass, Jo receives a letter in the mail declaring that she has won the competition. Success inspires Jo to continue writing. When she shares her new romance story with her family, Mr. March voices concern that Jo may be underestimating herself as a writer and discourages her from sending in her story until it is ready for publication, "You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money" (Alcott 305). Nevertheless, Jo decides to submit the story, and after receiving mixed reviews, Jo feels misjudged by the critics. In this scene, Jo demonstrates agency by selecting to submit her story regardless of her father's advice. Despite falling

short of her desires, had Jo never taken it upon herself to act independently, she would never have an opportunity to learn how to improve herself as a writer.

In chapter thirty-two, "Tender Troubles," Jo resolves to leave domestic life behind and enter public life. Saddened by her aunt's decision to have Amy accompany her to France, Jo finds herself in need of change. One day, Jo notices Beth in tears, and reasons that her younger sister may have a fondness for Laurie. She determines that it may be a suitable time to break free from her home life. In the process of determining who she is not, Jo forges her way to discover whom she longs to be. She also hopes her time away from home will allow time for Laurie to take an interest in Beth. Not wishing anything to stand in the way of Beth's dreams, Jo travels to New York and begins working as a caretaker for the Kirke family. According to Janis Dawson, "Although Alcott has asserted her heroine's right to independence, she has not seriously challenged the domestic ideal. Jo is working for wages within a safe domestic environment" (117). Despite the security of the domestic setting of her new role, Jo still leaves the familiarity of her home and ventures into a world of uncertainty. In doing so, she creates new opportunities for herself, which further leads to her development and growth. While in New York, Jo meets a German professor, Fredrich Bhaer, a respectable gentleman who earns a meager income but is warm and kind. Soon, their friendship begins to blossom. Determined to continue selling her stories, Jo submits her sensational manuscripts to the Weekly Volcano. When Professor Bhaer and Jo meet for a German lesson one day, he recognizes by the look on Jo's face that she is the author of the sensational stories in the newspaper. Without calling her out directly, Professor Bhaer disapprovingly speaks of the harm the stories perpetuate.

Jo, who was once content with her achievement of earning a wage, realizes that her silly, innocuous stories are indeed trash, just as the Professor had avowed. Setting the newspapers ablaze in the stove, Jo rids herself of their harm, "They are trash and will soon be worse than trash if I go on, for each is more sensational than the last. I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money" (Alcott 393). According to Rachael Griffis, "Jo quickly submits to Professor Bhaer's pronouncement and alters her writing style and content around his opinion" (Griffis 270). However, this essay argues that Jo does not so easily succumb to Professor Bhaer. Instead, much like the influence Marmee has on Jo, the effect Professor Bhaer has on Jo helps to reshape her opinion. Only by learning from his tutelage is she able to gain a better understanding of the moral obligations she has to herself as well as others. Equally important to her own opinion, is his opinion as Professor Bhaer is both a mentor and a friend. By ridding herself of sensational writing, Jo makes a decision that matters.

When Jo returns home from New York, she becomes gravely concerned for Beth's steadily declining health. When they visit the seashore for several weeks, Jo learns the seriousness of Beth's illness. Upon returning home, Jo agrees to inform their parents of Beth's dire situation. Placing her craft of writing on hold, Jo takes over Beth's role as the "angel in the house," and assists in caring for her sister in her final days. Now having worked in both the public sphere and the domestic sphere, Jo develops a greater appreciation of the sacrifice's others must endure which continues to prepare her for adulthood. Beth's eventual death leads to a re-birth for Jo, who begins writing again. At this point in the story, Mr. March takes it upon himself to send her story into a prominent magazine, and much to Jo's surprise, her work becomes praised by critics who find value

and truth in her words. Sharing a conversation with her father, Mr. March explains to Jo why she has succeeded:

> There is truth in it, Jo, that's the secret, humor and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last. You wrote with no thought of fame or money and put your heart into it my daughter; you have had the bitter and now comes the sweet (Alcott 474).

Readers now observe how acts of independence help to form Jo's distinct identity. Near the end of the story, Jo, and Professor Bhaer marry and start a family of their own. With the help of other family members, they transform Plumfield House into a boarding school for boys, and the students of the school become part of their extended family. Each of the March sisters now has children of their own, and in the final scene, the sisters are discussing their 'Castles in the Air' from their adolescent years. Analyzing this scene, Sari Edelstein argues, “Ultimately, *Little Women* fails to imagine womanhood as anything other than marriage and motherhood” (524). However, this essay argues quite the opposite for Jo, whose character never desired to marry or have children but to do something great with her life. Regardless of the influence others have had on Jo, the events of her life were not forced upon her, but instead, sought after on her own, free of control and authority. Or as Jill P. May attests, "The characters in *Little Women* do not make a vocal commitment to the early Women's Movement, but they do suggest that women have a right to express themselves freely in conversation, to choose roles for themselves, and to maintain their goals after marriage" (May 19), which is precisely what we witness with Jo’s character, who actively chooses to remain in the public work world by operating a school for boys. We have now identified the progression of agency that

has occurred in the first three novels, the next chapter of this essay will reflect on a novel where we observe a heroine who does not define herself by any societal role, but rather one who continually acts with agency and independence.

CHAPTER 5: NELLY'S SILVER MINE BY HELEN HUNT JACKSON

Nelly's Silver Mine was written by Helen Hunt Jackson and published ten years after the release of *Little Women.* It was the only children's book Helen Hunt Jackson wrote. Although it has mostly escaped the attention of literary critics and scholars, it has a valuable place in nineteenth-century American children's literature. The narrative details an exciting adventure about a family from Mayfield, Massachusetts, who move out West to Colorado in efforts to cure the father, who is suffering from asthma. The heroine of Jackson's coming of age novel is twelve-year-old Nelly March, a mature and determined adolescent. According to Dr. Mark West, "*Nelly's Silver Mine* is one of the first realistic children's books to be set in the West; it also features a strong female protagonist, a fast-moving plot, and well-drawn secondary characters" (71).

As we have observed with both Warner's and Finley's coming-of-age novels, the protagonists Ellen Montgomery and Elsie Dinsmore both express personal agency, but do so by taking advantage of the reverence and veneration attached to the feminine role. With Jo March, we observe a protagonist who makes the shift towards independence and pushes past the boundaries of societal norms. The heroine of Jackson's novel, Nelly March, stands apart from the others in that she is never in question of her role. This essay will highlight examples of her self-determinacy and show a newly formed feminine identity.

Helen Fiske, the author of Nelly's Silver Mine, was born in Amherst, Massachusetts. Her father, Nathan Welby Fiske, was a minister who taught at Amherst College, and her mother, Deborah Waterman Vinal came from a well-established family in New England. While Fiske was still in her adolescence, her parents died. She was left in the care of her

uncle, and arrangements were made for her to receive a formal education at the Abbott Institute, a well-known boarding school in New York. While a student at the school, she was a classmate of famous poet Emily Dickinson and the two became close friends, corresponding with one another into their adulthood.

At the age of 22, Fiske married United States Army Captain Edward Bissell Hunt and had two sons. After tragically losing both of her sons due to illness, as well as her husband to an experimental marine accident, Hunt grew overcome with profound grief and suffered from failing health. In the winter of 1874, at the advice of her doctor, Hunt moved to Colorado Springs and, while there, met William Sharpless Jackson, a wealthy railroad executive whom she married in 1875. Helen Hunt Jackson became an activist for Indian Policy Reform and is best known for *A Century of Dishonor*, a non-fiction book that recounted the injustices of Native Americans. In her novel *Nelly's Silver Mine*, Jackson provides a realistic depiction of nineteenth-century life out West, and readers can easily enjoy the detailed description of the Colorado landscape. (West 72).

Analogous to *Little Women*, the story begins at Christmastime as Nelly and her twin brother are lying awake in their beds, gazing longingly at their holiday stockings. Small framed and somewhat sickly, her twin brother Rob must remain in bed until the home is rid of the morning chill before he can open his gifts. Nelly, who acts more maturely than her brother, decides to wait until Rob can walk about the house so they both may enjoy opening their gifts together. From the opening of the novel, readers observe something unique about Nelly's nature. Acting well beyond her years, we immediately gain a sense of Nelly's self-sufficiency when she chooses to suspend her own enjoyment of opening holiday gifts to wait for her brother. This scene in the novel is significant to remark upon

because it shows the method of realism Jackson employed when developing her story. Although Rob and Nelly are twins, readers gain a clear sense of Nelly's advancement to that of Rob's, which is a realistic characteristic of female adolescents.

Not long into the novel, Nelly and Rob are engaged in a discussion regarding a conversation Nelly has overheard between their parents. Rob pleads with Nelly to reveal what she has learned. Nelly, however, is resolved to do what she believes is appropriate and silences her brother's constant questioning, "No, Rob I'm not going to tell you anything about it," replied Nelly. "It wouldn't be fair, because they didn't want us to know. It'll be time enough when it comes" (Jackson, 6). In this exchange, Nelly is deciding to do what she believes is proper. By refusing to share the details of what she has heard, she sets an example of proper behavior for her brother, who acts out impulsively.

In chapter two, "A Talk About Leaving Mayfield," Rob shares with Nelly his feelings about not wanting to wear a cumbersome woolen scarf while outside because the neighborhood boys will laugh at him. In this scene, Nelly artfully finds a way to persuade her brother to wear the scarf, so that he will resolve to do what is best for himself, "I don't care, I shouldn't mind. …Boys are a great deal hatefuller than girls. No girl would ever say such a thing as that to a girl if she were sick, or to a boy either" (Jackson 19). Here, we observe Nelly's awareness of others as well as her influence on her twin brother. In this scene, Nelly hides the hurt she feels when Ned Saunders ridicules her brother and therefore helps him decide to do what is wisest for himself. Hence, her character is unique in that she understands her agency. Nelly is willing to set her own needs aside to assist the needs of another. Describing her heroine's self-

determination, Jackson defines her protagonist as a girl who is calm and quiet yet "deliberate in all her movements" (Jackson 24). Before long, Mrs. March reveals to her children that she and Mr. March have been discussing the possibility of a move out West to help remedy their father's worsening asthma. Adventurous Rob, who is enthralled with a book he is reading entitled "Cliff Climbers," suggests a move to the Himalayan mountain range instead of Colorado. Acting as a mentor to her brother yet again, Nelly points out the location of the Himalayan mountain range on a globe and shares with her brother the difficulty they would experience living in such a remote location at high altitude. As Mr. March arrives home, Rob acts out excitedly about the prospect of his new adventure. However, Nelly, who is more interested in understanding her father's frame of mind than in expressing her sentiments, enquires as to her father's feelings of the move. Sagacious and sensible, Nelly is once again observant of the feelings of others and uses her interpretation of them to make informed decisions. By being aware, Nelly knows enough to ask questions, gain clarity, and more greatly control the factors that play into those decisions.

During breakfast the following morning, Mr. March announces to his family that they will move to Colorado in the Spring. Dropping her fork and knife, Nelly looks steadily at her father for a full minute and then eventually reveals her exhilaration of the news. Similar to the relationship shared between Elsie and her father, the bond between Nelly and her father is unique. When Mr. and Mrs. March share conversations about the children, Mr. March continually acknowledges Nelly for her perceptiveness and good sense. Unlike the relationship Elsie shares with Horace, Nelly does not have to follow by her father's commands. Instead, she empowers herself to act of her own accord. By

giving her readers a self-governing heroine, we observe how a progression of agency has taken shape.

In chapter three, “Off For Colorado,” the March family is soon to board the train out West. They are joined by Deacon Plummer and his wife, an elderly couple from their parish, who are also headed out West to improve Mrs. Plummer’s persistent cough. As they set out on their journey, Nelly decides to carry the new wax doll she received at Christmas despite her mother’s recommendation to pack the toy in the trunk. Nelly recognizes the risk of carrying the doll with her on the train, as it may get damaged, but decides to carry her doll regardless. Nelly’s conversation with her mother prompts a disagreement between Nelly and Rob, who rarely think alike about most things. While speaking about her doll, Nelly expresses agency by reminding Rob that she has choice, "I can talk if I've a mind to," retorted Nelly; "but I don't want to; that is, not very often: I don't see the use in it” (Jackson 53).

While on the train, two young German girls frighten Nelly as they reach out to touch her doll. Pleading with the girls to cease, Nelly turns to Rob to help run interference. Stepping in to assist his sister, Rob shoves the girls away, but no sooner than he tells the young girls to stay clear of his sister, a very tall man raises him by the nape of his neck and gives him a box in the ear. Begging the man to let go of her brother, Nelly drops her wax doll in all the scuffle, and soon it becomes trampled on and destroyed in the turmoil. When comparing this scene to the story of *Little Women*, we observe how both heroines learn from their experience and make decisions based on what they have learned. In *Little Women*, Jo March longs to publish her work and earn an income from her writing. Despite already being published, Jo decides to submit sensational stories to the

newspaper to earn money. In the process of learning the damage they could potentially cause; Jo learns there are other things more important than seeing her name in print. Likewise, by trying to deceive herself into thinking that the doll was best served in her arms and not packed away in the trunk, Nelly realizes there are other things more important than showing off one's possessions.

Furthermore, both heroines learn that not all acts of independence lead to happiness or success. In *Little Women*, after Jo speaks with Professor Bhaer, she realizes her sensational stories are damaging and decides to throw her stories into the fire. Similarly, Nelly realizes that her doll would have been cared for in the truck as her mother advised, and eventually decides to throw the mangled toy out the window of the train. By allowing both Jo and Nelly to learn from her own mistakes, both protagonists make the step beyond childhood and into young adulthood.

After one week of travel, the family arrives in Denver, Colorado, and soon make their way southbound, along the picturesque canyons of the Ute Pass. As soon as they arrive at the ranch, they meet Zeb, who is the land over-seer. In chapter six, "Life at Garlands," Nelly and Rob are exploring the new property and surroundings, and Nelly responds to her brother's comment about selling flowers, "Well, papa says that God makes them grow on purpose for us to see how pretty they are. They aren't of any other use: they aren't the same as potatoes" (Jackson 140). In this scene, Nelly applies her meaning to her father's words and decides to view flowers as objects of beauty rather than items to be peddled. By voicing her own opinion, Nelly expresses agency.

While there, the family encounters a man by the name of Long Billy, who teaches Rob and Nelly about silver mines. Long Billy also informs Mr. March about the town of

Rosita and the fertile farmland of the Wet Mountain Range, which is better suited for raising stock. After returning from their visit to Rosita, Mr. March and Long Billy announce to the family that will be moving to the valley. With Long Billy as their guide, the family heads southbound to the far-reaching valley. While en route to their new land, Rob and Nelly go exploring in the tall grass. While sightseeing, Rob accidentally falls into the creek and gets covered up to his elbows in sludge. Tearing off two rails from the fence, Billy, and Mr. March fish the young lad out of the muddy creek, and soon Rob is sent into the barn to rest in the hay, staying warm and dry. As Mrs. March and Nelly sit by Rob's side telling him a story until he falls asleep, Mrs. March asks Nelly to join her in exploring their new dwelling. Concerned at leaving her brother without help, Nelly declines her mother's request, "But, mamma," said Nelly, "I think I'll stay here. If he waked up, he would feel so lonely here; and he can't get out of the hay" (Jackson 177). As the rational, levelheaded thinker of the family, Nelly chooses to stay by her brother's side. Taking his needs into consideration, Nelly selflessly decides to do what is most appropriate for her family. Making a decision absent from her parents' guidance, Nelly's independence earns attention from others.

In chapter nine, "Wet Mountain Valley," three years have passed, and Nelly has now developed into a young adult. No longer is she entertained with dolls but now shows a greater fondness of reading books and helping tend to her family's needs. The first year of their life in the valley is met with great prosperity, and Mr. March spends much of the first year's profits on books, clothes, and furniture. In the second and third year, however, grasshoppers play havoc with their crops, and the family is forced to sell their possessions to make ends meet. Similar to the enterprising spirit Jo possesses, Nelly

comes up with the idea to sell eggs and butter to the townspeople in order to help contribute to the family's financial struggles, "I don't know what else there is for us to do. We haven't got any money; I think papa's real worried, and mamma too; and you and I've just got to help" (Jackson 193).

When Long Billy offers to help Nelly transport the eggs and butter, she explains to him that she is capable of making the walk into town by herself. By leaving the domestic sphere and entering into the public sphere, much like Jo, Nelly earns a wage to help support her needy family. Nelly takes the initiative and elects not to seek the help of her parents. Instead, she resourcefully informs them of how she is going to help contribute. Later that evening, Long Billy shares a conversation with his fiancé, Lucinda, about Nelly's self-reliance. Describing a conversation Nelly shares with one of the local miners earlier that day, Long Billy explains to Lucinda what he overhears, "No, thank you,' said she to Jake: 'Billy wanted to carry them for me, but I wouldn't let him. I like to carry them all the way myself, to see if I can" (Jackson, 197).

Later in the chapter, Rob shares with Nelly how he can help double their money by selling trout. Nelly agrees to help put the grasshoppers on the fishhook, a job she dislikes, but will sacrifice her discomfort for her family's benefit. However, when Rob tries to cook the fish on the stone, he ends up burning his fingers, and Nelly must come to his rescue and show him how to flip the fish with a larger stick to avoid getting burnt. In all these examples, Nelly's shrewdness prevails. Nelly is a heroine who is of good sense and solid judgment and has a belief in her ability to succeed. Instead of being ridiculed for stepping outside of the domestic sphere, Nelly is praised by Long Billy, Ulrica, and Mrs. Clapp for helping to support her family. She is also extolled for her consideration of

others, and it is through her relationships with others, that helps advance her identity and sense of self.

One of the most important themes of the narrative is foreshadowed at the beginning of the story but carried until the end. At the end of chapter two, the author is speaking directly to the reader and shares a tale about a poor slave by the name of Epictetus, who was known to have professed wise words. Jackson shares what Epictetus had written in his book, further describing the importance of his message:

> There are things which are within our power, and there are things which are beyond our power. Seek at once to be able to say to every unpleasing semblance: 'You are but a semblance, and by no means the real thing.' And then examine it by those rules which you have; and first and chiefly by this: whether it concerns the things which are within our own power, or those which are not; and if it concerns anything beyond our power, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you. (Jackson 40)

The essence of Nelly's journey through her adolescence rests on this quote. How she chooses to manage the satisfaction and disappointment of her experiences further enables her to develop into a young adult. By leaving her home and going into town, Nelly focuses on what is within her control to bring about a better life. Another example of this occurs when she and Rob receive yokes from their friend Ulrica to wear on their shoulders to assist in hauling baskets of eggs and butter. When she and Rob are ridiculed by local schoolboys, Nelly declares to her family, "I'm not going to think any more about it," said Nelly. "I don't care for those boys: they're too rude for anything. I sha'n't ever look at one of them; but you wouldn't catch me wearing that yoke again, I tell you"

(Jackson 223). In this example, Nelly is aware that she cannot change the attitudes of others, but what she can alter is how she responds to her environment. Even though the yokes are useful and help carry more products than if Nelly was to carry baskets in each hand, Nelly recognizes that she cannot prevent the actions of others and therefore makes the decision not to place herself in a position of ridicule. Her decision not to wear the yoke is significant because making decisions on her own, does not always signify on will receive happiness and satisfaction. Frequently, making decisions often involves making the most optimal choice based on one's set of circumstances and or limitations.

While in town selling eggs one morning, Nelly meets Mr. Kleesman, a local assayer who agrees to show Nelly the process of how to look for silver in ore. While visiting him in his office one day, a man enters the room to have his bundle of stones analyzed for the presence of silver. Nelly listens to Mr. Kleesman inform the man that the blackened mineral is of decent quality and tries herself to recollect where she has seen the black stone while on walks along the valley. Growing pensive about the location of the blackened stone, Nelly desires to search for the mineral. In the next scene, Long Billy asks Mr. and Mrs. March if Nelly can stay with Lucinda while he is out of town. Upon hearing the news, Nelly is happy to stay with Lucinda and have the time to walk along the ravine in search for ore. After a full day’s search, Nelly finally stumbles upon black stones in the ravine and so as not to forget the exact location, breaks branches along the way so that she will recall the pathway. Later that evening, Nelly shares with her father about the stones. Reluctant that much will come of her findings, Mr. March decides to seek the counsel of Mr. Scholfield, a local businessperson who claims to know about mining for silver. Mr. March arranges to give a third of the profits to Mr. Scholfield who

can provide the money upfront to work the mine. The following day, Nelly leads her father, brother, and Mr. Scholfield to the ravine, and after Mr. Scholfield claims the land is of worth and names the mine the Little Nelly. Being the independent female that she is, Nelly decides to designate it 'The Good Luck Mine,' giving direct ownership of the land to her father.

Fame of "The Good Luck Mine" spreads all over town, but many persist in calling the mine the Little Nelly. Mr. March and Nelly visit Mr. Kleesman, who tells them that he will assay the stones free of charge, so he can better determine if it is worth their effort in working the mine. After quickly glancing at the mineral, Mr. Kleesman grows quiet, and Nelly can determine by his expression that the stone is of no value. For a brief moment, Nelly feels melancholy that continuing to work the mine will be a fruitless and regrets ever mentioning the mine to her family. Providing a realistic account, "Jackson's sober conclusion is consistent with what often happened to miners in Colorado," which provided a truthful portrayal of frontier life out West. (West 74). Mr. Kleesman sends the letter confirming little value in the mine. Behaving as Epictetus had advised his readers, Nelly quickly puts behind what she can no longer control.

Near the end of the story, Rob and Nelly meet a family who has set up camp not too far from their home, and the two families become good friends. Mr. and Mrs. Cooke invite Nelly and Rob to join them in New York for several months, and in the final scene, Nelly is preparing for her first journey away from home. Before the children leave, Nelly takes it upon herself to visit with the friends she has made along the way to bid them farewell. Long Billy inquires as to whether or not Rob plans to say goodbye, and Nelly explains that he will do so on the day that they depart. Once again, Long Billy speaks to

his fiancé Lucinda about the maturity he sees in Nelly, "That's just the difference between the two children, Luce," said Billy, after Nelly had walked on: "Rob he's all for himself, without meanin' to be, either; he jest don't think: but Nelly she's thoughtful 's a woman about everybody" (Jackson 324).

Now a young adult, readers can identify ways in which Nelly has taken it upon herself to act with agency. She had looked after her brother when he was unable to look after himself, she chose to leave the domestic sphere and enter into the public sphere in order to earn money for her impoverished family, and she educated herself about mining for silver, finding a mine of her own. These events show a female protagonist who can strike out on her own, away from parental care, and act with independence.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

To gain a broader sense as to the progression of agency of the female role in American children's literature during the nineteenth century, as well as summarize each of these four novels, it is imperative to conclude this essay by briefly remarking upon the element of influence that factored into the formation of identity for each protagonist in each of these widely acclaimed children's stories. Identity formation may be defined as the development of the distinct personality of an individual in a particular stage of life in which individual characteristics are possessed and by which a person is recognized or known. As it relates to the stories we have analyzed thus far, identity is not only defined by how each character defines themselves, but also how they are defined in context to their relationship with others. Therefore, the relationships that influence each heroine's identity is critical to remark upon, because it directly factors into one's expression of agency, independence, and liberation.

6.1. Ellen Montgomery

Of the four heroines discussed in this essay, Ellen Montgomery is the protagonist who not only possesses the least freedom but also whose circumstance is the most constrained. She is the only female of the four heroines who is separated from a mother's love and guidance. Without her mother's support, Ellen grows heavily dependent on those figures that surround her. Hence, it is not surprising that she clings to what is familiar and determines to be dutiful to God. In the initial stages of her life, Mrs. Montgomery's influence on Ellen is the most significant to Ellen, and mostly what motivates her to lead a Christian life. Having never been told the truth about her mother's grave situation provides Ellen with hope that she will be reunited with her

mother again one day, which helps carry her through her grief and drives her spiritual quest even further. Conflict arises when Ellen's religious outlook causes conflict with her cold-hearted aunt, who believes much by way of spirituality is foolishness. Hence, it becomes the perfect storm for Ellen, who is innocently unaware of her precise circumstance. Clearly, she is deprived of a mother's love, abandoned by a neglectful father, and forced to live under the care of a distant relative that is indifferent to her needs. The effect all of these individuals have on Ellen is significant, and eventually what leads to her seeking like-minded individuals to help solidify a belief in her faith.

When Ellen befriends Alice Humphreys, a friend who encourages her feminine virtues, Ellen learns how to be patient, obedient, and forgiving. While in the company of the Humphrey family, Ellen acquires the ability to self-sacrifice. By using feminine virtues to her advantage, she gains agency and independence. One of the most memorable interactions occurs near the end of the novel when Ellen moves to Scotland to live with her mother's family. Speaking with Mr. Lindsay about historical figures of the past, Ellen explains to Mr. Lindsay how her Savior enlightens people to what is proper and just:

> "From the Bible, sir," said Ellen quickly, with a look that half-amused and half abashed him.
>
> "And you, Ellen, are you yourself good after this nice fashion?"
>
> "No, sir, but I wish to be."
>
> "I do believe that. But after all, Ellen, you might like Nelson; those were only the spots in the sun."
>
> "Yes, sir, but can a man be a truly great man who is not master of himself?"

"That is an excellent remark."

"It is not mine, sir," said Ellen, blushing; "it was told me; I did not find out all that about Nelson myself; I did not see it all the first time I read his life; I thought he was perfect."

"I know who I think is," said Mr. Lindsay, kissing her (Warner 521).

While this scene shows Ellen's desire to be dutiful to God, it also demonstrates her performance at being the sentimental subject. By exposing her spiritual deficiencies and taking responsibility for her own morality, Ellen gains sympathy, admiration, and respect from those in a position of authority who view her as femininely ideal. Hence, pious behavior gives Ellen greater power and control. Additionally, this exchange also speaks to the relevance of self-governance. Therefore, Warner may have been eluding to the notion that people can only be truly great when they are free to make their own decisions.

In studying Jane Tompkins's reading of *The Wide, Wide World*, LuElla D'Amico remarks on Ellen's eventual awareness, "Ellen is a socially savvy young women who understands patriarchal expectations of female submissiveness and overcomes them through managing her emotions and her performance of them, consequently managing how others perceive her" (D'Amico 6). Although it is primarily the decisions of others that reflect the values that influence and govern Ellen's life, it is how she manages her role as a female that enables her to navigate her way to her freedom.

6.2 Elsie Dinsmore

Before summarizing the major influence on Elsie Dinsmore's identity, it is essential to point out that only one-year passes in the first novel of the series. Unlike the three other novels where readers witness a child making the passage into her adolescence, Elsie

remains a child in the first book of the series. Despite being younger and living under the direct authority of an immensely stern father, Elsie has awareness and confidence in knowing who she is, is resolute in her convictions, acts of her own will. Similar to Ellen, she is also without parents but only an infant when her mother dies. Consequently, she does not suffer the same level of anguish as Ellen. In the absence of parental care, she becomes most greatly influenced by her Christian caretaker, Aunt Chloe, who teaches her the importance of possessing a strong faith in God. Thus, the impact of the rapport they share is vital to consider, because it impresses upon her identity at an early age and ultimately helps solidify her belief system.

As readers are made aware early in the novel, Elsie and Aunt Chloe move into her grandfather's estate where she is primarily overseen by her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Dinsmore. They are envious of her inherited wealth and before long, begin to mistreat her and take advantage of her innocence. Although she is acted upon by others, she is never corrupted by their resentment towards her and uses it as a method to further develop her morality and spiritual self. In one scene, while Miss Day is scolding Elsie for what she believes to be impertinent behavior, Elsie holds back her tears and reads a passage of the Bible, in search of solace and strength. Despite the Dinsmore's exploitation of her honorability, it does not cause resentment in young Elsie and only impresses upon her keen sense of faith. Elsie takes every opportunity to abide by the will of God in order to improve herself.

When her father returns home from Europe, she aims to earn his favor, but earning his love never becomes more important to her than the love she has for her Savior. Near the end of the novel, Elsie expresses agency by speaking with her father about the

importance of always placing God first in her life,

> "Dear papa, please don't be angry," she pleaded, tearfully, "but you know what Jesus says, “He that keepeth my commandments, he is it that loveth me.” He stooped over her. "Goodnight, daughter," he said. "Dear, dear Papa," she cried, throwing her arm around his neck, and drawing down his face close to hers, "I do love you so very, very much!"
>
> "Better than anybody else?" he asked.
>
> "No, papa, I love Jesus best; you next" (Finley).

By the end of the novel, Horace Dinsmore appreciates the value of his daughter’s faith and, as the series progresses, alters his earthly beliefs, and becomes a man of faith. Not only does Elsie influence her father’s faith but also her father’s best friend, Mr. Travilla, whom she later marries in the second book in the series. Consistently feeling empowered to speak openly about her Savior, Elsie herself becomes an influencer or an agent of change and thereby progresses the female role.

6.3. Jo March

At the start of the novel, Jo March is already an adolescent and earning an income to help support her needy family. With her character being five years the senior to both Ellen and Elsie, Jo does not require a parent or guardian to make decisions on her behalf and, therefore, already possesses more independence than the other two protagonists. Unlike Ellen and Elsie, Jo also shares her life with sisters and has the added responsibility of being a role model to both her younger sisters. These aspects factor into her expression of agency; however, the primary influence on her identity is the relationship she shares with her mother. With Mr. March serving in the war, Marmee is the only

parent present to assist in steering Jo's growth and development. As the primary figure in her life, Marmee helps empower Jo to find solutions on her own. With her guidance, Jo leaves domestic life behind and forge her pathway in life. By striking out on her own and becoming a published writer, Jo takes claim of her agency.

There are two figures aside from Marmee that also significantly influence her identity. The first is the relationship she shares with her neighbor Laurie, and the second is the relationship she shares with Professor Bhaer. The critical aspect that plays into her relationship with Laurie is the naturalness she feels while in his company. With three traditional female siblings, Jo longs to do boyish things, be adventurous, and therefore struggles at the feminine role. When Jo is in Laurie's company, she does not have to concern herself with acting ladylike and therefore feels a sense of ease or liberation being herself. Before long, Laurie expresses affection towards her, but Jo, who does not share his feelings tries to prevent him from uttering the inevitable. A turning point occurs in the story when Jo observes her younger sister crying to herself. Jo believes her sister may have a fondness for Laurie. Seeking Marmee's counsel, Jo decides to leave for New York to pursue her dreams. By leaving the domestic sphere and heading out on her own to earn a wage, Jo demonstrates independence. Furthermore, being conscious of a life she does not desire, serves as the catalyst that further drives her to make a purposeful decision about a life she does. Thus, his influence is integral to Jo's development and sense of self.

The second most influential friendship in Jo's life is the relationship she shares with her friend and mentor, Professor Bhaer. Despite his innocuous flaws, Professor Bhaer is wise and honorable, and a person in whom she finds decency and truth. In one scene in

the novel, Jo, and Professor Bhaer are at a symposium, and Jo begins listening to a philosophical conversation, a few attendees are sharing about religion. Professor Bhaer joins the discussion speaking out in honest indignation, to defend the concept of religion. It is not the truth of his words but his consciousness to stand up for what he believes in that impresses upon her. In efforts to earn his respect and improve herself, Jo gives up authoring sensational stories and begins authoring stories of merit. Professor Bhaer's influence on Jo is momentous and directly impacts the decisions that affect her life. More pointedly, her character represents a female protagonist that is no longer being acted upon, but rather, one that creates her own mobility and independent identity thereby transforming the female role.

6.4 Nelly March

With the narrative *Nelly's Silver Mine*, readers observe a character who possesses the most deep-seated independence of all the four heroines. Nelly is more advanced than her male counterpart, and she is mindful of the advantage she has in being more mature. Acting protective of her twin brother, she places herself in a position of authority. In one scene in the novel, Mrs. March overhears her children disagreeing on the location to store their hairbrushes. As Mr. and Mrs. March discuss their children's conversation, Mrs. March shares Nelly's words with her husband, "Rob March! you can move those hair-brushes just as often as you please: it won't make the least difference. I shall move them right back again into this drawer if it's every day of your life till you're fifty years old" (Jackson 203). This passage highlights the control Nelly assumes. Careful of thought and deliberate in her actions, Nelly makes decisions on her own such as carrying her doll on the train, selling eggs and butter in town, or taking it upon herself to look for the

blackened stone. Similar to Jo, Nelly takes it upon herself to experience new opportunities, which, in effect, allows her to make decisions on her own. In the process of expressing agency and acting freely, Nelly establishes a new female identity, a female figure who is not acted upon or in need of performing at her role, but rather one that formulates her own opinions that govern her life.

Drawing on the domestic lives of each of these four heroines, we can observe a pattern that takes shape in the progression of agency of the female role occurring in American children's novels towards the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the earlier books, *The Wide, Wide World,* and *Elsie Dinsmore,* the heroines exhibit pockets of agency over authority, yet they are still very much entrenched in the feminine ideal where females are more greatly acted upon and having to manage their virtues to gain power or control. In the later novels, *Little Women* and *Nelly's Silver Mine*, we witness heroines who, in the absence of authority, make purposeful choices and act with agency. In sum, each of these revolutionary novels continued to have an impact that had gone well beyond the book itself. Throughout time their characters have served as role models for an increasing female readership and operated as steppingstones for works that followed and continued to show the advancement of the female role. In essence, the very notion which aimed at promoting 'a true women' did just that! Helping give rise to its change and improvement.

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