

the steward of her soul

elsie dinsmore
and the training
of a victorian child

pam hardman

During the early 1860's Martha Finley, a thirty-two year-old invalid living in Pennsylvania, decided to write a novel about a pious young girl, modelled after her niece. Finley claimed that this idea "was given her in answer to a prayer for something which would yield her an income."¹ The book, published in 1867, was *Elsie Dinsmore*, the first volume in a lucrative and popular series that would stretch to twenty-eight, ending only with the author's death in 1901. This blend of spiritual piety and material profit marking the inception of the series runs thematically throughout the books and sets Elsie apart from other conventional nineteenth-century saintly children. Finley is as much concerned with Elsie's physical health as with her spiritual health. The first two books, *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Elsie's Holidays* (written actually as one continual narrative but split into two volumes by the publisher), have much in common with their contemporary *Little Women* in portraying a child learning how to adapt successfully to various nineteenth-century social and religious demands. Finley focuses more on a child's relationship with her world than that with her God, and by emphasizing the secular aspects of Elsie's life, veers significantly from the mainstream of nineteenth-century sentimental novels idealizing the saintly child.²

The *Elsie* books diverge from this central current in another important way: they portray a different relationship between masculine and feminine spheres than did earlier sentimental novels. Most students of these domestic novels agree on one general point (in spite of significant differences in their arguments): that much of the sentimental fiction written by women during the nineteenth century constitutes a subtle protest against masculine authority. The genre is quietly but clearly subversive in illustrating the incompetence and moral inferiority of men. Sentimental novels imply the moral superiority of the feminine domestic sphere; they portray the "empire of the mother," where women and their values rule, usually by excluding men.³ Finley, though, has created an idealization of the domestic sphere that differs from that of most nineteenth-century women's fiction. She demonstrates not the incompetence of men and the complete separation of the spheres, but an increase of masculine capacity to improve society. In the *Elsie* books Elsie's father, Horace Dinsmore, moves authoritatively into the feminine domestic sphere; in addition to typically masculine powers in the realms of finance and science, Horace assumes powers of the home normally reserved for women. Such aggrandizement of male ability occurs at the expense of women's capabilities. Elsie's "territory" shrinks with Horace's entrance, and she ultimately wields less power than many other sentimental heroines do. In learning to thrive physically, and to become a sturdy middle-class citizen, Elsie does survive and gain self-control, but to do so she must relinquish a great deal of spiritual and moral control to men. In placing such power into competent male hands, and in opening the domestic sphere so that men can move freely into and out of it while women must stay put, Finley upsets the traditional pattern of nineteenth-century sentimental novels.

Finley does, though, borrow some of the outward forms of her heroine's character from the standard sentimental types of the time. In many ways Elsie resembles the saintly child redeemers outlined by Anne Tropp Trensky and others. Trensky could be describing Elsie when she lists the features of the typical saintly child: separated from her parents, she has a Christ-like "aura of holiness" and has lost her religious, frail mother; a "supernatural beauty" reflects her inner grace as she endures much suffering; her father, "young and handsome, is intensely devoted to and possessive of his daughter, his affection often verging upon the erotic."⁴ Elsie shares specific traits with some of her fictional American sisters, such as Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or Ellen Montgomery in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (a book that Elsie, her family, and Jo March all read and weep over). As Ellen does, Elsie finds herself in an alien environment where she suffers unwarranted abuse and misunderstanding until she is befriended by an equally pious young woman. Like Eva, semi-orphaned, a pious Bible-reader, Elsie always dresses in white and has a face framed by golden curls. She is a paragon of virtue in the midst of amoral, hypocritical Christians, and shares religious fervor and affection with her slave, Aunt Chloe. As Eva was, Elsie is sensitive to others' needs and pains and is equally volatile emotionally, flushing, turning pale and weeping by turns. Finley clearly modelled Elsie's character partly after these prototypes of nineteenth-century romantic children. This resemblance is only superficial, though. Such divine children as Little Eva or Hawthorne's Gentle

Boy could not survive in the world; their deaths suggested the corruption and the failure of their society to nurture and sustain such purity and piety. Elsie's healthy survival attests not only her own strength, but also the new worthiness and capability of the patriarchal realm, which can now harbor and cultivate such goodness.

The series does portray a tension between Elsie's spiritual values and her father's more worldly, empirical concerns. However, rather than illustrating a conventional redemption story in which the saintly child converts her father to the narrow path, the series presents a different type of conversion story, one which reflects a major cultural transition of the time. The first three *Elsie* books illustrate a change from an anti-rational, emotional romanticism to a pragmatic, worldly Victorianism. Finley focuses not on Elsie's ability to change others, but on the changes she herself experiences; Elsie becomes more the saved than the savior. And her authoritarian father is the agent, not the object, of the conversion.

Horace is in many ways trying to transform Elsie from an early nineteenth-century American Protestant steeped in Puritanical and revivalistic zeal, to a late nineteenth-century Protestant governed by restraint and respect for the social and materialistic world. Elsie's personality transformation reflects the religious changes experienced by the country as a whole during the nineteenth century. When Horace first meets Elsie, she is very much a product of revivalistic religion, manifesting what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg identifies as "anti-ritualism," which peaked during the Second Great Awakening. Its defining characteristics include:

. . . the repudiation both of ritual and of formal organization structures; a preference for intuitive or instinctive forms of knowledge and religious experience; a glorification of the individual; a rejection of communal norms and of harsh systems of punishment for their violation; a weakening—even the denial—of boundaries between this world and the next. Wild bodily behavior and physical disorder. . . .⁵

This type of religious enthusiasm gave women a new power, by allowing them (as well as children) to have a voice in religious meetings. Also, by valuing an excitable sensitivity over restraint and reason, such revivalistic thinking located true religious piety in areas typically designated as "feminine": the affections and intuition. And by giving them a forum for asserting their individuality and for expressing their emotions, revival meetings offered women a way of rebelling against repressive patriarchal authority.⁶

Barbara Epstein has discussed the hostility that many men felt towards this religious fervor, which gave so much power to unbridled, individual emotions and sudden conversion experiences. She and others have charted a movement as this undisciplined, enthusiastic behavior became gradually tamed during the nineteenth century when society began to channel this zeal into more orderly paths, structured by moderateness, sobriety and control, because the rising industrial culture demanded such traits in its citizens. By the end of the nine-

teenth century (when Finley was writing), Christianity had become a more orderly, prudent faith, the tool of a careful middle class which used religion to justify its own material success. Unworldly, "soft" feminine piety appeared very feeble in a progressive society governed by science and capitalism.⁷

Horace guides Elsie through the same religious evolutions that the country was experiencing. He first rids her of the last traces of old Calvinist thinking, which had dominated American religious thought until the end of the eighteenth century. When they first meet, Elsie is riddled with typically Puritanical ideas: fears of absolute authority; extremes of moral judgment, a tendency to brand herself either absolutely good or sinful; and a devaluation of the efficacy of worldly action to effect any kind of salvation (a Calvinist tenet most criticized by the self-reliant, optimistic Victorians). Horace's first words to Elsie, "I am not an ogre, that you need be so afraid of me; but there, you may go; I will not keep you in terror any longer,"⁸ suggest his aversion to that Puritanical stance of awe-struck fear in the face of authority. From the beginning Horace tries to teach Elsie that she can change the quality of her life through her actions: she does not have to wait helplessly for her father to love her, but can elicit his love through proper behavior.

Horace's first challenge is to save Elsie from these Calvinist assumptions of unworthiness and helplessness. His biggest struggle, though, comes as he tries to train her away from early nineteenth-century "anti-ritualistic" thinking and behavior. He spends many chapters trying to discipline Elsie's revivalistic zeal, which expresses itself through frenetic, solitary praying and emotional excess. Until Horace's arrival, Elsie had experienced a very personal relationship with God, unmediated by anyone and shared only with her slave Aunt Chloe and the occasional female relative. Horace's initial arrival modifies such private, intuitive religious experience. He forces her to socialize on Sundays and to limit her anguished prayers, which his final conversion completely transforms. Once he nominally becomes Christian, Horace completely rules Elsie's spiritual life, organizing her religious education around scholarly commentary of the Bible and regular prayer schedules. Such orderly, intellectual religious experience represents a drastic change from her earlier emotional periods spent in tearful and impassioned Bible readings and spontaneous prayers.

Ultimately, Horace becomes the ideal Victorian parent espoused by Horace Bushnell in his *Views of Christian Nurture*. Elsie's father follows Bushnell's prudent guidelines for raising healthy Christian citizens: both men believe in gradual "growth" rather than sudden "conquest," valuing a cautious, gradual development over the quick and violent conversions of early revival meetings (Horace's own conversion experience appropriately follows such a slow, careful path). Horace also trains Elsie to become a member of an "organic" network of community and family, rather than a solitary individual uninfluenced by those around her.⁹ Even before his conversion, Horace had begun leading Elsie away from a revivalistic religion dominated by women, into a more prudent and secularized Victorian protestantism run largely by men. And he is highly successful: by the time she reaches adolescence, Elsie is rarely tempted to throw herself into the fits of religious passion, self-castigation and self-sacrifice that marked her earlier typically evangelical behavior.

Such a transformation not only reflects an historical change in American religious thought, but also represents a waning of Elsie's feminine spiritual authority. Throughout the series, Elsie's evangelical zeal is never very powerful. She fails to redeem anyone except her father, and she did not have to overcome very much in converting him, because he was not very bad to begin with. Unlike Augustine St. Clare or the people in Ellen Montgomery's world, Horace Dinsmore is not remarkably indolent, callous or unjustly cruel. Rather, he is an industrious, watchful and authoritative parent. To convert him to Christianity entails simply moving him one step further along the highly moral, virtuous road he already travels. Elsie never accomplishes what Little Eva does with Topsy, or Ellen Montgomery does with Nancy Vawse (an equally mischievous, wild girl), in completely turning around a recreant soul. Elsie's young Aunt Enna, spoiled, selfish and cruel, and her Uncle Arthur, a dissolute, violent gambler, both remain indifferent to Elsie's frequent attempts to show them the Way, becoming progressively more callous and hostile to her goodness and redemptive power. Throughout the series Elsie's piety, even when disciplined and fortified by her father, remains a relatively useless ornament to her femininity.

The main concern of these books, then, is not to glorify Elsie's special powers of conversion; instead, they focus on her father's successful attempts at converting his daughter. The first three *Elsie* books illustrate Horace's persistent and fruitful attempts to change his frail, spiritual child into a healthy, practical, social girl. Rather than a romantic story of the impossibility of sustaining spirituality and emotional intensity in an increasingly mechanical, industrialized society, Finley's work becomes a Victorian tract about how to blend these two sets of values. It's as if Horace Dinsmore were trying to turn Stowe's Little Eva into Alcott's Jo March, or even Horatio Alger's young capitalist Richard Hunter. The central drama of the first three volumes concerns the way in which Horace raises such a successful child. Horace's scheme for raising Elsie closely follows nineteenth-century theories about child-rearing; throughout the series Horace behaves as the ideal Victorian parent should. In many ways, the first few *Elsie* books function as child-rearing manuals (a genre that proliferated after the 1830's) in persistently demonstrating, through example, the proper methods of training a child and the rewards of such practices. Although Horace does become more overtly loving and gentle as the books progress, from the beginning he practices the systematic nurture espoused by most Victorians. He bases his methods on authorities and scientific evidence, a cautious pragmatism consistent with nineteenth-century self-consciousness about child-rearing. Such diligent attention to every aspect of Elsie's life—from diet to education to hygiene—constituted an important part of the child-rearing regimen.¹⁰

Horace works to transform Elsie into a self-governing and self-controlled child and adult. He tries to make her internalize moral and behavioral codes, to instill in her a "portable parent" that will guide her to the final goal of self-imposed restraint.¹¹ Horace desires Elsie's obedience not to force her to cower before his authority, as earlier Puritanical fathers did, but to push her along the path towards self-control. He enforces none of his rules purely for the sake of enhancing his power; instead, every regulation he imposes on Elsie helps to

make her more resilient and useful. Even though Horace frequently stresses the need for submission in Elsie, he always follows his restrictions and punishments with clear, rational explanations for them; he never demands blind obedience to arbitrary authority, but always appeals to Elsie's reason in his discipline, a key principle of Victorian child-rearing theory.¹²

Earlier patriarchal forms of childrearing relied heavily on the practice of harsh will-breaking, which meant subduing a child's spirit in one climactic scene (a parallel to the revivalistic tendency towards sudden violent conversion). Parents frequently used stern stoicism and corporal punishment as crucial weapons in their battles with childhood passions. Although Horace repeatedly demands Elsie's submission, he never resorts to these older methods of harsh force and physical punishment. Horace usually demonstrates a preference for more gentle nurturing, appealing to Elsie not through fear but through her affections. He knows the most effective punishment is not physical force, but withdrawal of his love and company. This method of discipline helps account for the latent eroticism between Horace and his daughter. In showering Elsie with frequent kisses and caresses, Horace establishes a highly desirable set of rewards, which he can mete out or withdraw according to Elsie's proper behavior. Mary Ryan describes the importance such sensory appeals had even in early child training: "Such nurturing of a child's sensory and muscular powers was no idle matter; it enabled the unreasoning infant to imitate and to expect smiles, kisses, and caresses, the key instruments of moral education."¹³ Such "love withdrawal" was a very popular method of punishment in the nineteenth century; the practice suggests the general preference for psychological manipulation over physical force, again as a way of tapping into the inner resources of the child and developing a self-directed conscience.¹⁴

Horace, then, is a model Victorian parent, using methods of psychological coercion and gentle but consistent monitoring to instill in Elsie the capacity to become a self-controlled, pragmatic middle-class woman. Horace differs, however, from the ideal Victorian parent in one significant respect: the child-rearing duties he assumes—emotional nurture, constant affection and care, monitoring of daily activities, decorating the home, moral and religious education—were normally assumed by the mother, not the father. Studies of nineteenth-century domestic life repeatedly point to the vital role played by the mother in creating the home: she was the center of a domestic "empire" which she ruled with affection and nurture. The father was usually relegated to the periphery of this sphere, responsible for the financial, material duties of breadwinning, but wielding very little actual power to determine a child's future character.¹⁵ Horace absorbs all of these maternal duties and maintains his authority in the masculine sphere of finance and intellect as well; he has to sacrifice none of his masculine power in adopting this feminine responsibility.

Horace's training begins relatively late in Elsie's life, as she is eight years old before her father ever sees her. Elsie is the product of a short-lived but passionate marriage between seventeen-year-old Horace and a young heiress from New Orleans, Elsie Grayson. Although she had wealth, beauty and piety, the elder Elsie, unfortunately, did not have an aristocratic father, but one who "had made all his money by trade." Consequently, neither family fully approved

of the other, and Horace's father separated the couple. His wife grew "thin and pale, and weak and melancholy" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 16-17), and finally died a week after young Elsie's birth. Since Horace refused to return to his child, Elsie spent her first four years at her maternal grandfather's. Because of his callous indifference to her, she received her moral upbringing from two fervent Christians: Mrs. Murray, the Scottish housekeeper, and Aunt Chloe, her mother's and her mammy. Instilling in Elsie a thorough reverence for fundamentalist Christianity and a literal interpretation of the Bible, the two women represent the early forms of Calvinism and revivalism from which Horace will rescue her.

When she turns four, Elsie's grandfather dies, so she is packed off to her paternal grandfather and step-grandmother and their extensive family; the children, although her father's step-brothers and sisters, are all near Elsie in age. They live on an opulent plantation in some unnamed Southern state near the sea, with an abundance of slaves, ponies, gardens and toys. Elsie receives every material comfort here, but very little affection and much unwarranted abuse. The governess picks on her, her young uncle pulls her hair and blots her copy book, her step-grandmother ridicules her scruples. Yet Elsie endures all this with meekness, patience, forgiveness and many tears. At this point, early in the first volume, Elsie displays all the hallmarks of the conventional saintly child: separated from her parents in a hostile environment, she clings tenaciously to her faith and her Bible.

Elsie's life begins to change when her handsome father finally returns home from his travels. She has longed for his arrival: "It was her dream, by day and by night, that he had come, that he had taken her to his heart, calling her 'his own darling child, his precious little Elsie'" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 30). Unfortunately Horace has not longed with equal intensity for a reunion with his daughter. In fact, he dreads it and harbors a prejudice against her based on rumors that she is a Christian and a "disagreeable, troublesome child." Although he is an "upright, moral man," he objects to any deep religious beliefs because he finds most Christians "hypocrites and deceivers" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 52-53). Therefore, he meets Elsie with a preconceived aversion to her spirituality.

This aversion grows upon meeting Elsie. Finally faced with her Papa, she trembles and rushes away sobbing, refusing to dine later with him because of a "bad headache." Such vulnerable and emotional behavior evokes the critical remark from Horace, "I hope she is not a sickly child" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 57). In their other early meetings Elsie reveals similar emotional volatility and fragility, and Horace continually reacts with disapproval to such uncontrolled intensity. Elsie cries when Horace holds his step-sister Enna on his knee; repulsed at this show of jealousy, Horace gives her a "look of displeasure that cut her to the heart" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 60). Later, Horace's best friend, John Travilla, kindly asks Elsie to play the piano for a group of his friends. Too meek and timid to do so, Elsie breaks down in tears at the keyboard, and her displeased and embarrassed father sends her away "with a heart almost bursting with grief and mortification" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 68). In these first encounters, then, Elsie repeatedly proves herself incapable of functioning in society. Her father sternly disapproves of an emotional susceptibility and frailty cherished in someone like Stowe's Little Eva or Hawthorne's Gentle Boy; those traits which mark Elsie as a traditional angel child now prevent her from attaining her father's love.

Horace has an empirical morality, with standards of right and wrong based on material criteria; right produces beneficial rewards for the body and society, bad causes physical harm or social inadequacies. Horace, then, believes in one of the basic tenets of the new American middle class: material prosperity and health reflect moral good. Appropriately, he shows his first sign of affection for Elsie by attending to her physical well-being. "I have neglected my little girl too long, but I intend to begin to take good care of her now" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 72), Horace says one morning soon after Elsie's humiliation at the piano. He begins this care by establishing rules for her diet. These restrictions, far from being aimlessly mean, follow very practical guidelines for healthy nutrition. "Children in England are not allowed to eat butter until they are ten or eleven years of age, and I think it an excellent plan, to make them grow up rosy and healthy" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 72), Horace explains. He could have taken his ideas for Elsie's diet straight from T. W. Higginson's suggestions in "A Letter to a Dyspeptic." Higginson castigates his sick friend for his diet of meat, coffee, butter and pastries;¹⁶ Elsie echoes such prohibitions when she explains to Arthur that Papa will allow her to eat anything "except meat, and hot cakes, and butter, and coffee" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 73). Although diet is his main concern, Horace also cultivates Elsie's health by requiring a regular bedtime (even at age eighteen Elsie obediently marches off to bed at 10:00 p.m.) and daily exercise.

Any saintly impulse Elsie has to sacrifice the material for some intangible goal angers Horace, and he quenches it. He becomes equally frustrated when Elsie shows signs of cowardice, sending her away sternly if she trembles timidly in front of him. A heroic display of physical courage, in fact, is one of the actions that finally wins Horace's love. When a runaway carriage causes all its occupants, including Horace, to turn "deadly pale" with terror, only Elsie retains calm fortitude. Such bravery wins Elsie several new smiles and caresses (*Elsie Dinsmore* 142-148). In this concern for a healthy body, Horace again echoes T.W. Higginson in his *Out-Door Papers*. Horace tries to transform Elsie into a Higginsonian ideal. Until Horace's arrival, Elsie had been one of those "saints," who "by spiritual laws have usually been sinners against physical laws" because of her "non-intercourse with the visible world." Agreeing with Higginson that "physical health is a necessary condition of all permanent success," Horace begins to instill in Elsie a reverence for bodily rather than religious virtue. In finally attaining a balanced combination of "nervous energy . . . and . . . muscular power,"¹⁷ Elsie reaches Horace's (and Higginson's) ideal of the highest good. In doing so, Elsie also moves further and further away from Little Eva and her sisters, who become ideally good and adored only as they surrender muscular power to "nervous energy" and relinquish all intercourse with the visible world. Horace's reasoning springs from a main current in Victorian thought, which ran through child-rearing advice books and cultural trends such as muscular Christianity, the temperance movement and social Darwinism. In monitoring Elsie's health he's trying to bring her in line with these ideas espousing the virtues of physical well-being. In Horace's empirical, utilitarian morality, Elsie's spiritual goodness is worthless unless it is coupled with physical health.

To regulate Elsie's life and turn her into an efficient and productive middle-class citizen, Horace must naturally regulate Elsie's money. As an heiress, Elsie is hardly threatened with poverty; therefore it is not in the interests of frugality that Horace monitors Elsie's finances, but in the interests of order and control. Prudent spending was a mainstay of the young capitalistic society. In this same early chapter where Horace begins his "care" by regulating Elsie's diet and exercise, he also makes her keep a detailed, careful account of every cent she expends. This relatively minor restriction not only indicates Horace's Victorian respect for orderly finances (a forerunner of the bank book proudly kept by Alger's Ragged Dick); it also serves to stifle several of Elsie's impulses that would lead her quickly down the path of romantic excess. She can no longer buy lavish gifts for others, so Horace dampens that selfless (but wasteful) generosity characterizing other angel children. Most importantly, though, Elsie cannot cater to her young Uncle Arthur's gambling addiction. Throughout the volumes Arthur begs Elsie for greater and greater sums to pay off his "debts of Honor." Yet Elsie firmly refuses, in spite of Arthur's vindictive violence, because Papa forbids her to spend any unrecorded money, and Arthur, of course, will not let her tell Horace of his needs. Therefore Horace's restrictions organize Elsie's haphazard accounts and prevent her from becoming a stock sentimental figure from temperance novels: a victimized martyr to a dissolute cad. In saving Elsie from Arthur, Horace also restrains her evangelical impulse to sacrifice herself in order to convert others. Such an impulse arose in part from the female reform societies of the nineteenth century, which encouraged women to direct their energies and piety towards aiding dissolute individuals, frequently at the expense of themselves.

Many of Elsie's romantic child predecessors felt a strong attraction to nature. Herbert Ross Brown speaks of this impulse in sentimental novels of the time: "these nature-addicts aspired to an infinite haziness in which the pleasurable sensations varied directly with the fuzziness of the horizon. . . . Communing with nature became a favorite form of self-indulgence."¹⁸ Yet Horace restricts Elsie's communion with nature even more severely than he does her diet, doing as much as possible to prevent her from becoming any transcendental or romantic child of nature. He establishes strict rules for Elsie's behavior outdoors, forbidding her to go out into the night air, walk or ride her pony alone, go on a picnic, venture into the meadow, pick strawberries or swim until she's been at the shore for three days. He makes each of these restrictions, again, not to flaunt his power or to upset Elsie, but to insure her physical safety. Each has a sensible, practical reason behind it which he eventually explains to Elsie: she may catch cold in the night air, may hurt herself walking alone or picnicking without his presence and may strain herself in the sun strawberrying.

Although examples of Horace's restraints on Elsie's outdoor activities appear frequently throughout the volumes, he establishes the entire pattern with an incident early in the first book, soon after his dietary decrees. Elsie has gone walking with her friends Lucy and Herbert Carrington. Herbert, a stereotypical frail, good child—"a pale, sickly-looking boy" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 86)—cannot move easily and play. So Elsie, in good romantic child fashion, sacrifices her pleasure for his and runs around gathering the arrows which Herbert shoots

randomly. The whole scene has a mythic tinge: a child sleeping the grass, another wandering after arrows shot aimlessly into the woods. One of Herbert's arrows flies into the meadow, and Elsie, forgetting her father's injunction, goes after it. She soon remembers, though, and horrified at her disobedience, immediately runs to confess to Horace. He is furious, and speaking in his "sternest tone," refuses to forgive her and sends her to bed early. The next morning, the reason behind Horace's strictness becomes clear: a good object lesson is provided by the fortuitous capture of a long rattlesnake found "in the meadow" (emphasis Finley's). Precaution against such dangers motivated Horace's restriction. Once again, then, what seemed an arbitrary tyranny became actually a prudent safety measure. "I hope that you will always, after this, believe that your father has some good reason for his commands" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 93-94), Horace says, standing over the rattlesnake. And in keeping her out of the meadow, Horace protects Elsie from more than snakes: he also prevents the purposeless, erratic and un-Victorian behavior encouraged by an untrammelled nature. Requiring Elsie to stay close to the house also teaches her the necessity of remaining within some community network, some "organic" system encouraged by Bushnell, thereby avoiding the perils of too much individual isolation.

But Horace does not want to remove Elsie completely from the natural world. In fact, he encourages healthy, organized outdoor activities like garden strolling, pony riding and flower picking—communal as well as utilitarian activities. Horace agrees once more with Higginson that outdoor activities should be purposeful, such as sports and studies. Horace even keeps, as Higginson suggested, "a cabinet . . . of the animal and vegetable productions of his own township."¹⁹ Elsie receives one of her most bizarre but ultimately sensible punishments for innocently threatening this scientific project. She finds a hummingbird trapped under a glass jar in the garden; thinking that Arthur maliciously captured it, she frees it. But actually Horace wanted the bird, a "rare species . . . to add it to his collection of curiosities" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 150). Disturbed, he binds Elsie's hand in a handkerchief. As cruel as this may seem, the whole scene really embodies a post-romantic view of nature as something to be tamed and studied; interactions with nature should be profitable to man. Horace had attempted to repress and control nature, while Elsie let it go wild and free, so he must punish his dangerously romantic daughter for such defiance of the Victorian moral code. Such a pursuit illustrates Horace's ability to blend scientific interests with his spiritual nature (although this scene occurs before Horace's conversion, he relinquishes none of his scientific and intellectual explorations afterwards). In this combination Horace manages to resolve a conflict that haunted most late nineteenth-century Christians: the doubt that science cast upon their faith.

Nature isn't the only force that can evoke undisciplined, irrational behavior in a child; emotional and imaginative excess also produces passionate and ungovernable feelings. A debilitating sensitivity and hyperactive imagination characterized saintly children. Little Eva has a Christ-like ability to empathize with others' suffering. Highly impressionable, she experiences Biblical and slave stories so vividly that she becomes ill: "I'm not nervous, but these things

sink into my heart"²⁰ (emphasis Stowe's), Eva says to her father after he tells her the sad story about Scipio. Horace wants to curb any such imaginative sensitivity and emotional intensity in Elsie. While Augustine St. Clare reveres such vulnerability in his daughter, Horace Dinsmore abhors it in his. In controlling her emotions and imagination, Horace regularizes Elsie's behavior, once again making her more stable and socially responsible.

Elsie's crying sessions and obsessive reading of religious and secular works are two activities that isolate her from others and prevent her normal social functioning, so Horace does all he can to check both. From the beginning he disapproves of Elsie's weeping, her main form of emotional indulgence. When Arthur taunts Elsie with the notion that her father doesn't really love her, she runs sobbing away, the emblem of the angel child as her father "just [catches] a glimpse of her white dress disappearing down the garden walk" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 73). Yet rather than being transported by this saintly vision, Horace is irritated and wants to force Elsie out of such a useless state. He calls her and sets down another rule, along with those about diet and nature: "'You have been crying,' he said, in a slightly reproving tone. 'I am afraid you do a great deal more of that than is good for you. It is a very babyish habit, and you must try to break yourself of it'" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 75). Such intolerance springs from his desire to make her less vulnerable to pain and more sturdy and resilient. Yet quelling her tears also silences one of the few ways heroines in sentimental novels could voice their reactions against authority. Nina Baym discusses the value of weeping in sentimental fiction as an acceptable outlet for grief, rage and frustration.²¹ By discouraging her crying, then, Horace stifles Elsie's only expression of rebellion against restrictions.

Horace shows similar aversion to Elsie's imaginative extremes. Soon after he delivers his ban on tears, Horace takes Elsie to visit his friend John Travilla. Travilla teases Elsie by pretending that she will have to leave her father to live with him, so she predictably runs off weeping. Instead of valuing the imaginative receptivity that provoked such tears, Horace is repelled by such senseless thinking and wants only to quell it: "'Pooh! nonsense, Elsie! I am ashamed of you! [H]ow can you be so very silly as to believe for one moment anything so perfectly absurd. . . ?'" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 80-81), he says in response to her gullibility. The depth of Little Eva's imagination is glorified; her distracted, dreamy other-worldliness sets her apart and makes her look like "one of the angels stepped out of [Tom's] New Testament."²² Horace views this same dreaminess in Elsie, her tendency to believe in things that aren't of this world, as a useless habit, like her fondness for candy, that must be broken.

Reading, obviously, has a far more functional value than believing in silly absurd stories. While Horace certainly likes Elsie to employ her time with books, he carefully monitors which books she reads as another way of controlling her imagination. Throughout the series he censors her reading matter. At the end of the first volume, a friend of Horace's gives Elsie a storybook, which she obediently refrains from reading until Horace has approved it. Sadly for Elsie, though, her Papa finds that "the stories are very unsuitable for a little girl of [her] age, and would, indeed, be unprofitable reading for anyone" (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 308). Once more, utilitarian, functional considerations win out over

imaginative, irrational urges. The literal dangers of indulging in such unprofitable, romantic reading become much clearer near the end of the second volume, when listening to Horace read a story causes Elsie actually to become flushed and feverish. “Your pulse is very quick, and I fear this book is entirely too exciting for you at present —,”²³ Horace responds, and ceases reading. Horace carefully steers Elsie through the many dangers of imaginative indulgence by shielding her from anything that may excite her passions or give her unprofitable lessons—Victorian priorities of reason and order supplanting romantic ideals about the primacy of the feelings. Horace monitors Elsie’s reading according to one current in the nineteenth-century controversy about women’s education: that women should avoid strenuous intellectual forays, as threats to mental and physical composure.²⁴

In spite of Horace’s success at training Elsie into a socially responsible adult, he does make two notable mistakes. The first two volumes both move towards central conflicts as Horace’s seemingly unjustifiable strictness threatens Elsie’s life. They constitute the only times in the entire series when Elsie consciously disobeys Horace, and she does so only because he orders her to disobey God’s commands about the sacredness of the Sabbath. It is significant that their main conflict revolves around the issue of Sabbath observance, as that formed one of the most controversial issues in the late nineteenth-century struggle between the civil and religious worlds. For most middle-class Protestants of the time, the refusal of the government to implement laws protecting the sanctity of Sundays (such as forbidding mail delivery) was the only remaining obstacle keeping America from becoming the ideal Christian nation.²⁵ Elsie’s relationship with her father, then, represents a microcosm of the country: a perfect union thwarted only by the ruling authority’s refusal to acknowledge the Sabbath.

In the first scene, Horace asks Elsie to play a secular song on the piano for his friends. Because the Bible forbids worldly activity on the Sabbath, Elsie adamantly but tearfully refuses, so Horace makes Elsie sit precariously on the piano stool for hours. The physical and emotional strain of such punishment overcomes Elsie, and she finally collapses, hitting her head as she falls and bleeding all over her nice white dress. Such physical damage finally moves Horace; he forgives Elsie her “willfulness” and admits her back into his good graces. Although the incident makes Horace value Elsie more because of his near loss, it does not move him any closer to Christian conversion. Once more, Horace’s behavior throughout the scene is motivated by a concern for Elsie’s physical and social well-being. He wants her to play the piece because her refusal is irrational and sacrifices social duty for intangible, unworldly scruples. Obeying her conscience prevents her from sharing her worldly accomplishments with the community. Horace’s punishment, then, is consistent with all his other strictures: he attempts to make her unworldly spirituality conform to the demands of the here and now. He finally ends the punishment not because he is moved by her goodness and piety, but because he is frightened at the potential bodily harm that almost befell his daughter. His remorse is inspired not by any spiritual revelation but by a tangible reality: “she was a pitiable sight indeed, with her fair face, her curls, and her white dress all dabbled in blood” (*Elsie Dinsmore*, 228). The scene, then, does not idealize Elsie’s powerful religious influence as much as it affirms the value of her worldly presence.

In the second volume, the crisis follows an identical pattern, only with higher stakes. Horace falls ill and Elsie nurses him devotedly. Unfortunately, one Sunday Horace asks his daughter to read him a secular story. She refuses, of course, with much trembling and tears, and Horace banishes her from his love until she admits her error. Elsie can never comply with his demand, for such an apology would concede that her father's law is more important than God's, so she begins a long period of pain and hardship. Horace will not forgive her until she repents appropriately, and he deprives her of "dainty" food, company, her mammy and his presence in order to bend her will. The final straw for Elsie occurs when Horace threatens to send her to a convent. This punishment would be far more dreadful than any other, for Elsie as a quintessential Protestant equates Catholicism with Gothic, satanic evil, and the threat propels her into a feverish delirium. Horace returns just in time to see his raving daughter lapse into a coma. Desperate with agony, Horace gazes at Elsie's Bible only because it reminds him of her. The divine meaning soon breaks through to him, and Horace finally surrenders his soul to Christ. Elsie then makes a miraculous recovery, and proceeds to live joyously with her repentant, saved father.

This incident seems on the surface to belong to the group of conventional nineteenth-century death-bed scenes in which the dying angelic child converts various unredeemed souls around her. Finley's scene, however, ultimately espouses somewhat different values. Even Elsie now reveals an un-Christian longing for the real world and an aversion to entering the kingdom of God, showing how thoroughly she has absorbed her father's values about the primacy of the physical over the spiritual. Rather than "symbolically [rejecting] the world,"²⁶ as Samuel Pickering suggests conventional dying children did in this genre, Elsie bemoans her worldly losses; she cries about her shaved hair, wails in terror about the threatened convent, and complains, "I'm *all alone!* There's nobody to love me" (*Holidays*, 241).

Horace especially is swayed by social and physical necessity rather than spiritual promptings throughout this episode. He does have Elsie's well-being at heart in his strictness. Horace disapproves so firmly of Elsie's refusal because such irrational, scrupulous Sabbath-keeping may prevent her from becoming socially responsible and productive, echoing a common argument against legal restrictions on Sabbath activity. Again, he wants to keep her from sacrificing worldly demands for other-worldly urges. "Ten years hence I shall want to take her occasionally to the theatre or opera, or perhaps now and then to a ball," he explains to his sister Adelaide, "and unless I can eradicate these ridiculously strict notions she has got into her head, she will be sure to rebel then, when she will be rather too old to punish" (*Holidays*, 128). Therefore, he punishes Elsie not to flaunt his baseless power, but to mold her into a predictable, controlled citizen, to teach her proper outer behavior, regardless of her inner dictates.

Just as his belief in the primacy of the material over the spiritual motivates his initial decision, so it inspires his final repentance. As in the earlier piano scene, physical necessity finally breaks Horace's will. He had never yielded to Elsie's early piety and emotional agony, and only when confronted by her physical injury now does Horace admit his error. The catalyst that finally pushes Horace into Christianity is also something tangible: the sight of Elsie's

well-used Bible, a tear-blistered letter, and a lock of her hair. Horace groans less over the spiritual meaning of the Bible and the letter than he does over the concrete evidence of Elsie's presence in them. Finley describes his reaction to Elsie's Bible:

. . . he could not at first trust himself even to look at the little volume that had been so constantly in his darling's hands, that it seemed almost a part of herself. . . . There were many texts marked with her pencil, and many pages blistered with her tears. Oh, what a pang that sight sent to her father's heart! In some parts these evidences of her frequent and sorrowful perusal were more numerous than in others (*Holidays*, 248).

His conversion, then, is brought on as much by concrete actuality—"evidences"—as it is by Elsie's ethereal goodness. Appropriately, Horace wants the final act symbolizing his union with Elsie in Christian fellowship to be not a shared spiritual communion or prayer; rather, he asks Elsie for her Bible, emphasizing that it is her "property . . . and . . . a very strong proof of [her] affection" (*Holidays*, 312-313). This dramatic struggle between Elsie's conscience and Horace illustrates, as other episodes do, the overwhelming power empirical considerations have in Horace's life. It also suggests his healthy respect for property, an appropriate value for a middle-class citizen during the stages of early capitalism.

Horace's conversion requires very little actual change from him except for some routine attendance to Sabbath duties. His conversion by no means alters his utilitarian moral scheme. After Elsie's recovery, Horace takes up her training where he left off, continuing his routine of teaching her to be a survivor in the real world. His reasons and methods for disciplining her after his conversion are identical to those he had before it, except that the church now receives some acknowledgement, and he tempers his firmness slightly. He still makes Elsie eat bread and water when she is late for tea, but also gives her a gold watch to help her punctuality. Horace manages to fit his new Christianity into a pre-established Victorian morality; his religion, like Elsie's bank account, becomes regulated, with strict times for Bible reading and prayer. He frequently speaks of his Christian mission using financial or medical language: he is the "steward" of Elsie's soul, while Jesus is its true "physician." Such images again suggest Horace's ability to reconcile several conflicting elements in Victorian religion: financial success, physical science and faith. So salvation does not actually cause much of a change in Horace's life, and it certainly doesn't alter his determination to make Elsie less of a romantic, spiritual child. In portraying Horace's conversion as merely a minor addition to his already stable, empirical ethics, Finley not only idealizes such Victorian thinking, she also undercuts the power and importance of the child redeemer. The changes that Horace effects in Elsie are much greater than those she inspires in him.

Since Horace converts in volume two, the third book can't progress towards any similar dramatic conflict between Elsie's Christian conscience and her father's worldly one. However, Finley creates a replacement for this conflict, and

a climactic struggle again ensues between Horace and Elsie, with significant differences. Once converted, Horace apparently can do no wrong, and so is justified in his stance while Elsie errs seriously. This time Horace forces her to deny not a religious passion for God, but a sexual passion for a handsome but deceiving gambler. Both Horace and Elsie endure this trial as they did the others, and come out more strongly devoted to each other than ever. Horace's years of rigorous Victorian child rearing now face their ultimate test: Elsie has to rely heavily on her "portable parent," that inner conscience planted by her father, to avoid destroying herself through an excess of reformist zeal and sexual passion.

Earlier in this volume, Horace had already prevented Elsie once from following her reformist tendency. She had agreed to marry the crippled Herbert Carrington, not because she loved him, but because he needed her so desperately. She would willingly throw away her worldly pleasure to serve Herbert, and thereby become a stock sentimental martyred heroine, forfeiting her life for others, if it weren't for Horace. He sternly intervenes and brings her down from the clouds of romantic idealization by forbidding the marriage, pointing to the impracticality and wastefulness of devoting her life to a sick man: "Herbert's ill health and lameness are two insuperable objections."²⁷ Horace once more expresses how much he values physical efficiency over weakness and spiritual concerns. The episode contains a hint of social Darwinism, as Horace espouses a sort of survival-of-the-fittest theory in his reasoning against the marriage. Elsie must grow up to be a healthy, productive middle class citizen, implying the worthlessness of a pure spirituality if it is severed from physical health. In tempting Elsie to squander her common sense and strength in a reformist attempt to help someone, this scene foreshadows a later one, in which Elsie's stability and well-being face an even more dangerous threat.

Elsie's Uncle Arthur is now a student at Princeton, and no less vindictive towards Elsie. He owes the dissipated con man Tom Jackson an exorbitant amount in gambling debts; Jackson agrees to accept rich Elsie in payment if he can trick her into marriage. So disguised as the upright Bromley Egerton, he travels to Ohio, where Elsie, separated from her father, is spending the summer with her Aunt Wealthy. "Egerton" succeeds in deceiving everyone, luring Elsie into a passion for and engagement with him. Horace adamantly forbids this match, because he has discovered, through a series of remarkable coincidences, Egerton's true identity, and rescues Elsie from such a tragic end. However, she never quite believes the truth about Egerton and pines away, until she accidentally sees him in Philadelphia months later. He is stumbling drunkenly along on the arm of a prostitute, and Elsie overhears him say that he only wanted to marry that "southern heiress" for her money. Thoroughly convinced now, Elsie soon recovers her happiness and health, and renews her respect and love for Horace.

This courtship was the most difficult ordeal yet for Elsie and Horace. Egerton offered Elsie the greatest temptation to follow her excessive romantic tendencies, so Horace now faced his hardest and most important task as her protector. As with Herbert, marriage with Egerton would have forced Elsie to

sacrifice prudence and worldly happiness, save that her loss would have been much greater. A drunken, gambling husband would have victimized and abused her far more than an ill one would have, and would have placed Elsie in a stock scene from sentimental novels: the suffering wife of a degenerate husband. In his seduction, Egerton forced Elsie to indulge in two highly irrational and perilous impulses: imagination and sexuality. As a deceiver, Egerton inspired Elsie's imagination to believe his stories—tales far more destructively "absurd" than Travilla's earlier teasing. Elsie persisted in believing in Egerton's innocence, in spite of much concrete, rational evidence to the contrary. Only after actually witnessing Egerton's dissoluteness did she surrender her fantasy. Finley explained later how Elsie allowed her imagination to blind her to reality. She loved not the actual man but an ideal creation: ". . . she had never loved *him*; her affection had been bestowed upon the man she believed him to be, not the man that he was" (*Girlhood*, 389). Although Horace had already struggled with Elsie's imaginative excess, he had not yet confronted her sexual passion for another man. This romantic urge caused Horace the most pain, for he didn't know how to conquer it as he did his daughter's other irrational extremes. When Elsie explained that she let Egerton kiss her because ". . . at the moment [she] forgot everything but—but just that he was there" (*Girlhood*, 373), Horace became angrier than he had ever been with her. Such a feeling, dulling any rational sense, any awareness of proper behavior, represented Elsie's most serious transgression yet of Horace's Victorian principles. Fortunately, he had instilled in Elsie enough self-control to fend off Egerton's temptations and to survive the trial. All of Elsie's years of maturing had moved towards this final purpose of preventing her from marrying the wrong man.

The plots of the first three *Elsie* books run contrary to those of the women's fiction outlined by Nina Baym:

The purpose of both plots is to deprive the heroine of all external aids and to make her success in life entirely a function of her own efforts and character. The idea that a woman's identity or place in life is a function of her father's or husband's place is firmly rejected.²⁸

At this critical moment in Elsie's life, she was entirely dependent on "external aids" to insure success, as it took both Travilla and her father's persistent moralizing and gathering of evidence to convince Elsie of her gross misjudgment.

And her identity remained clearly a function of both her father's and her husband's place, as the appropriate mate whom Elsie and her father finally settled on is no other than John Travilla, her father's best friend and the man who repeatedly saved her in the past (it was Travilla's fortuitous discovery of Egerton's true identity that unmasked the villain). Travilla offered the perfect consummation of Elsie's life: wealthy, wholesome, pious and conventional, he would provide for Elsie and keep her safely close to home. He would give her very little opportunity to indulge in any unworldly or passionate extremes, for he excited in her none of these feelings associated with romantic heroines. She

did not have to suffer for him because he was already happy and healthy; she need not strain her imagination to believe in false promises; she did not have to feel much passion for him, since Finley presented their alliance as basically asexual; she did not even have to bow submissively to his will, as he explained that he would never want to dominate her. So he was the ideal replacement for her father, a man who would continue gently to guide her character towards worldly practicality. Also, having married a father figure, Elsie would remain forever a type of daughter, depending on a male authority to guide her through life (appropriately, Elsie's marriage only survived three volumes; Travilla died relatively early, thereby returning Elsie to her father's care and her own perpetual childhood).

Marriage with Travilla and the consequent eight children and prosperity were appropriate rewards for Elsie's piety and goodness. Her virtue brings her not happily into God's unearthly kingdom, as it did Little Eva, but contented and rich into Travilla's successful plantation. It was the material goal Horace always wished for her, and she would not have gained it if he had not carefully guided her through childhood. On an extended European visit, "more than one coronet had been laid at her feet" (*Girlhood*, 396). Yet because of Horace's training, Elsie was reasonable and astute enough to discern Travilla's worth, so she refused these romantic opportunities and accepted Travilla's sensible, reliable offer. Elsie ended her girlhood, then, as an emblem of American Victorian goodness: choosing the familiar, industrious next-door-neighbor over exotic European aristocracy.

Although Finley splintered off from certain strands of nineteenth-century children's books, her works do show the influences of literary trends of the time. Much literature appearing during the late nineteenth century also portrayed a domestication of the romantic child. Rather than transcending society (usually through death), these children become assimilated into the community as healthy, productive members. Twain's Tom Sawyer, Aldrich's Tom Bailey, Alger's boys, Alcott's Meg, Jo and Amy all learn to avoid romantic extremes and gain some concrete success. Yet Finley is unique in portraying, through Horace and his child-rearing methods, a full-fledged affirmation of Victorian principles about the value of material affluence and health. The books manage to blend the two strains of didacticism and fantasy characterizing much late nineteenth-century children's literature,²⁹ in suggesting that proper behavior will bring other rewards than just a virtuous soul; conscientious obedience of paternal dictates brings Elsie a treasure chest of clothes, toys, books, jewels and furnishings. The books clearly reveal their kinship with Sunday School books, which sought to bridge the Bible and the real world and make orthodox religion palatable by telling stories about children learning to act correctly in the everyday world. They try to blend religious values with the secular world, just as the *Elsie* books do.

During the final third of the nineteenth century, when Finley was writing, America as a whole needed some kind of training manual, as the country tried to unify itself after the fragmentation of the Civil War. Many religious and social assumptions were being questioned, particularly those about the relationship of Christianity to the modern industrial world. America was becoming progressively dependent upon materialistic values, which grew out of capitalism

and the new science—values that seemed at odds with traditional Christian humility and piety. How, then, could the country progress as an industrial, aggressive culture and still remain piously Christian?³⁰ Much of American religious thought of the time addressed this clash of the modern world with older spiritual values. Muscular Christianity, social Darwinism and the Social Gospel movement all tried to reconcile traditional religious ethics with the rigorous demands of a progressive culture.

Closely intertwined with these religious concerns were questions about the roles men and women should play in the coming society. The increasing “feminization of American culture” discussed by Ann Douglas and others³¹ entailed certain major problems. The cults of domesticity and true womanhood, which dominated the feminine middle class throughout the mid-nineteenth century, presented obstacles and threats to an increasingly rootless, competitive nation. If the home provided the source of all moral education, and women ruled absolutely in this domestic realm, didn’t women, unschooled in the demands of a commercial society, then wield more power than they could handle? How could sons make the necessary leap from an insular maternal sphere into the public business world? These dilemmas pointed to the general problem of separating the masculine and feminine spheres, of placing women in the home, controlling moral nurture and character development, and placing men in the public world, determining finances and civil laws; the domination of one sphere at the expense of the other might seriously threaten American society. The tyranny of the masculine would produce a heartless, Godless brutally aggressive culture which sacrificed humanity for selfish material interests, and America was not yet ready to accept the modern scientific age without the blessing of traditional Christianity. However, the triumph of the woman’s domestic sphere would also endanger the growing nation, by enfeebling it with undisciplined, irrational piety and emotional volatility.

In the *Elsie* series Finley offered a fairy-tale solution to these various conflicts, representing a strain in post-Civil War thinking either too optimistic or too desperate to tolerate such irreconcilable conflict and potential social chaos. The books presented a resolution that re-joined faith and the world and dissolved the barriers between the masculine and feminine spheres. Horace manages to resolve any such religious conflict in himself by becoming the perfect Christian scholar-gentleman—avidly studying science, running a successful plantation, fulfilling his religious duties and “maternally” raising a daughter. Finley reconciled feminine powerlessness with the continuance of feminine values by giving a great deal of maternal power to Horace; Elsie’s feminine realm contains a trick door that allows Horace to move back and forth freely, but that does not allow Elsie to exit at all. As the books progress, Horace assumes more and more maternal authority, until he finally has his own private entrance right into Elsie’s bedroom (*Holidays*, 290), a private sacred space that sentimental novels traditionally reserved for women and their “feminine rituals.”³² As Horace trains his daughter, he steadily robs her of the responsibilities as well as the privileges of the nineteenth-century middle-class women’s sphere, including housekeeping and the education and nurture of children. He gradually severs all of her ties to other women, cutting her off from the resource of female companionship that

proved so vital to many nineteenth-century women.³³ In giving such power to a paternal figure, Finley forced Elsie to remain a child her whole life, nurtured and controlled by her father to the end.

Although an actual shrinking of the women's sphere occurs in the *Elsie* books, Finley managed to retain feminine values by "feminizing" a patriarch. Yet Horace does not become a sentimental weakling in this process of feminization. He retains and increases his powers in the "masculine" realms of commerce and science, becoming both breadwinner and nurturer. Horace achieves a kind of idealistic androgyny, maintaining a worldly paternal authority augmented by feminine spiritual power. He embodies the kind of "paradoxical combination" that David Reynolds describes as characterizing post-1850 American culture:

American religion became both more "feminine" and more "masculine" during the nineteenth century. The loss of theological rigor was accompanied by a valuation of "tender" sentimentality in both popular ministers and female writers. Yet the escape from the strict belief in predestination and total depravity resulted in a "tough" assertion of human capability and heroic muscularity.³⁴

The transformation of Elsie's character, though, is far less radical; she does not successfully blend such "tough" and "tender" authority. Although she does gain physical health and minimal self-discipline, she remains always within the control of a benevolent but strong patriarchal system. Feminine values do survive, but they no longer threaten masculine authority.

Why would Finley create such an anti-feminist "Eden" just at a time when women were beginning to gain more legal power, when images of "masculinized" women, capable of wielding both male and female authority, populated American culture more and more? Such a vision certainly separates Finley from the mainstream of quietly subversive women writers discussed earlier. In suggesting that America could become materially successful and still maintain its purity and the sanction of Christian piety, Finley's books offered a solution to the problems besetting post-Civil War life that many readers found attractive. The saintly child could both retain her innocence and live and propagate in a world now worthy of deserving her. And the angel child will not only survive—she will remain an eternal child. This extended childhood helps explain why Finley sets her story in the Neverneverland of the ante-bellum south, where neither the country nor Elsie will ever have to grow up. So America should be able to preserve its virtue as it advances into the new world, just as Horace will successfully engage in scientific and financial speculation, keeping Elsie obediently perched forever on his knee.

Finley ultimately presents a profoundly conservative view: the books demonstrate a way of reconciling conflicts without creating social disorder or questioning social institutions. In this sense they run counter to the trend of sentimental novels described by Jane Tompkins:

. . . the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view; . . . in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville.³⁵

Although Elsie's process of maturity resembles that which Tompkins traces in other sentimental heroines, it differs in a significant respect. Elsie's "training," unlike Ellen Montgomery's in *The Wide, Wide World*, does not teach her to surrender in response to an unjust world and to retreat into an "inviolable" self. Instead, Elsie learns to listen to, respect and trust male social authorities who know much better than she how to "rear" herself. Elsie has no protected inner realm; Horace enters into every literal and spiritual private space (including her piety) and teaches her more efficient ways of organizing and running her "self." Elsie herself points to the difference between her experience and Ellen's, in discussing Warner's book with Travilla: "How I pity poor Ellen for having such a father, so different from my dear papa" (*Girlhood*, 83). Here Elsie suggests that paternal authority for her is not an inescapable force she must learn to cope with as Ellen Montgomery must learn to "submit to the authorities society has placed over [her]."³⁶ On the contrary, Elsie's father represents a welcome and essential agent of her development which she joyfully heeds. This conservatism also partially explains why Finley set the books in a pre-Civil War era. In presenting the Golden Age version of an ante-bellum South filled with benevolent masters and happy slaves, she suggests a nostalgic preference for a time before such idealized paternal institutions had been "reorganized" and destroyed.

Finley's books suggest no "faint bitter taste of poison in the cup,"³⁷ no undercurrent of resentment and anger. They convey a yearning for an increased masculine authority tempered by gentle affection, for a more stable, patriarchal time. One could speculate at length on why Finley took such a reactionary stance. Perhaps the books helped to resolve the painfully ambivalent feelings she must have experienced as a childless, unmarried invalid succeeding in the masculine territory of writing.³⁸ Her prefaces frequently blame God or her public for inspiring her books, thereby allowing her to avoid the responsibility of female autonomy and assertion, just as Elsie does. Perhaps Finley's glimpses of drastic cultural upheaval led her to create such an idyllic fantasy world. Her books portray what Daniel T. Rodgers describes as "inverted reflections of . . . apprehensions of chaos." Finley created what other late-nineteenth "child shapers" did, "a literature which served at once to train children and to enlist them in a web of adult fantasies—to project upon children, and thus lay bare, much of the covert restlessness and half-disguised anxiety within late-Victorian America."³⁹

Finley's own anxieties focus on the dangers of an irrational religious fervor and an unbridled matriarchal society. Her books offer training advice for Elsie and her country: years of prudent child-rearing, in which her father taught Elsie to respect benevolent paternal authority, to suppress her religious extremism, and to accept her limited sphere of feminine influence, finally carry Elsie

into an idealistic American marriage. If the late nineteenth-century nation as a whole would follow these cautious principles, it too might achieve perfect harmony and union after a tumultuous youth.

Brown University

notes

1. Florence Wilson, "The Author of the Elsie Books," *Ladies' Home Journal* 10 (April, 1893), 3.
2. For other critical explorations of the *Elsie* series, see the following: Janet E. Brown, "The Saga of Elsie Dinsmore," *University of Buffalo Studies* 17 (July, 1945), 75-129; Amy H. Dowe, "Elsie Finds a Modern Champion," *Publishers' Weekly* 31 (December 31, 1932), 2384-2387; Jacqueline Jackson and Philip Kendall, "What Makes a Bad Book Good: *Elsie Dinsmore*," *Children's Literature* 7 (1978), 45-67; Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, *American Authors 1600-1900* (New York, 1938), 272; Jane Manthorne, "The Lachrymose Ladies," *The Horn Book Magazine* 43 (June, August, October, 1967), 375-384, 501-513, 622-630; Agnes Repplier, "Little Pharisees in Fiction," *Scribner's Magazine* 20 (December, 1896), 718-724; M. Sarah Smedman, "Martha Finley," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Glenn E. Estes (Detroit, 1985), Vol. 42; G.B. Stern, "Elsie Reread," *The New Yorker* (14 March, 1936), 52-54; Ruth Suckow, "Elsie Dinsmore: A Study in Perfection," *The Bookman* 66 (October, 1927), 126-133; Algernon Tassin, *Cambridge History of American Literature*, eds. William Peterfield et al. (New York, 1927), 397-398; Bernard Wisby, *The Child and the Republic* (Philadelphia, 1968), 87-90.
3. For further discussion of the subversive nature of these novels, see Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 820-1870* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978); Mary Kelley, "The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal in the Home," *Signs* 4 (Spring, 1979), 434-46; Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings: A Study of the Domestic Novel in America, the Women Who Wrote It, the Women Who Read it, in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1956); Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity 1830-1860* (New York, 1982); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York, 1985); Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, Ohio, 1976).
4. Anne Tropp Trensky, "The Sainly Child in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction," *Prospects* 1 (1975), 389.
5. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1985), 135.
6. *Ibid.*, 163-4
7. Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelicalism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1981), 48-50; see also Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb, Illinois, 1971); Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York, 1977); Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York, 1971); Janet Wilson James, "Women in American Religious History: An Overview," in *Women in American Religion*, ed. Janet Wilson James (Philadelphia, 1980), 1-25; Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, 1970); Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1986); William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago, 1978); David S. Reynolds, "The Feminization Controversy: Sexual Stereotypes and the Paradoxes of Piety in Nineteenth-Century America," *The New England Quarterly* 53 (March, 1980), 96-106; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981); Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Welter, *Dimity Convictions*.
8. Martha Finley, *Elsie Dinsmore* (1868; rpt., Salem, New Hampshire, 1985), 55. All subsequent references are taken from this edition.
9. Horace Bushnell, *Views of Christian Nurture and of Subjects Adjacent Thereto* (1847; rpt., Delmar, New York, 1975), especially "Growth, Not Conquest, the True Method of Christian Progress," and "The Organic Unity of the Family."
10. See Daniel T. Rodgers, "Socializing Middle-Class Children: Institutions, Fables, and Work Values in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Growing Up in America: Children in Historical Perspective*, eds. N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes (Urbana, Illinois, 1985), 121; and Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 160.
11. Ryan, *Empire of the Mother*, 51 and *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 160-161.
12. Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980), 87-91.
13. Ryan, *Empire of the Mother*, 55.

14. For further discussions of nineteenth-century child-rearing practices, see Anne M. Boylan, "Growing Up Female in Young America, 1800-1860," in *American Childhood*, eds. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner (Westport, Connecticut, 1985), 153-184; Nancy F. Cott, "Notes Toward an Interpretation of Antebellum Childrearing," *The Psychohistory Review* 7 (Spring, 1978), 4-20; Barbara Finkelstein, "Casting Networks of Good Influence: The Reconstruction of Childhood in the United States, 1790-1870," in *American Childhood*, eds. Hiner and Hawes; Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*; William McLoughlin, "Evangelical Childrearing in the Age of Jackson," *Journal of Social History* 9 (Fall, 1975), 20-43; Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1975); Welter, *Dimity Convictions*; Wishy, *The Child and the Republic*.
15. Many people have explored the roles of men and women in the domestic sphere. Treatments especially relevant to this essay include Boylan, "Growing up Female"; Degler, *At Odds*; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977); Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity*; McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America*; Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class, The Empire of the Mother, and Womanhood in America*; David Schuyler, "Inventing a Feminine Past," *The New England Quarterly* 51 (September, 1978), 291-308; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Maxine Van de Wetering, "The Popular Concept of 'Home' in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American Studies* 18 (April, 1984), 5-28; Welter, *Dimity Convictions*.
16. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "A Letter to a Dyspeptic," *Out-Door Papers* (Boston, 1874), 57-59.
17. Higginson, "Saints," 4, 9, 12.
18. Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America* (Durham, North Carolina, 1940), 335.
19. Higginson, "Saints," 29.
20. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, 1966), 255.
21. Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 144; see also Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 178.
22. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 162.
23. Martha Finley, *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* (New York, 1868), 285. All subsequent references are taken from this edition.
24. Susan Phinney Conrad, *Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America, 1830-1860* (New York, 1976), 22-27.
25. Handy, *A Christian America*, 48, 84-85; Marty, *Righteous Empire*, 96.
26. Samuel Pickering, "The Grave Leads But To Paths Of Glory: Deathbed Scenes In American Children's Books, 1800-1860," *Dalhousie Review* 59 (Autumn, 1979), 457.
27. Martha Finley, *Elsie's Girlhood* (New York, 1872), 147. All subsequent references will be taken from this edition.
28. Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 35.
29. See Elizabeth A. Francis, "American Children's Literature, 1646-1880," and Sally Allen McNall, "American Children's Literature, 1880-Present," in *American Childhood*, eds. Hawes and Hiner; Rodgers, "Socializing Middle-Class Children."
30. The explorations of post-Civil War American conflicts are varied and abundant. Discussions particularly relevant to this essay include Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis*; Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*; Marty, *Righteous Empire*; McDannell, *The Christian Home*; Derican Intellectual and the Victorian Crisis of Faith," in *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe (Philadelphia, 1976), 59-77; Reynolds, "The Feminization Controversy"; Rodgers, "Socializing Middle-Class Children"; Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*; Schuyler, "Inventing a Feminine Past"; Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; Wishy, *The Child and the Republic*.
31. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*; two responses to this book are also interesting: Schuyler, "Inventing a Feminine Past" and Reynolds, "The Feminization Controversy."
32. See Ann Douglas Wood, "Mrs. Sigourney and the Sensibility of the Inner Space," *The New England Quarterly* 45 (June, 1972), 163-181 and McDannell, *The Christian Home*.
33. Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Disorderly Conduct*, 53-76.
34. Reynolds, "The Feminization Controversy," 106.
35. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 124.
36. *Ibid.*, 177.
37. Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings*, xvii.
38. See especially Ann Douglas Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *American Quarterly* 23 (Spring, 1971), 3-24; also, Conrad, *Perish the Thought* and Wood, "The Sensibility of the Inner Space."
39. Rodgers, "Socializing Middle-Class Children," 125, 128.