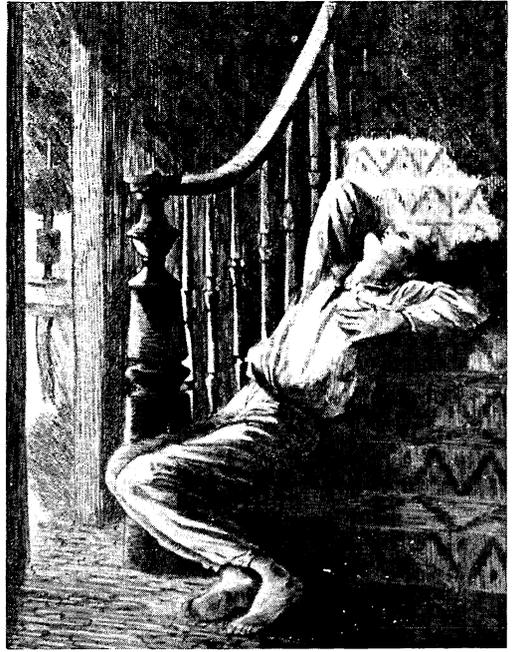


**weak fathers
and other beasts**

**an examination
of the american male
in domestic novels, 1850-1870**

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Alas! He has an imbecility of mind, and infirmity of purpose, a cowardliness of heart. . . .¹

While marked attention in recent years has been given to the heroines of mid-nineteenth century American domestic novels by such critics as Nina Baym and Ann Douglas Wood, little seems to have been done with the male characters, with the exception of suitors. While suitors serve as either a kind of prize or, more frequently, as an obstacle to the heroine's ambitions, one should not overlook the importance of the other male figures in the novel—figures which very frequently control the heroine's money, mobility, education or incipient career. Superficially, these figures serve to illustrate both by character contrast and plot complications the singular strength of the heroine and her spiritual superiority to men in general when faced with adversity. More specifically, however, the male characters reflect a singular picture of the world women writers seemingly felt they lived in—one dominated, as we shall see, by both male prerogative and the males' incompetence to fulfill their prerogative.

FIGURE ONE: Men, usually in control of the heroine's money, education or career, often were incompetent "when faced with adversity." (Illustration originally appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* [July 11, 1868], 589. Reprinted by permission from *Harper's Bazaar*.)

That men receive such marked, negative treatment at the hands of these novelists is, in itself, interesting, and presents something of a question mark to the ordinary scholar steeped in the works of historians such as Barbara Welter, Daniel Walker Howe and Ann Douglas. The current wisdom derived from such authors holds that, due to culturally held set values expressed in what Welter calls the "Cult of True Womanhood," the mid-nineteenth century ideal woman accepted her natural position as one of a well-oiled satellite, endlessly and harmoniously circling a central masculine sun. Ideal women, as Welter describes them, were pious, pure, domestic and most of all, submissive.² As Howe notes, the ideal woman "was expected to operate to a large extent through emotional conditioning, conceding to her husband superiority in the ultimately more important domain of reason."³ How surprising it is, then, to find the majority of men in these novels portrayed as obviously incompetent in regard to those problems in the "more important domain of reason," such as financial planning and theological criticism. The presence of such male figures, therefore, presents potentially severe philosophical problems to both the woman reader of the novel and, of course, the heroine inside the story: how can being "feminine" be anything but suicidal if women must concede the final decision in regard to crucial questions to those more incompetent than themselves? Obviously, they cannot; pragmatism and preservation of either the rest of the family or themselves militate against such self-destructive behavior. The heroines of these novels must, therefore, take up the financial burdens, use their own judgment and education and become self-reliant. Any philosophical problems concerning femininity resulting from such actions are solved by the presence of weak men. These men provide the all-important rationale and justification for shifting the borders of the Cult of True Womanhood to include more intelligent and self-reliant qualities, all in the name of *being* true women—but true women *in adversity*. Heroines do not rebel explicitly but rather deal strongly and competently with the circumstances in which they find themselves. They show grit, not gall. With the "right kind" of man, the heroines may lay down many of their assumed burdens, though it is often the self-reliant qualities which attract the "right kind" of man. Sometimes the "right kind" of man never quite shows up in the novel at all.

It is my desire to show that a large and varied number of such negative portraits of men did, in fact, exist in important and popular domestic novels. Further, I intend to suggest that these portraits are neither inexplicable anomalies existing in the midst of a homogeneous popular ideal of True Womanhood nor are they the products of a self-conscious political feminism; rather, the weak male characters, in combination with the strong heroines, are possibly the first inchoate indication of a *competing* popular ideal which other evidence (including advice books and etiquette manuals) suggests arose between 1840-1880. This emerging ideal required of its perfect woman self-sufficiency, high intellectual ability, physical strength and late marriage, and it used the twin justifications of financial adversity and necessity (because of male incompetence) to provide the

rationale which would allow its advocates to act as they did and still claim the right to the label "feminine." The novelists may claim (some more tepidly than others) that woman's primary sphere is moral and domestic—but by their heroines' actions, they grossly extend that sphere to include (out of necessity of course) working for a living, studying academic subjects and redefining the doctrines of Calvinism. The result is a curiously bifurcated effect when one reads these novels: we are *told* mildly traditional doctrines explicitly, but somehow, we don't really believe in their validity, and the portraits of the men are an important reason why we don't.

However fascinating the heroines of these novels are, there is no scholarly need here to make them the center of critical interest. Other critics, most especially Nina Baym in her recent study *Woman's Fiction* (1978), have already dealt extensively and elegantly with these characters. What is needed, critically, is some careful classification and analysis of the males in these novels—both in terms of their nature and in terms of their relations with the heroine—in order to show the essence of that crucial justification for ideal change.

At this point, some questions could legitimately be raised concerning both the size of the samples from the novels that I use, and the number of novels that I choose to examine. My reasons for restricting the sample are particularly literary, rather than historical. Because of the nature of the analysis, there is a need for classification rather than simple computation, and chronology that must be included as summary. All of these considerations dictate that fewer novels be dealt with at key moments, rather than a large number of them dealt with quantitatively.

The choice of these particular authors, however, must first be explained. Given the previously mentioned limitations of number and sample size, I chose domestic authors who were as representative of those writing in the genre as possible. Caroline Hentz, Mary Jane Holmes, Elizabeth Phelps and Augusta Evans were all extremely popular novelists in their own time; their novels were reissued over a decade or more and sold tens of thousands of copies. They were as popular in the United States, in fact, as those authors we now consider notable, such as Hawthorne, Melville or even Poe.⁴ Since one of my critical concerns is indicating the possible existence of a competing popular ideal for women, my purposes are best served by those authors who were widely and consistently read at the time, even though the weak man occurs in works by other authors as well—one thinks immediately of Hawthorne's Dimsdale as the perfect example of the morally weak man for whom a woman must take up the spiritual burden.

If, as Baym has suggested,⁵ Phelps and Evans are contributors to the final epoch of serious domestic fiction (Hentz one of the earliest, and Holmes one of the most representational authors), then these writers themselves are accurately representative of the genre. On one hand, if one uses novelists who did the majority of their work before 1840, like Catharine Maria Sedgewick, the picture is somewhat slanted by the influence of the "seduction motif" then pre-eminent in fiction. If, on the

other hand, one uses much later novelists such as Martha Finley, the genre audience and heroines become increasingly not women but young girls. I chose each novel, moreover, as representative of its author's body of work. Evans' *St. Elmo*, for example, is much more in keeping with the rest of her corpus than the later *Vashti*; Hentz's *Linda*, though not as notorious as her later novel, *The Planter's Northern Bride*, is much closer to *Rena* and her other novels in terms of both tone and male characterization.

A word about the method of literary criticism I used. To understand the novelist's circumnavigation of the passive ideals of True Womanhood through the figures of the men in the novels, I decided to examine not only the overt "voice" of the author as it intrudes in commentary or speaks through the heroine, but to listen as well to the more subtle "voice," narratively, that accrues from the structure, sequence and meaning of events—either as they form a pattern themselves or in relation to dialogue.

Some generalizations about the males that these women writers portray are in order. The implicit consensus of writers such as Caroline Hentz, Mary Jane Holmes, Augusta Evans and Elizabeth Phelps seems to be that American men are characterized by weakness, dishonesty, savagery or some combination of all of these. Given the enormous emphasis ladies' magazines and other periodicals placed on "self-control" and "self-government" during this period,⁶ the inability to control one's passions would certainly have been considered another form of weakness—either moral or emotional—to the nineteenth century mind. Intellectual dishonesty would also fall neatly into the category of ethical weakness, since it implies a queasy reluctance to face unpleasant facts squarely or assess talent with fairness, if the resulting assessment disagrees with the assessor's personal prejudice. The authors show, however, that despite their lack of fitness, such males are in indisputable positions of power over the novels' heroines. It is a power which these same men exercise without pity or compunction, and against which the heroine must struggle constantly, either overtly or covertly.

If the males I intend to discuss were merely tyrannical, the problems the heroines face might more easily be solved, either by flight or at least by subterfuge. What Hentz, Evans and the others show, however, is that *Homo tyrannicus* is only the most easily identified of the genus; *Homo timidus* and *Homo tenuis*—the cowardly or faint-hearted man and the weak man—are greater threats to the heroine's progress, health, sanity and growth, because they are so hard to identify, or, once identified, hard to call to account. Their sins tend to be those of omission rather than commission, and frequently these omissions are cloaked under a variety of self-serving labels: duty, professional judgment, spiritual guidance or discipline. Finally, the biggest threat these men pose to the various heroines is that they use these previously mentioned self-serving rationales to convince the heroine and implant false values in her mind. They tell her she is "neglecting her duty," or that her academic or vocational efforts are "professionally inadequate," when quite the opposite is true. Since these men are in positions of paternal or professional power, the heroine's most

strenuous battle is with herself—fighting a judgment in her own mind which she has accepted from the one in authority.

As we will see in these domestic novels, men are rarely to be trusted; at best they deliberately mislead, repeatedly betray, or usually fail to aid the heroine in times of great need; at worst they physically or psychically threaten to brutalize her. The heroine's journey, then, becomes much more than a mid-nineteenth century version of a fairy tale in which the heroine finds wealth, position and an enchantingly royal mate. These novels present rather an allegory of spiritual, intellectual and emotional growth—an American woman's struggling *Pilgrim's Progress* through a debilitating and hostile world dominated by weak men in positions of power. To use a somewhat crude analogy, these fictional males are the spiritual barbells the domestic heroine lifts, the dead weights she pulls, to strengthen her own intellectual and ethical muscles. Even a brief survey of a variety of novels by selected popular female novelists shows how much iron needed pumping.

Fathers—or guardians—serve as the most obvious example of the problems such weak males create for the heroine. Fathers are, in fact, strongly representative simultaneously of both the *Homo timidus* and *Homo tenuis* species. As readers of these novels discover, fathers can be morally irresponsible about financial arrangements; they usually are in delicate health and have frequent physical and psychic breakdowns, often over bankruptcy, and generally when the family or the heroine needs them most; fathers often lack courage in the face of stronger, but destructive, female characters such as step-mothers or aunts who harass the heroine; fathers are known to lie, gamble, drink, dissemble and run away. And worst of all, except in the case of drinking and gambling, these males most frequently justify their weakness by calling it "sensitivity" or by ignoring their own failures. They insist that the heroine "obey" and show filial piety by following whatever destructive course of action the father has been forced to acquiesce to or has impulsively decided upon.

One of the most noxious examples of such a father can be found in Caroline Hentz's *Linda* (1848). In this case, the heroine's father is both morally and psychically weak, and almost allows his daughter to be destroyed as a consequence. After the death of his first wife when the heroine, Linda, is seven, Mr. Walton marries a woman with "thin compressed lips, pale blue eyes, and almost white eyelashes and brows" who speaks always in the soft hiss of "a serpent."⁷ The new Mrs. Walton proceeds, in order to gain mastery of the household, to beat Linda into welts and "submission," then to force the child into an unused lumber room to sleep and play. This she does, she informs Mr. Walton, so that her son by a previous marriage, a brute named Robert, can be "near" her at night if he needs her—the only room "near" enough, it seems, is Linda's. Robert, it should be noted, is a hulking fourteen year old with a variety of amorphous physical complaints.⁸ Hentz allows us to see that Mr. Walton is fully aware of the treatment—both physical and emotional—being meted out to his only child, but that he is too timid to stop it by standing up to his

new wife. Moreover, he feels nervously that it is of paramount importance to maintain his wife's good opinion since she has organized the household accounts, "smartened up" the slaves' behavior (by vindictively reducing one or two to field hands and threatening to sell the others) and made the snarled mess of his accounts and his life orderly and smooth again. As Hentz tells us, "The lady in question would remedy all these evils. Her feminine but powerful influence would harmonize every jarring element, and his days would glide away in tranquil happiness."⁹

Mr. Walton does, however, have feelings of remorse in his tranquility from time to time as he watches his daughter being victimized daily; his remorse unfortunately is never strong enough for him to exert himself and put an end to the brutality. Hentz apostrophizes that, "like many other easy-tempered, weak-willed men, he yielded to a power he loathed and despised, and became a passive instrument of evil."¹⁰

Mr. Walton is an excellent case to study since he simultaneously exhibits a variety of weaknesses while Linda is growing up. He protects Linda, for example, no more from a hideous engagement than he did from her stepmother's beatings. He takes no better care of her fortune from her real mother than he did of her emotional state as a child. His lack of protection is due, again, to cowardliness and its resulting ethical weakness in the face of his second wife's desires and temper. The second Mrs. Walton wants Robert, her son, to inherit all of Linda's money and so browbeats Mr. Walton into insisting that Linda marry her stepbrother (whose chief characteristic thus far in the novel has been his sadistic treatment of both animals and Linda). Mr. Walton even goes up-river to Linda's school and forces her to come home so that she can be married. Linda, in effect, will have her education and her training for self-sufficiency, as well as her money, taken away and she will be tied forever to a man with a psychotic temper whom she loathes. Once more it is her father's repeated appeals to her "duty" and her filial obedience which cause Linda even to board the river boat home in the first place; her confusion is such that she feels she must return with him, even if she finally resolves to escape the marriage—a plan she has in mind when she acquiesces to the trip. Her resistance, though strong, begins to weaken on the trip as her father plays on her guilt and her pity for him. He extracts, in fact, what soon turns out to be a death-bed promise to him to obey his wishes. Fortunately for Linda, Hentz, with commendable vindictiveness, has the steamboat boiler explode on the trip home. Linda is thrown clear, but Mr. Walton is burned alive, and the reader (and Linda) watch him sink, blackened and crisped almost beyond recognition beneath the waves, still croaking out an injunction for Linda to marry as he submerges. He does not, we see, release Linda from this terrible necessity even when the wrath of his wife can no longer touch him. It is a tribute to Linda's good sense and growing self-reliance that she manages, despite enormous guilt, to shake off the *mortmain* of duty and run away, rather than be forced by her stepmother to marry Robert.

Mr. Walton, however, is not the only father to ignore the emotional



FIGURE TWO: A common characteristic of a weak father was the neglect of his family's emotional and financial needs. (*Harper's Bazaar* [July 25, 1868], 621. Reprinted with permission from *Harper's Bazaar*.)

and economic needs of his child. Indeed, some weak fathers do not even openly acknowledge their children. In Mary Jane Holmes' novel, *'Lena Rivers* (1856), 'Lena's father is present *incognito* throughout three-fourths of the novel. He had deserted his first wife, 'Lena's mother, and, after the first wife's death from illness and heart-break, married a second time, denying he had ever been married before or had a child. As Holmes shows, this was not hard to do, since he had married 'Lena's mother under a false name, "Rivers," to begin with, in order to avoid his parents' censure. Under his *real* name, Graham, he watches the humiliation and cruelties to which his daughter, in her status as a poor relation, is subjected by her aunt and her cousins, and soothes his conscience by mysteriously giving her a riding horse on one occasion and a new dress on another. What he does *not* do, until nearly the end of the novel, is acknowledge that 'Lena is his legitimate daughter; 'Lena is forced throughout the novel to bear the taunts of "bastard" and "charity case"—one of which is untrue, the other, reversible, and both of which are within Mr. Graham's power to remedy. His reluctance, like that of Hentz's Mr. Walton, seems to be because he is afraid of his wife—a lady whose temper and fortune are equally enormous, and whose jealousy is monumental. Because of her essentially friendless position and her lack of a "name," 'Lena takes it upon herself to be judged worthy of respect for more intrinsic and valuable qualities—her intelligence, her moral stalwartness and her fortitude. As it turns out, the hero, Durward Belmont, finds just these qualities enchanting, especially displayed as they are to their best advantage by the ugly social and emotional setting in which 'Lena exists. While her father's lack

of acknowledgment does provide the heroine with something to struggle against and to overcome, and while it does indirectly build her character and help her define herself, the reader is nonetheless left with a nasty impression of the nature of fathers—especially since 'Lena's guardian and uncle (her mother's brother) is also weak and allows his wife to browbeat and criticize his helpless ward unmercifully.

Fathers in these novels are frequently morally weak about money, too, in the sense that they take enormous risks with the family income and end by throwing their families into penury—a state which the fathers do nothing to remedy. Indeed, they frequently surrender, dying of shame and "brain fever." This situation inevitably throws the burden of the family's support on the heroine. If the shock fails to kill the father, he turns imbecilic or withdraws. Such is the case in another Holmes' novel, *Meadowbrook* (1851). Heroine Rosa Lee's father, with the financial maladroitness that seems to characterize domestic novel fathers, has signed notes for his brother-in-law, who, through speculation, ends up bankrupt and defaults. The result is that Mr. Lee's farm, Meadowbrook, is lost. Mr. Lee (who incidentally signed the note after neither forethought on his own nor consultation with his wife) takes to his bed from the day of the default and lapses into complete passivity. He takes only a prefatory interest thereafter in what will happen to his family and his aged, widowed mother who is living with them. Before the farm is foreclosed, he fortuitously dies—thereby avoiding the difficult decisions that have to be made.

His daughter, Rosa, is not so fortunate. As the oldest child, she feels bound to support the family (or at least do what she can) despite the fact that the only job she can find is a thoroughly degrading one as a governess in Georgia for \$600 a year.¹¹ This she bears, even though it means a daily life of meager meals taken alone, constant criticism, social ostracism and thread-bare clothing. What money she has she sends home; she swallows her pride and bears the verbal abuse with silent dignity and fortitude.

Mr. Lee is fairly typical, unfortunately, of this kind of weak father. Inevitably, such men consult no one about what are obviously risky and ill-advised financial moves, even though such decisions will have a life-and-death effect on an entire family. Moreover, the weak father is usually touchingly credulous about what is and is not a "good investment," or about the honor of someone for whom he signs a note. His type even works its way into magazine fiction and *exempla* in advice books, and in these too, it is the young daughter and heroine who must save the family as best she can after the father has, in the colorful phrase of the time, "broken up."¹²

Fathers or guardians, however, are not the only males to serve as obstacles to the heroine's emotional, financial or intellectual progress. The next category of weak male—a sub-species of *Homo timidus*—is unexpected, but seemingly has the greatest potential for a destructive influence on the heroine's vision of herself—the teacher or mentor. Like the cowardly man, the teacher is unable to face the fact that his protégé has gone beyond him intellectually; he resents this, and gives the heroine a false evaluation of her work because he is jealous. For the same reason, the teacher may also seek

to move the relationship into the sexual realm rather than deal with the heroine intellectually. In both cases the teacher—through a significant part of the novel the heroine’s friend and supporter, the source of her learning—turns suddenly and viciously into a betrayer.

Such is partially the case for Hentz’s much-tried heroine, Linda. Though the betrayal by the school master McCleod is a minor blow to Linda compared to the truly awesome persecutions of her weak father and a psychotic suitor, it still reveals a particular caution on the part of domestic novelists: even those who talk grandly of the life of the mind and quote Shelley are no better morally than any other man—and, indeed, are worse, since they *appear* to accept the heroine as a thinking, striving human being with ambitions and desperate needs, and then use her or betray her sexually instead. In this situation, the heroine, Linda, has returned home, following the death of her father in the steamboat accident, to inform his wife that he is dead. Once there she discovers that her stepmother can delay the settlement of the will indefinitely (thus keeping Linda from her inheritance) unless Linda agrees to marry the stepbrother Robert immediately. It is school master McCleod to whom Linda turns for help and guidance; he upholds her decision to defy her father’s last wishes, and, in fact, helps her plan an escape down the river, offering to provide her with the necessary money she needs until the will is settled. Gladly Linda accepts his offer, steals away in the night with McCleod, boards a river boat and escapes the brutist Robert. No sooner is the boat in mid-river, however, than Mr. McCleod turns from a discussion of her fine mind and forces his sexual attentions upon Linda. As he paws her, he speaks of marriage, and only becomes more insistent in his attentions as she resists. To escape, Linda leaps overboard and swims ashore, bravely throwing herself on the mercy of the wilderness, and as it happens, a Noble Savage named Tuscarora—the only man in the novel who is decent, and the only one who is most obviously a figure out of a romance. His great virtue is that he is strong but child-like, already has an equally noble wife, and, for reasons known only to the dusky mind of a savage, wants simply to help her. The reader suspects a foil here, especially since Hentz, a bit loudly, talks incessantly of Tuscarora’s “innate Christianity.”

Linda’s trials with her teacher are trivial, however, compared to those of heroine Edna Earl’s in Augusta Evans’ novel, *St. Elmo* (1866). Edna’s teacher, the local pastor, Reverend Allan Hammond, seems initially to be all that a heroine could ask for in a mentor. He takes her on as a private student when she is only twelve, and, impressed with her prodigious abilities, encourages her to study and master Latin, Greek, Hebrew, belles-lettres, oratory, composition, modern languages, history, philosophy and “natural science.” He espouses ambitious future curricular plans for the girl as well, insisting that he feels she should be encouraged “to discuss freely the ethical and psychological problems” of the day. In order to do this, he demands that the range of both her intellect and her studies be “as wide as the universe, and as free as its winds.”¹³

To fulfill these unusual pedagogical ideals—and to feed Edna’s truly

scholarly desire for knowledge—Hammond embarks on daily intensive tutoring sessions with Edna at the parsonage. These continue for approximately five years; the natural result of such intensive intellectual hot-housing is that Edna comes to envision an intellectual, professional future for herself that is well beyond the abilities of those young men of her acquaintance who have gone to a university. Edna decides that her purpose in the world is to write a treatise which will prove in a solid scholarly fashion that the source of all the world's mythologies and religions is the Old Testament. This, Evans indicates, is certainly within the compass of Edna's abilities, armed as she is with competence in a truly staggering number of ancient languages and a solid comprehension of comparative literature, religion and culture. Indeed, as readers, we see Edna "pick up" both Arabic and "Chaldee" along the way in her quest for knowledge, and we also see her consulted as a scholarly source by one of Hammond's other students, a lawyer named Gordon Leigh. There is no question in the reader's mind that Edna is up to the challenge.

Despite the length of time it takes (and the fact that she works secretly), Edna does finish her opus. Trembling with excitement and pride, she takes it to her old mentor for criticism and comment. She gets both, but not in the manner she—or the reader—expects:

My child, your ambition is your besetting sin. It is Satan pointing to the tree of knowledge, tempting you to eat and become 'as gods.' Search your heart, and I fear you will find that while you believe you are dedicating your talent entirely to the service of God, there is a spring of selfishness underlying all. . . . How many of the hundreds of female writers, scattered through the world in this century, will be remembered six months after the coffin closes on their weary, haggard face [*sic*]?¹⁴

While she is still attempting to absorb the blow of Hammond's unexpected betrayal, he thrusts at her again, this time aiming at the heart of all of her ambitions: "Edna you have talent, you write well, you are conscientious; but you are not De Stael or Hannah More, or Charlotte Bronte, or Elizabeth Browning. . . ." ¹⁵

Where, we wonder, is the man who wanted Edna's interests to be "as wide as the universe and as free as its winds"? Where is the mentor who believed ladies had "as good a right to be learned and wise as gentlemen"?

The case of Reverend Hammond especially bears analysis since the betrayal is so blatant and implies so much about the author's vision of learned men. They are supportive and stalwart only so long as, Evans suggests, their female pupils do not surpass them; when this occurs, like other weak men, they fall back on calls to "duty" and "woman's sphere" and threaten the Eve-like heroine with death and destitution. As Hammond cuttingly tells Edna,

If you fail [and he suggests strongly that she will], you will be sneered down till you become imbittered [*sic*], soured, misanthropic; a curse to yourself, a burden to the friends who sympathize with your blasted hopes.¹⁶

The sequence of events is an important clue to Hammond's reason for ferocity. It is only after Edna has shown him her *completed* book and informed him that it is being considered for publication that he accuses her of "ambition" and "selfishness." Reverend Hammond, it seems, has had similar ambitions, but never managed to produce a completed work. Intellectual jealousy—certainly a form of ethical weakness—seems to be a part of the reason Hammond seeks to betray not only Edna's desire for a literary and scholarly life, but her belief in her own ability as well. This last is, once again, a major obstacle to the heroine's progress, and once more the fight must be against Edna's foe within—the conscience that has always revered Reverend Hammond's scholarly judgments. She wavers, telling herself repeatedly that she is only, after all, an untried girl, little more than a student.

As though this particular form of sabotage were not enough, the Reverend Hammond has another form to offer. Hammond decides that Edna, rather than devote herself to an "unfeminine" literary career, should instead marry the anti-hero of the novel, St. Elmo, in order to save that monster's soul. Hammond, it seems, has for the past twenty years been attempting to bring St. Elmo back into "the Light" and has failed miserably. Only Edna, Hammond insists, has enough influence with the brooding and intellectual atheist, to bring this end about. She must marry him and "save him." Hammond appeals unashamedly to Edna's sense of Christian duty and her personal gratitude to him, telling her that if she does save St. Elmo she will be doing "better work" than if she published her book. He also tells her that the saving of St. Elmo has been the dream of his (Hammond's) life, and that if she does this spiritual task, he, Hammond, will sleep easier in the old churchyard. He implies strongly, at this point, that he is perilously close to that destination already.

Somehow Edna finds sufficient strength at this point to refuse this sacrifice of her life and ambition, despite Hammond's intellectual, scholastic and emotional box barrage, and goes on to publish her book and become a famous woman of letters. What this incident with Hammond provides is a map to tiger traps along the road to achievement for women readers. It is not lack of ability, Evans suggests, that keeps women from succeeding but the conscience within them which weak and jealous men have unscrupulously and falsely appealed to, and which then argues in a socially acculturated voice against the heroine's own true desires and abilities. To succeed, writers such as Evans imply, one must not be swayed by traditional arguments involving "saving" other people. Edna does not, and succeeds, having become sure enough of herself and scholarly enough about religious matters both to overturn the "save a sinner" argument and to assess the worth of her manuscript properly.

Even those men who do not suffer from jealousy concerning a heroine's intellectual abilities and do try to aid her in her career prove no stronger finally than the Reverend Hammond. They are simply betrayers of a different sort. Holmes' *Meadowbrook* heroine, Rosa Lee, at the tender age of 13 manages to secure a post as school teacher through the good offices of a

member of the board, Dr. Clayton. Dr. Clayton, a young bachelor in the district, encourages Rosa's ambitions, loans her books and, in effect, courts her. She falls in love with him and he with her; Rosa, however, runs afoul of the daughter of a prominent citizen named Thompson and finds her job in jeopardy. Not only does Clayton only tepidly support Rosa when she is under fire, but he becomes engaged to the perpetrator of the crime, Dell Thompson. Since he is already secretly engaged to Rosa Lee, he is in a difficult position. His answer to the dilemma is to avoid Rosa and allow Dell to tell the girl cuttingly that she, Dell, is soon to marry the doctor. At this point, Rosa has lost both her job and her fiancé—betrayed in both cases by the man who functioned initially as her kindly mentor. Her home is also being foreclosed upon, thanks to the economic ham-handedness of her father who then, shortly afterward, dies. The obstacles along the way seem insurmountable, but Rosa has both the fortitude and the financial motivation to press on.

Though Holmes' Dr. Clayton functions in a variety of roles—suitor, mentor, employer—he is also representative of another variety of betrayer as well—the employer who will desert his employee for the most unethical of reasons. In the case of Dr. Clayton, it is because his future wife, who hates Rosa, supposedly will inherit \$15,000 that his loyalties switch so suddenly away from the girl. The end result of this betrayal is that Rosa strikes out on her own; Dr. Clayton makes it both necessary and admirable for her to do so. In the case of Evans' Edna Earl (already being tormented by Reverend Hammond and the satanic suitor, St. Elmo), the reason for her employer's betrayal is more insidious—male friendship. Douglas Manning, editor and publisher, at first rejects Edna's opus, though he has previously published a series of short philosophical essays by her. When he does reject it, he tells Edna that the subject is far beyond either her scholarly abilities or her rightful feminine scope—and implies that her writings are amateurish and embarrassing, though somehow this was never the case with her shorter pieces. Edna is heartbroken and despairing; her earlier contact with Manning had convinced her that his professional judgment was sound, and his vicious criticism is hard for her to disavow. Once again, the enemy becomes an internalized judgment derived from a man whose ethical weakness is soon revealed. Manning, it turns out, has lied to Edna about the quality of her scholarship and the articulateness of her work because St. Elmo, the misanthropic (and as we see, misogynistic) suitor, an old friend of Manning's, has requested that he do so. For friendship's sake, St. Elmo begs, dissuade Edna from her ambitions for a career. If she is dissuaded, then St. Elmo feels Edna will marry him. Manning is only too happy to oblige. Edna does not. Despite a dark night of the soul, she decides to take her book elsewhere and continue her scholarship. It is, of course, published and becomes an enormous success.

As we have seen thus far, the heroine's physical health, economic resources, emotional health and intellectual development, as well as her career ambitions, have all been subject to the destructive influence of weak men. Somehow, these domestic novel heroines manage to find the strength

and the confidence to go on despite enormous hardships. Part of that strength lies in their true religiosity and personal belief in God. Even their spiritual health, however, is subject to the evil effects of weak or abusive men, as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps shows in her 1868 novel, *The Gates Ajar*.

Phelps' warning is fairly pointed in this novel: she shows that "good Christian men"—especially those connected with the authority and hierarchy of organized religion—are usually neither good nor Christian. She also shows clearly that, despite centuries of obedience to religious authority, true Christianity for women must come from a thoughtful, *private* and individual assessment and recreation of the basic tenets. As she shows through the figure of the heroine Mary Cabot, and especially through the heroine's spiritual mentor, her aunt, Mrs. Winifred Forceythe, women are fully capable of finding the road to salvation and the answers to life's knotty ethical and moral problems on their own. To listen to men on matters of grave spiritual concern is to fall into despair and atheism because men lack insight and understanding.

Such is the danger faced by Mary Cabot at the beginning of the novel. We find the heroine attempting to come to terms with the death of her only relative, her brother Royal. Royal has been killed in an early battle in the Civil War, and Mary struggles with herself as she questions the value of what Royal was fighting for, and indeed, the very existence of a loving and caring deity. She is hardly aided in her struggles by either the pastor or the

FIGURE THREE: Despite hardships inflicted upon women and their children by uncaring or irresponsible men, the "domestic novel heroines manage to find the strength and the confidence to go on. . . ." (*Harper's Weekly* [January 23, 1858], 1. Reprinted with permission from *Harper's Bazaar*.)



deacon of her church who, while paying condolence calls, drive her into despair and fill her with rage. The Reverend Bland is the master of the platitude and the convention, telling Mary it is all for the best. This he follows with homilies about the goodness and loving nature of God and the rightness of the patriotic cause which took Royal's life. His deacon is no better. Deacon Quirk is a stupid, bigoted man whose vision of both God and the hereafter involve endless retribution and pain. He upbraids Mary for grieving for her brother and informs her that she is impious because she questions "the Lord's will." He thunders at Mary to "accept" that will and cease being sinful by willfully grieving. As Phelps shows, these male spokesmen for organized religion drive Mary further and further away from God and push her into an angry, bitter atheism. The platitudes of the one who, as we shall see, is spiritually a vacuum, and the hell-and-damnation speeches of the latter, who is an illiterate fool, cause Mary (who is both intelligent and spiritual) to reject the God they represent—the only one she has ever known.

Mary is saved from the Victorian fate which is truly worse than death—atheism—by the arrival of her extraordinary Aunt Winifred, her dead mother's sister, herself a widowed minister's wife. Aunt Winifred, it turns out, rivals Evans' Edna Earl in terms of erudite learning. She is a reader of Plato, Cicero, Goethe, Heine, Tacitus, Luther, Butler, Taylor, Swedenborg and Caesar, as well as a host of Romantic and Victorian poets, and she brings all of these to bear on the spiritual problems her niece faces. By use of such authorities, she gently leads Mary back to belief in God—or at least Aunt Winifred's version of Him. Aunt Winifred convinces Mary that each woman, if she has sufficient reading and intelligence, a thorough knowledge of the Bible and adequate time for contemplation, can find her own answers and construct her *own* vision of God, the afterlife and the reason for distressing events. She points out that certain interpretations, such as those offered by Bland and Quirk, are just that—interpretations—subject to the same flaws and lapses in logic as anyone else's.¹⁷ There is no more reason for Reverends Bland and Butler to be correct in their interpretations than there is for Winifred Forceythe or Mary Cabot, for that matter, as long as the interpreter has consulted the Bible carefully and used common sense and authority. Based on this, Aunt Winifred constructs a vision of Royal in the afterlife in a curiously tangible heaven which soothes Mary and slowly brings her back to faith. By doing so, Aunt Winifred frees Mary from any moral vulnerability to the pronouncements of Bland or Quirk.

This lack of vulnerability is absolutely vital, since both men are, in effect, threats to Mary's soul. In a particularly scathing scene, Phelps shows the heavy-handed and fiery doctrinaire Deacon Quirk reduced to near babbling after a confrontation and debate with Aunt Winifred. It is, after all, Deacon Quirk who had previously informed Mary that Royal was probably in Hell and that she herself was facing a similar fate because of her attitude. Aunt Winifred, attacked by Quirk for her idiosyncratic version of the afterlife, uses Plato, Aquinas, the Bible and Swedenborg,

along with Luther, to refute him. In the process her surgical logic exposes the frail under-pinnings of Quirk's unthinking dogmatism. The effect is not lost on Mary:

I looked him [Quirk] over again,—hat, hoe, shirt, and all; scanned his obstinate old face with its stupid, good eyes and animal mouth. Then I glanced at Aunt Winifred as she leaned forward in the afternoon light; the white, finely cut woman with her serene face and rapt, saintly smile. . . .¹⁸

Obviously, Deacon Quirk—and the kind of dogmatism that delights in a bullying domination of others—is shown up for what he is: an intellectually weak man and an emotional brute.

In pulverizing Quirk, Aunt Winifred also pulverizes any *unthinking* acceptance of the pronouncements, theological dicta or spiritual interpretations offered by male religious authorities. Again, this last and worst trap to the heroine's progress—the appeal to spiritual conscience—can also be avoided, as Aunt Winifred shows. One need only read, study and evaluate what is being said to gain some sort of critical perspective on the matter.

As if to seal this point, near the novel's end, Phelps has Aunt Winifred take on the Reverend Bland as well. Bland's wife has died, and Phelps reveals the fact that Bland is so entirely hollow in his beliefs that he is left in melancholia and despair, neglecting all of his spiritual and pastoral duties. His vacuous and unexamined brand of Christianity has left him without solace in his moment of trial as, we are reminded, it left Mary in hers. Aunt Winifred, however, with her erudition and her compassion, manages to raise the weak Reverend Bland from the depths of his depression by preaching to him her scholarly version of God, Heaven, Hell and Christian Duty. Thoroughly revived (or cowed), he comes back to active life, ministers Aunt Winifred's brand of Christianity to his congregation and resumes his profession.

It is interesting to note that even though Aunt Winifred eventually succumbs to cancer, unlike other mentors and male relatives in these domestic novels, she does not leave Mary with nothing. Mary is enriched by invaluable aid during her greatest spiritual trial and by the more material aspect of a very small inheritance that Aunt Winifred leaves her. Aunt Winifred, in direct contrast to all the weak fathers, pastors, teachers and mentors, dies with no detail unattended to, no aid unoffered. She has, unlike Evans' Reverend Hammond or Editor Manning, encouraged Mary's intellectual and literary ambitions; unlike Holmes' Mr. Lee or Mr. Graham, she has provided thorough emotional support, acknowledgment, money and love; in contrast to Hentz's Mr. Walton, she has faced Mary's tormentors and vanquished them, even though she put herself at social, even financial risk, by doing so. Most of all, unlike any of the male figures examined here, she has actively encouraged her niece to be self-sufficient, strong and free-spirited.

By examining a figure such as Phelps' Aunt Winifred we can see clearly the kinds of characters the domestic novelists *wished* were in authority in

their world; through her we also see the kind of woman that a female reader would have to become herself in order to survive in the world that, unfortunately, existed. Aunt Winifred, of course, is a compilation of all of the virtues exhibited by all of the heroines we have looked at. She is intelligent, learned, responsible, loving, intellectually critical, spiritually aware and tremendously strong. Though her husband dies, leaving her with a child, she survives and thrives; though she is a threat to men less intellectual than herself, she is up to the challenge and deflects their attacks with ease; she follows the course she believes is morally and ethically correct. Most of all, she believes in herself and is able to avoid the deadly traps along the way—traps disguised by appeals to duty or to Christian charity. One suspects that this subversive idea, as expressed by both positive portraits of the heroines and the disturbing ones of weak men, was exactly the novelists' point.

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notes

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1. Caroline Lee Hentz, *Linda; or the Young Pilot of the Belle Creole* (Philadelphia, 1869), 38.
2. Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Georgia, 1976), 21, 27.
3. Daniel Walker Howe, "Victorian Culture in America," *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe (Philadelphia, 1976), 26.
4. Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, New York, 1978), 11-13; Ernest Earnest, *The American Eve in Fact and Fiction, 1775-1914* (Chicago, 1974), 2-5; see also Nina Baym, "Portrayal of Women in American Literature, 1790-1870," *What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York, 1977); see also Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of the Best Sellers in the United States* (New York, 1947), Appendix A, esp. 307-309.
5. Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 276-299.
6. See, for example, Mrs. L. G. Abell, *Woman in Her Various Relations* (New York, 1851), 204-205; see also T. S. Arthur, "Jessie Hampton," *Woman's Trials or Tales and Sketches From The Life Around Us* (New York, 1885), 134-153; see also Dr. Dio Lewis, *Our Girls* (New York, 1871), 10-14.
7. Hentz, 22, 36.
8. *Ibid.*, 29-38.
9. *Ibid.*, 19.
10. *Ibid.*, 29.
11. Mary Jane Holmes, *Meadowbrook* (Chicago, n.d.), 168-169.
12. "Olive West," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 32 (April, 1866), 655-657; see also T. S. Arthur, "Taking Boarders," *Women's Trials*, 40-127; Arthur, "Jessie Hampton."
13. Evans, 90.
14. *Ibid.*, 291.
15. *Ibid.*, 292.
16. *Ibid.*, 291-292.
17. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* (Boston, 1869), 79.
18. *Ibid.*, 141-142.