ELSIE DINSMORE REVISITED: THE UTILITY

OF AN OUTCAST SERIES

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* series (1867-1905) deserves to be reconsidered for its potential utility in the broader arena of American literature. The series, popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century, is the special object of critical scorn amongst modern scholars despite having experienced a revival in popular circles. While other formerly-sidelined books, such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), have been reclaimed through sustained feminist scholarship, the *Elsie* series remains largely blacklisted from academic conversations. Scholars such as Nina Baym and Jane Tompkins, who worked to bring respect to female writings from the 1850s and 1860s, drew a sharp distinction between fictions written for adult audiences, like *The Wide, Wide World* and those written for adolescents, like *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Little Women* (1867) – a distinction that has caused juvenile fiction to be largely omitted from canon expansions benefitting adult domestic fiction. I argue that the *Elsie Dinsmore* series has a value within the American canon by acting as the best example of transitional literature between adult domestic fiction and the girls' series books that dominated the end of the century. To develop this argument, I first examine the textual and cultural factors that have contributed to *Elsie*'s omission from academic conversations. I then examine the extent to which the *Elsie* series participates in tropes of adult domestic fiction and in tropes of girls' fiction to situate the series within the progression of American female writing in the nineteenth century. I contend that the *Elsie* series can make a valuable

addition to courses on the development of female writing in America by acting as prime examples of texts that participate in both adult and juvenile genres.

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INTRODUCTION

"Though Elsie's painful ordeal may have drawn tears of sympathy from young readers, it would hardly have inspired emulation. The book well deserves the banishment that its miserable little heroine so often experiences, and should not only be sent to a garret room but kept forever locked away."[1] – John Seelye, 2005

John Seelye's opinion of the *Elsie Dinsmore* series (1867-1905) – stated, in an ironic twist, in his study expressly designed to consider marginalized works of nineteenth-century American women writers – encapsulates academia's general feelings towards Martha Finley's oeuvre, a twenty-eight book behemoth. Despite growing critical interest in sentimental fiction and in reclaiming previously maligned works by early women writers, *Elsie Dinsmore* remains curiously blacklisted even among studies designed specifically to give credence to didactic, highly Christian female literature.[2] Similarly, among surveys of juvenile literature, the realm to which *Elsie* has been often relegated, the text receives little serious scholarship and is often mentioned simply as a historical relic or as a foil to plucky heroines. *Elsie*'s status as the black sheep of women's literature makes the story of its positioning in the canon one more of omission and asides than sustained critical inquiry into its utility and place in American literature.[3]

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[1] pp.137-8, Jane Eyre*'s American Daughters: From* The Wide, Wide World to Anne of Green Gables *A Study of Marginalized Maidens and What They Mean* (2005).
[2] For example, see Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction (1978)* and Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1985), two studies that I will discuss later in this thesis.
[3] Due to the paucity of critical writings that conduct sustained analysis of *Elsie* (and even fewer that give serious consideration to explaining why the series is or is not included in the canon), I choose to give an in-depth discussion of those critics whose work is central in establishing a theoretical framework for discussing sentimental women's writing as serious literature rather than an overview of the scant extant criticism on *Elsie*. Where applicable, I will provide an overview of those scholars who have deemed *Elsie* a worthy topic for discussion.

This state of affairs seems notably curious, given a body of text that incorporates many of the most notable tropes of nineteenth-century literature aimed at a female audience. The *Elsie Dinsmore* series follows the titular heroine, who at the beginning of the series is a lonely half-orphaned eight-year old, throughout the journey of her life. The early books in the series center principally on the relationship that develops between Elsie and her father, Horace, when he returns from an eight-year grand tour in Europe. Elsie is a devout Christian who refuses to disobey any aspect of Biblical commandments; Horace, her father, is a worldly man who believes his child must obey him absolutely. Through numerous trials and confrontations, Horace is converted into a model Christian. From this point forward, the *Elsie* books follow Elsie's growth into a woman, her various romantic interests, her marriage, motherhood, and widowhood. After the death of her husband, the *Elsie* series centers primarily on the lives of her numerous children and grandchildren and the family vacations that they all enjoy together.

Critical works devoted to studying the *Elsie Dinsmore* series (rather than simply mentioning them in passing) are quite rare; studies that see *Elsie* as providing valuable input into the world of letters are even rarer.[4] Critics who do study *Elsie* often begin their analyses by affirming *Elsie* as a lesser work of fiction. In 1945, Janet E. Brown found it necessary to begin her overview of the *Elsie Dinsmore* series "with an admission [that] the material which Martha Finley spread through twenty-eight reasonably large volumes, when bulked together for examination, is frankly rather thin" (75). In 1978, Jacqueline Jackson and Philip Kendall preface their otherwise-favorable opinion of *Elsie* with this disclaimer: "for the sake of the uninitiated, it

[4] Throughout this thesis, I refer to both the *Elsie Dinsmore* series and the first book in the series, which is – rather confusingly – named *Elsie Dinsmore*. Unless I am referring to a specific moment from the first novel, I will use *Elsie* to denote the series as a whole.

behooves us to establish our initial assumption, that *Elsie* is indeed a bad book" (46).[5] Helena Michie begins her 1989 critical inquiry with an acknowledgment that "the *Elsie* books [are] unknown except for a faint infamy that depends largely on the psychopathology of one scene from the first book [and has] no place even in the more capacious and responsive canon of the late 1980s" (188).

Over the past twenty years, critics have become less dismissive of the *Elsie* series and have begun to explore *Elsie*'s potential to provide worthwhile contributions to the American canon of sentimentality. In *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (2000), Marianne Noble examines the masochism evident through Elsie's repeated submission to her father. Jackie E. Stallcup treats the *Elsie* series as a valuable tool through which to examine the world of Christian female empowerment in her article "Stamping the Coin of Character: Elsie Dinsmore and the Power of Christian Wealth" (2009). As a whole, although these scholars demonstrate their acceptance of the *Elsie* series by virtue of their subject matter, they have not specifically addressed the need to reconsider *Elsie Dinsmore*'s place in the arena of American women's writings.

When discussing the canon formation of nineteenth-century women's literature, a key voice in any conversation must be Nina Baym and her foundation work, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978). Baym's purpose is to "[report] on a large body of once popular but now neglected American fiction" and provide the reasoning necessary to bring these overlooked female texts into the realm of acceptable academic study (11). In so doing, Baym hopes academics will "reexamine the grounds upon which certain hallowed American classics have been called great" (15). Baym defines woman's fiction as

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[5] To be fair to Jackson and Kendall's argument, it is important to note that their overall thesis calls for the "[restoration of] *Elsie* to her rightful pedestal in American letters" (46).

works that “are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women” (22); namely, these novels “chronicle the ‘trials and triumph’ … of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them” (22). Such novels dominated the American literary landscape from the 1820s until their decline in the 1870s (Baym 22).[6]

Although Baym primarily focuses on adult fictions between 1850 and 1870, she does discuss *Elsie Dinsmore*’s place in the canon of sentimental literature. Baym appears to omit *Elsie* from *Woman’s Fiction* because of a generic classification: that is, *Elsie* falls within the “waning days of woman’s fiction, when it permuted into children’s literature” (23). Specifically, Baym values fiction written for women over fiction written for girls. To wit:

> In the same year that Evans published *St. Elmo* [1867], Martha Finley published the first Elsie Dinsmore book, where little Elsie, resisting her father’s command to sing for his guests on Sunday, falls off the piano stool and gashes her forehead, taking the strategy of self-abuse for the purposes of manipulating others further than it had been taken before, and more crudely. In 1868, Louisa May Alcott published the first part of *Little Women*. These two publishing events marked … the decline of woman’s fiction as we have studied it, because they represent the transformation of woman’s fiction into girl’s fiction. The story of feminine heroism now becomes a didactic instrument for little girls; as an adult genre, woman’s fiction becomes the gothic romance. (Baym 296)

Thus, we find that, although Baym does not seem to admire *Elsie Dinsmore* as a particularly well-executed work, she does not find it unworthy of study. Rather, Baym values adult literature over children’s literature and accordingly does not discuss those works she sees as ushering in the “decline” of woman’s fiction.[7] In so doing, Baym’s omission does not comment specifically

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[6] Baym cannot offer any one reason as to why woman’s fiction declined in this period. She speculates that “adult woman’s experiences may have become too heterogeneous and complex” (*Woman’s* 296) for these formulaic storylines, that new generations of writers were tired of the woman’s fiction story, and that “new, massive doubts about traditional Christianity must certainly have undermined the evangelical certainty of woman’s fiction” (*Woman’s* 297).

[7] Baym’s privileging of novels written for adult women over those written for young women is an interesting assumption that deserves further discussion. Since the publishing of *Woman’s Fiction* in 1978, the study of children’s literature has gained greater respect in the academic community. This is due, in large part, to three works

on *Elsie*'s critical status, or lack thereof; instead, the scope of her study does not encompass children's literature.

Jane Tompkins continues Baym's overall recuperative work in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (1985). In this seminal work of feminist apologia, Tompkins provides a rationale for reading sentimental works of early American writers "not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order" (xi). These sentimental writers wrote "not so that they could be enshrined in any literary hall of fame, but in order to win the belief and influence the behavior of the widest possible audience [; indeed,] these novelists have designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way" (Tompkins xi). Tompkins pays particular attention to the "cultural realities that made these novels meaningful," such as the "religious beliefs, social practices, and economical and political circumstances that produced them" (xiii). In short, Tompkins evaluates nineteenth-century sentimental writings by the standards of their own time. She "chose to discuss two works of domestic, or 'sentimental,' fiction because [she] wanted to demonstrate the power and ambition of novels written by women, and specifically by women whose work twentieth-century criticism has repeatedly denigrated" (xiv).[8] In contrast to generations of naysayers who denigrate sentimental fiction as trite and overblown, Tompkins

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of scholarship on the power and positioning of children's fiction in the American canon: Gail Schmunk Murray's *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood* (1998); Anne Scott MacLeod's *American Childhood: Essays on Children's Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1994) and Gillian Avery's *Behold the Child: American Children and their Books 1621-1922* (1994). We might question if, given the recent acceptance of children's literature as an area of literary study, Baym might now reassess her negative opinion of the change in woman's fiction in the 1870s. In this paper, I hope to extend Baym's course of study in light of our increased appreciation for children's literature.

[8] The two sentimental works Tompkins discusses are Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*.

finds that sentimental novels actually gain strength and efficacy precisely through their use of stereotyped characters, plotlines, and settings (xvi).[9]

Although Tompkins' work makes no specific mention of the *Elsie* series, Tompkins provides a theoretical positioning from which we may defend the nineteenth-century sentimental novel and, by extension, *Elsie Dinsmore*.[10] Additionally, modern scholars of children's literature now position *The Wide, Wide World* as the first instance of girls' domestic fiction (Murray 54). Because *The Wide, Wide World* and other woman's fictions such as *The Lamplighter* are focused on a young heroine's development, Gillian Avery categorizes these books as children's literature in *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books 1621-1922* (115). In so doing, Avery calls into question the distinctions Baym and Tompkins make between woman's fiction and children's fiction. While I will maintain Baym's and Tompkins' original distinctions for the purpose of this thesis, keeping in mind the truly liminal nature of these distinctions allows us to better examine *Elsie Dinsmore*'s place within the American canon. Throughout this thesis, I will

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[9] Specifically, Tompkins writes:

> In arguing for the positive value of stereotyped characters and sensational, formulaic plots, I have self-consciously reversed the negative judgments that critics have passed on these features of popular fiction by re-describing them from the perspective of an altered conception of what literature is. When literary texts are conceived as agents of cultural information rather than as objects of interpretation and appraisal, what counts as a 'good' character or a logical sequence of events changes accordingly. When one sets aside modernist demands – for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy – and attends to the way a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions, an entirely new story begins to unfold, and one's sense of the formal exigencies of narrative alters accordingly, producing a different conception of what constitutes successful characters and plots. The text succeeds or fails on the basis of its 'fit' with the features of its immediate context, on the degree to which it provokes the desired response, and not in relation to unchanging formal, psychological, or philosophical standards of complexity, or truth, or correctness. (xvii-xviii)

[10] John Seelye appears to overlook Tompkins' focus on adult literature (which is underscored even further by her omission of *Little Women*, which is by far the most accepted of the girl books) and instead reads Tompkins' omission of *Elsie* as a value call on the worth of *Elsie Dinsmore* as a series. He writes: "If suffering as Jane Tompkins suggests is the empowering feature of sentimental fiction, then *Elsie Dinsmore* together with its many sequels must be accounted a voltaic pile, discharging the highest redemptive power of all the books under consideration here. As literature, however, Finley's pious effort has nothing to redeem it, and is deservedly neglected, even by Jane Tompkins" (133). Given Tompkins' openness towards domestic texts, a more likely explanation is that Tompkins chooses to focus on adult domestic fictions, similar to Baym.

use the groundwork laid by Baym and Tompkins to provide the theoretical basis for an argument in favor of adding *Elsie* to the body of sentimental novels now routinely studied as examples of woman's fiction.

Overall, serious scholars of literature largely dismiss *Elsie* on one of two grounds: the devaluing of children's literature or an incomplete reading of the *Elsie* series. Baym and Tompkins omit anything considered girls' fiction from their important works of sentimental canon formation. John Seelye seems to be the only person since Nina Baym's groundbreaking study *Woman's Fiction* (1978) to consider *Elsie*'s place within the larger sentimental fiction canon, and, although his reading of sentimental literature is informed by a positive perception of children's literature, he dismisses *Elsie* on faulty assumptions made through a clearly incomplete reading of the book. He cites only the first novel in the series and his argument contains numerous factual errors about Elsie's development as a character. The only studies to indicate knowledge of *Elsie's* events up to book eight have come from specialists in the areas of children's literature (Stallcup, Sekeres). To dismiss universally *Elsie* as inferior to other sentimental texts such as *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* on the basis of the first book alone – as John Seelye does – is poor scholarship at best. To omit her from the canon of sentimental literature because of outdated modes of thinking about the value of children's literature is also unfair. *Elsie* contains the same tropes and information as *Wide, Wide World* and even allows the titular heroine to grow up, marry, and reproduce – a leap of development unheard of for most sentimental novels. Elsie, although submissive, becomes empowered through her submission to Christ. Furthermore, she exercises the power of Christian charity through the management of her money (Stallcup 301). Why then, is *Elsie* considered such childish drivel?

In this thesis, I argue for the formal and cultural necessity of re-evaluating *Elsie*'s place in the canon of American sentimental literature. I will begin the body of this thesis by focusing on the textual history and reception of the *Elsie Dinsmore* series and examining how this history has affected its status among literary communities. Next, in order to establish *Elsie*'s credibility as a novel of comparable worth to leading woman's fictions, I move into a discussion of the similarities between the first four books of the *Elsie* series and *The Wide, Wide World*. I next address *Elsie's* place within the canon of established children's literature through an analysis of the first eight *Elsie* books alongside *Little Women*. I conclude by arguing that scholars can use the *Elsie* series as a valuable didactic text to show the confluence of sentimental literature and children's literature. That is, rather than its status as both sentimental woman's fiction and girls' book being seen as a weakness, we could use its dual nature as a teaching tool to demonstrate the change in women's writing in the years immediately following the Civil War. Far from being the *de riguer* example of poorly written excessive sentimentality, Elsie provides scholars insight into the evolution of women's writing as a whole.

CHAPTER I

Saved by Grace: The Death and Rebirth of the *Elsie Dinsmore* Series

According to the large claims of my title, I find it necessary to begin my discussion on *Elsie Dinsmore*'s placement in the American canon with a detailed account of the series' history for a number of reasons. Examining *Elsie*'s complex history allows us to understand the series' modern classification as children's literature, despite its original intended audience of both women and children. Additionally, *Elsie*'s textual history reveals why so few scholars are familiar with the books, and why feminist scholars may be more reluctant to study *Elsie* than other similarly-written and themed novels. Understanding the critical reception of a text is important in any undertaking, but, as we shall see, it may prove particularly crucial to understanding contemporary scholastic attitudes towards *Elsie Dinsmore*.

Dodd, Mead publishers released Martha Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* to the American reading public in 1867. [11] At that time, Dodd, Mead had one additional volume of *Elsie* planned – *Holidays at Roselands: with some after scenes of Elsie's Life* (1868), which was not a sequel, per se, but rather the second half of Finley's original manuscript of *Elsie Dinsmore* – but still no idea of the behemoth series it would become. Between 1867 and 1905, Dodd, Mead released twenty-eight volumes following Elsie Dinsmore and her family, the sales from which outnumbered every children's book other than *Little Women* in the nineteenth century (Sekeres 16). In the seventy years following its publication, the novel sold more than five million copies and had an

[11] Finley asked that the first two *Elsie* books be published under the pseudonym of Martha Farquharson because her family felt it was untoward for her to place her name in the public sphere (Janet Brown 79).

estimated twenty-five million readers, making its reading public "'nothing more nor less than a civilization'" (Smedman n.p.). Today, however, the series that was once a hugely popular bestseller is known primarily by right-wing Christian conservative readers intent on advertising Elsie's life as a spiritual guide.[12] In this chapter, I will examine the journey of the *Elsie* books from blockbuster hits to Christian boutique Bible study guides with specific attention to the role critical reception has played in this rebranding.

Fittingly for the Christian role model Elsie would become, *Elsie*'s life began with an answer to her author's prayers. During the mid-1860s, Martha Finley, an unmarried writer of Presbyterian Sunday school tracts living in Philadelphia, developed chronic back problems that left her bedridden and financially dependent on her brother. Eager to support herself despite her disability, Finley prayed for "something which would yield her an income," and shortly thereafter, Elsie Dinsmore was born (Smedman n.p.). Once completed, Finley took the manuscript of *Elsie Dinsmore* to Dodd, Mead; the publishers determined that the text "was far too long to appear as a single volume," so Frank Dodd "suggested that the first part be published as *Elsie Dinsmore* and the second as a sequel" (Smedman n.p.). Dodd halved Finley's manuscript with little regard for structural transitions, which is evident by the manner in which the second volume – *Holidays at Roselands* – merely picks up where the first volume ends. Dodd, Mead released *Elsie Dinsmore* (part one of the original manuscript) in 1867 and released *Holidays at Roselands* (part two) in 1868.[13]

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[12] Throughout this thesis, I will use the term "Christian" in a strictly conservative, Protestant sense of the word. Even more specifically, the *Elsie* series itself espouses a nineteenth-century form of Protestantism that is the cultural inheritor of the American Great Awakening.

[13] Although the American Civil War (1861-1865) is an integral force within the *Elsie* books, few scholars have examined the role it played in the publishing history of *Elsie*. Janet Brown addresses this question briefly and concludes that:

> The times were ripe for what Miss Finley had to offer. The Civil War was over; soldiers of the Northern armies were coming home with fabulous tales of Southern grandeur. Many readers were attracted by the pseudo-authentic picture of life on a pre-war plantation – many Northern readers, that is. It has been

Finley had no intention of continuing the *Elsie* stories past the end of *Holidays at Roselands*; however, the two books steadily gained a wide, fervid reading audience eager for more *Elsie* books (Smedman n.p.). Although we do not have publication statistics for the first year of *Elsie*'s existence (or, for that matter, how many books each installment of the series sold), we know that in its first decade *Elsie Dinsmore* sold 300,000 copies (Carpan 3). Because of its popularity and profitability, Finley wrote four additional volumes chronicling Elsie's life: *Elsie's Girlhood* (1872), *Elsie's Womanhood* (1875), *Elsie's Motherhood* (1876), and *Elsie's Children* (1877). In these volumes, Finley includes prefaces explaining that she continues Elsie's story because of public demand. For example, in *Elsie's Girlhood*, Finley writes: "[Elsie] was kindly welcomed, and such has been the favor shown her ever since, that [the] Publishers and Author have felt encouraged to prepare a new volume in which will be found the story of those years that have carried Elsie on from childhood to womanhood" (5). Similarly, in *Elsie's Womanhood*, Finley writes: "The call for a sequel to *Elsie's Girlhood* having become too loud and importunate to be resisted, the pleasant task of writing it was undertaken" (5). Finley repeatedly rejects any vested interest in Elsie's continuing saga, instead emphasizing the public's demand to learn more about Elsie's life. Indeed, in the preface to *Elsie's Womanhood*, Finley writes herself out of the stories entirely: "the pleasant task of writing it was undertaken" by no subject, grammatical or otherwise. Thus, Finley retains her womanly modesty by portraying herself as an unwilling non-author whose only cause for writing is her sympathy for her audience's desires.

Finley originally planned to end the *Elsie* series with *Elsie's Children*, writing in its preface:

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impossible to discover what was Miss Finley's early reception in the South; it is probable that its scattered population, its poverty, and its relative illiteracy prevented its rivaling the North in buying any book, including this one. But in the North, *Elsie Dinsmore* sold spectacularly. (75)

> With this volume, bringing the Story of Elsie and her Children down to the present time, the series closes. It was not by request of the author's personal friends, that either this or any one of the previous volumes was written, but in acquiescence with the demands of the Public – the friends and admirers of Elsie herself; and we know that as child, as young girl, as wife and mother, she has had many friends who have been loath to part with her. May they find neither her nor her children less lovable in this, than in the earlier volumes, and may their society prove sweet, comforting and helpful to many readers and friends both old and new. (1)

The public, however, was unwilling to let go of *Elsie*, demanding instead that Finley provide a continuation of Elsie's life. A mere three years after Finley declared the series' end, she released *Elsie's Widowhood* (1880). In the preface, Finley explains that "it was not in [her] heart to give [her] favorite child, Elsie the sorrows of Widowhood. But the public made the title and demanded the book: and the public [as Finley was] told, is autocratic" (3). From this preface, we may gather that Finley's reading public not only lobbied for the *Elsie* series to continue but also chose the direction the story would take. They chose the title *Elsie's Widowhood*; Finley obediently wrote a story in which Elsie's husband, Edward Travilla, dies unexpectedly.

After *Elsie's Widowhood*, Finley appears to have accepted her success sans protest: in subsequent *Elsie* volumes, Finley rarely includes any prefatory material. In *Grandmother Elsie* (1882), Finley uses new characters introduced in *Elsie's Widowhood* to begin a multi-book story arc that is not dependent on Elsie. The following five volumes – *Elsie's New Relations* (1883), *Elsie at Nantucket* (1884), *The Two Elsies* (1885), *Elsie's Kith and Kin* (1886), and *Elsie's Friends at Woodburn* (1887) – focus on Elsie's daughter Violet and her family. In these books,

Finley primarily follows Violet's stepchild, Lulu, from childhood until marriage, although Elsie and her father Horace remain in the story's periphery.

Having satisfactorily resolved Lulu's developmental storyline, Finley uses the remaining fifteen *Elsie* books to explore the travelogue genre. This third and final grouping within the *Elsie* series includes: *Christmas with Grandma Elsie* (1888), *Elsie and the Raymonds* (1889), *Elsie Yachting with the Raymonds* (1890), *Elsie's Vacation and After Events* (1891), *Elsie at Viamede* (1892), *Elsie at Ion* (1893), *Elsie at the World Fair* (1894), *Elsie's Journey on Inland Waters* (1895), *Elsie at Home* (1897), *Elsie on the Hudson* (1898), *Elsie in the South* (1899), *Elsie's Young Folks in Peace and War* (1900), *Elsie's Winter Trip* (1902), *Elsie and Her Loved Ones* (1903), and *Elsie and Her Namesakes* (1905). Sarah Smedman, author of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* entry on Martha Finley, writes that these last fifteen volumes

> are virtually plotless … new characters are introduced, frequently to marry into the family and perpetuate it. The Dinsmores, the Travillas [Elsie's married name], and the Raymonds [Violet's married name] travel up, down, and across the United States, often by yacht. …. Horace [Elsie's father] grows more flaccid; Elsie retains her beauty; the descendants increase and multiply. The final volume gives no hint that it was destined to be the last. Presumably Elsie was to go on as long as Finley was able to write. (n.p.)

In the United States, Dodd, Mead was the exclusive publisher of all twenty-eight volumes of the *Elsie* books until 1943, when the series went out of print. During Finley's lifetime, the books were also published in British editions generally released within a decade of the corresponding U.S. editions. In Britain, the books retained the same text and titles, but were published by three different firms over the course of the series: King published *Elsie Dinsmore*

through *Elsie's Girlhood*; Routledge published the majority of the series; and Stevens (later known as Stevens & Brown) published *Elsie at Viamede*, *Elsie's Journey on Inland Waters*, and *Elsie and her Namesakes* (Smedman n.p.).

Between 1868 and 1943*,* Dodd, Mead sold five million copies of *Elsie Dinsmore* that show no significant textual differences (Sekeres 16). For the first twenty-five years of *Elsie Dinsmore*'s publication, Dodd, Mead printed the *Elsie* books from one set of plates. In the publisher's note to an 1893 edition, Dodd, Mead states, "a large new edition has been called for at least once every year, and often twice" (Finley, *Popular Culture in America* 6). Such "repeated use [wore] the type and a new set of plates was called for," causing Dodd, Mead to create a new set of plates that were first used for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Finley, *Popular Culture in America* 6). Although I found no documentation of the publishers commissioning additional plates, we may assume that at least one other set was created. Comparison of the facsimile of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Elsie Dinsmore* (which is available to modern-day scholars in the reprint edition, *Popular Culture in America: 1800-1925* [1974]) with an edition from 1896 reveals that the 1896 edition does not contain the publisher's note. Additionally, the 1896 edition contains rectangular illustrations, which generally contain flora and fauna, above each chapter heading – a feature that is absent from the anniversary edition. Due to the limited amount of research that has been done on *Elsie*, I was unable to uncover any scholarly conjectures or explanations regarding this discrepancy.

While the peri-text of *Elsie* may have changed during its seventy-year printing run at Dodd, Mead, the text remained unchanged. The editorial revision from Finley's original intention did not occur until 1945. According to Janet Brown, author of "The Saga of Elsie Dinsmore" an "abridged edition of *Elsie Dinsmore* appeared circa 1945 with "new illustrations

and a more modern format for the modern generation" (80).[14] Between 1945 and 1974, the *Elsie* series remained entirely out of print. In 1974, Arno Press Inc. published *Elsie Dinsmore* as part of the *Popular Culture in America: 1800-1925* series. This edition is a facsimile of the twenty-fifth anniversary printing of *Elsie Dinsmore*. A similar edition of *Elsie Dinsmore* appeared in 1977 as part of the *Classics of Children's Literature: 1621-1932* series; this edition contains a facsimile of the original 1867 text ("Elsie Dinsmore" n.p.).

Like all texts appealing to niche readers, the *Elsie* series' success was eventually affected by changes in popular culture. Where Elsie flourished in the conservative Protestant culture of the late nineteenth-century, she disappointed secular mid-twentieth century readers with her lack of spirit and mischief. In their article "Leaving Elsie Dinsmore Behind: 'Plucky Girls' as an Alternative Role Model in Classic Girls Literature," Nancy Rost Goulden and Susan Stanfield argue that only classic girls' literature featuring "non-conformist," "plucky" girls endured into the middle of the twentieth century (184). Further, although its fortunes changed drastically when the reading public began to prefer spunky role models, we must also consider that adult, scholarly critics have disliked *Elsie* since its inception. The *Elsie* series was often excoriated during its own time period – indeed, an article from the April 1893 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* refers to the "dogs of criticism" that have descended on Martha Farquharson (Wilson 3). Furthermore, Anne Scott MacLeod notes that public librarians began a battle against the *Elsie* series during the early twentieth century. MacLeod states: "[turn of the century librarians] fought to cast out Horatio Alger; Martha Finley, guilty of *Elsie Dinsmore* and its terrible sequels; Frank Baum, producer of endless Oz books; and the octopus empire of Edward Stratemeyer, pouring forth the Rover Boys, Bobbsey Twins, Tom Swifts, and who could name what else" in order to

[14] Brown's 1945 work on *Elsie* remains the only scholarly undertaking to consider all twenty-eight of the *Elsie* books in the scope of her study.

rescue children from “the low sensationalism of trash literature [and] the mediocrity of most series books” (122).

These factors – a trend in girls’ fiction towards plucky girls and a concerted effort by adults to eliminate the *Elsie* books from public libraries – likely played a central role in the books’ declining popularity in the 1930s and ‘40s. We know little about the series’ life for the nearly thirty years that *Elsie Dinsmore* was out of print because no scholarly work was conducted on the text during that time. In 1978, Jacqueline Jackson and Philip Kendall produced the first critical discussion of the text since Janet Brown’s work in 1945 with the publication of “What Makes a Bad Book Good: *Elsie Dinsmore*.” Jackson and Kendall write that, although “*Elsie Dinsmore* has been out of print more than a generation, and if it is remembered in critical works it is only as an object of ridicule … [they hope the Modern Language Association] will help to restore *Elsie* to her rightful pedestal in American letters” (46). These scholars argue that, despite the excessive sentimentality of Finley’s works, the *Elsie* series is compelling and worthy of notice in the American literary canon because of the erotic characterization of Elsie’s and her father, Horace’s, relationship (64). To wit, “it is the intersection of these two themes [Chrisianity and incest that produce] an idealistically Christian, sadomasochistic, incestuous-erotic work for children which, in spite of being a thoroughly bad book, gives *Elsie Dinsmore* its compelling and abiding power, which elevates it to the supreme height of a great bad classic” 964).[15]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the academic community did not respond with gusto to Jackson and Kendall’s call to arms. Gradually, however, the series began to receive discussion among literary scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sarah Smedman wrote today’s standard for factual information surrounding *Elsie*’s publication for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* in

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[15] If known at all in the larger literary canon, *Elsie Dinsmore* is often cited for the nature of Horace and Elsie’s relationship – one that to modern readers appears like that of two lovers because of the co-dependence and emphasis on caressing that occurs between father and daughter throughout the series.

1985; Pam Hardman deconstructed Elsie as the child redeemer in "The Steward of Her Soul: *Elsie Dinsmore* and the Training of a Victorian Child" in 1988; Helena Michie analyzed the similarities of *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in "'Dying Between Two Laws: Girl Heroines, Their Gods, and Their Fathers in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the *Elsie Dinsmore* Series" in 1989; and Deidre Johnson traced Nancy Drew's debt to Elsie in "Nancy Drew – A Modern Elsie Dinsmore?" in 1994. While these articles represent a drastic increase in critical attention concerning *Elsie*, we will see that the series ultimately needed a spiritual revival to regain a semblance of cultural relevance.

Since 2000, scholarship on *Elsie* – while still scarce by comparison to canonical texts – has exploded. In the past decade, three academic articles, three in-depth book chapters, a conference paper, and three scholarly theses have been written that exhibit interest in Finley's series (Stallcup; Sekeres; Goulden & Stanfield; Noble; Day; and Brown & St. Claire).[16] This relative explosion of interest in *Elsie Dinsmore* coincides with a resurgence of the text's availability, which may account for the increase in scholarly work.[17] In the 1990s, Christian publishers began publishing the original, unabridged texts of the *Elsie* series and marketing them in Christian book catalogs and stores. As of 2000, six Christian publishers – Cumberland House,

[16] Unfortunately for *Elsie* scholars, Katie Day's paper entitled "The Seductions of Elsie," presented as a Joint Paper for CHLM 20.205 "Origins and Development" and CHLM 20.208 "American Children's Literature" in June 2000 remains unpublished. I accessed her work through a Google search on "Elsie Dinsmore," which linked me to the following pdf document of her research: librarianedge.pbworks.com/f/Elsie_Dinsmore.doc. Similarly unpublished are results from three dissertations dealing with *Elsie*: Rebekkah Ann Mehl's "Spiritual Independence in Finley's *Elsie Dinsmore* Series, Alcott's *Little Women* Series, and Wilder's *Little House* series" (2011); Melissa N. Schulz's "Moral Fictions: Girlhood and the Material Bible in the sentimental novel" (2010); and Emily A. Honey's "From Spiritual Guides to Eager Consumers: American girls' series fiction 1865-1930" (2010).

[17] Unlike many eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels – such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* – the *Elsie* series does not seem to have benefitted from feminist scholarship intended to rediscover forgotten female texts. Finley and *Elsie* are omitted from countless surveys of nineteenth-century women's literature. Joyce W. Warren's *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (1993) and Kristin Boudreau's *Sympathy in American Literature: American Sentiments from Jefferson to the Jameses* (2002) are two surveys whose scope encompasses Finley, yet fail to include her in their analyses. Elsie is such a famously anti-feminist character that only the most recent children's literature scholarship, such as Jackie Stallcup's "Stamping the Coin of Character: Elsie Dinsmore and the Power of Christian Wealth" (2009), attempts to read some degree of agency in *Elsie*'s actions.

Amereon Ltd, Ayer Co. Pub., Full Quart Press, Mantle Ministries, and Mission City Press – sold editions of the *Elsie* books (Day 4).[18]

Although the majority of these Christian publishers reprinted unaltered editions of the original texts, Mission City Press released revised editions of the first eight *Elsie* books in 1999.[19] Mission City Press not only updated the text of the books, but also re-titled the series to better appeal to today's youth. In the Mission City Press editions, the *Elsie* saga (which has no formal unifying title) is called the *Elsie Dinsmore: A Life of Faith* series. The new editions' individual titles are: *Elsie's Endless Wait* (comparable to *Elsie Dinsmore*); *Elsie's Impossible Choice* (comparable to *Holidays at Roselands*); *Elsie's New Life* (comparable to *Elsie's Girlhood*); *Elsie's Stolen Heart* (comparable to *Elsie's Womanhood*); *Elsie's True Love* (comparable to *Elsie's Motherhood*); *Elsie's Troubled Times* (comparable to *Elsie's Children*); *Elsie's Tender Mercies* (comparable to *Elsie's Widowhood*); and *Elsie's Great Hope* (comparable to *Grandmother Elsie*).

In "Renewed but not Redeemed: Revising *Elsie Dinsmore*" (2005), Diane Carver Sekeres examines these revised editions of *Elsie* and argues that their revision is a function of the need for marketable Christian brands. Sekeres places passages from the Mission City Press alongside the original text, revealing that the revised edition has been drastically changed (32). Notable changes include reduction of the characters' extensive quotation of long passages of scripture, simplification of archaic narrative language, updates of the main characters' speech and habits, elimination of African American speech based on the minstrel tradition, and reduction of the instances in which African American characters interact with Caucasians (Sekeres 28).

[18] Investigation of Amazon's stock of *Elsie* books reveals that at least four other publishers currently offer editions: Hendrickson Publishers, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Kessinger, and The Vision Forum.

[19] Mission City Press is a subsidiary of Zonderkidz, the children's department of the major Christian publishing firm Zondervan (Sekeres 17). Harper Collins, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, purchased Zondervan in 1988 in an effort to appeal to the rapidly growing Christian book market (Sekeres 27).

Furthermore, the updated editions take great liberty in changing the structure of the novels, often altering narrated sections into dialogic interactions between characters. The Mission City Press editors also insert contextualizing notes into the text – such as an explanation that Aunt Chloe is Elsie's slave – without alerting the reader to the editorial intrusion (Sekeres 33). This intrusion is necessary because the editors have eliminated "slave" from the text, instead referring to the Dinsmores' enslaved as servants (Sekeres 34). Unfortunately, Mission City Press' significant textual changes do not resolve Finley's problematic portrayal of slavery as a beneficent, benign institution. Sekeres writes: "with the disappearance of the obvious trappings of slavery, the very real difference between the White and African American characters also disappears. Those differences were never important to the story except in terms of setting, not for the characters themselves, but at least they were apparent in the original" (34).

For the Christian publishers of the rebranded *Elsie Dinsmore: A Life of Faith* series, however, a realistic portrait of slavery's evils may not be a primary goal. Sekeres notes that in the foreword to *Elsie's Endless Wait*, "the editors glossed over the bitter debate among Christians about slavery, … they misinformed their readers by implying that Southern Christians abhorred slavery," and even misinformed readers about the amendment responsible for abolishing slavery (the foreword cites the Eighteenth Amendment, while in reality it was the Thirteenth) (Sekeres 29). Mission City Press' concern is portraying Elsie Dinsmore as a model of good faith for young Christian girls to emulate; editing the books' problematic portrayals of African Americans appears to be less an act of genuine concern for racial sensitivity (or, for that matter, historical accuracy) than a business decision aimed at broadening the readership base and responding to the books' many critics.

Although Mission City Press failed to impress scholarly critics with their *Elsie*

adaptations, their desire to downplay the negative aspects of slaveholding in Elsie's life represents a practical business decision in an industry pushing Elsie Dinsmore as a model Christian. To date, Mission City Press is the sole publisher to alter the original text. In addition to revising the books' language to appeal to modern readers, Mission City Press and other publishers have created a wealth of Elsie-branded merchandise to aid a young Christian on her path to righteousness. At Christian bookstores, readers can purchase a variety of *Elsie* paraphernalia: *Elsie* study guides that highlight the series' Christian message; *Dear Elsie*, an advice book for young girls; and Elsie dolls and diaries (Brown & St. Clair 85).

One need only peruse writer and reader reviews on booksellers' websites to get a feel for the impact *Elsie* has on today's Christian youth – particularly those who are homeschooled. Nancy Peterson, author of *Elsie and Me: A Study in Christian Literature, Student Workbook* (2001), writes in her Christianbook.com biography that: "[she] wanted to do this project for [her] children. Elsie, although fictional, is an inspiring example of how a child can love the Lord with all her heart and serve Him. It would be [her] desire that children learn from Elsie's example and be inspired to love the Lord and serve Him. The curriculum [in Peterson's *Elsie* study guide] is designed to pick out character qualities and learn to appreciate Christian literature from yesteryear" (n.p.). Seventy-four readers have left reviews on Amazon, often engaging in heated debates over the book's sentimentality, bigotry, and portrayal of Elsie's relationship with her father ("Elsie Dinsmore" n.p.). Christian reviewers adamantly praise Elsie and the books, while non-religious reviewers generally loathe the book because of its sentimentality.[20]

One possible explanation for the *Elsie* series' revival is the relative paucity of young adult literature with a religious theme. Allen Nilsen and Kenneth Donelson note that, in today's

[20] As a point of reference, Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World* has eleven Amazon reviews, none of which seem to be in dialogue with one another.

political climate, “books that unabashedly explore religious themes are relatively rare, partly because schools and libraries fear mixing church and state through spending tax dollars for religious books[;] also, mainstream publishers fear cutting into potential readers and making others uncomfortable” (qtd. in Brown & St. Clair 81). Thus, religiously-minded readers must often turn to texts written for and published by specialty Christian publishing houses. In the *Elsie* series, children find a wealth of reading material – twenty-eight books of interrelated stories – and conservative parents find a suitable alternative to *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*.

The textual history of *Elsie Dinsmore* provides the scholar with a fascinating case study of a text whose spin on Fortune’s wheel has taken it from the height of popularity to the brink of extinction. *Elsie* also provides a compelling example of what Jerome McGann would call the social construction of the text. During Finley’s lifetime, the public demanded sequels and she complied; they chose the title *Elsie’s Widowhood*, and Finley faithfully killed Mr. Travilla. Today, the text’s repackaging to conservative Christian crowds demonstrates the extent to which targeted interest groups can recall a novel from obscurity, drastically altering the original text in the process. Mission City Press’ editions of the first eight *Elsie* books are altered to the point that we might more safely call them adaptations. Thus, while the *Elsie* books have been omitted from the canon and excoriated by generations of scholars, we find that Finley’s creations may be in the midst of a Renaissance. Repackaged and reformulated to guide future generations of readers, the series has regained a devoted following and is steadily gaining merit as a topic of scholarly research among juvenile literature scholars.

However, as the opening of my project discusses, *Elsie Dinsmore* has yet to gain traction among scholars focusing on adult domestic fiction. Part of this, I suggest, can be attributed to its lengthy publication history. The *Elsie Dinsmore* series was out of print during the decades

leading up to Nina Baym's recuperative work in *Woman's Fiction* (1978) and was still largely unavailable when Jane Tompkins published *Sentimental Designs* (1985). The versions of *Elsie Dinsmore* published in the 1974 and 1977 specifically linked *Elsie* to popular literature and juvenile fiction by virtue of the series in which *Elsie* was included – the *Popular Culture in America: 1800-1925* series and the *Classics of Children's Literature: 1621-1932* series, respectively. Thus, during the key time frame of the 1970s and 80s, when feminist scholars were doing the most to bring woman's fictions into a larger realm of scholarship, *Elsie* had only recently come back into print and had already been generically classified as children's literature. Although I do not suggest here that Baym and Tompkins did not have access to the *Elsie Dinsmore* series, it does not seem outside the scope of reason to suggest that the text's long dormancy may have contributed its omission from their studies.

While the text's obscurity and *de riguer* classification as girls' fiction may have caused Baym and Tompkins to turn to better-known domestic fictions – such as *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* – upon which to base their studies, *Elsie*'s more recent history as the progeny of Christian fundamentalism may contribute to modern scholars' distaste for Finley's work. Although she does not mark a relationship between *Elsie'*s current publishers and scholastic reception, Jackie Stallcup notes that "some scholars may feel squeamish about addressing seriously the Christian discourse" found throughout *Elsie* (301). However, as Stallcup rightly argues, "it is impossible to appreciate Finley's discussion of women and economics without considering the theological underpinnings of that discussion" (301) – to which I would respond that it is impossible to truly understand *any* aspect of Finley's text without considering her theological basis. Protestant Christianity informs every action that Elsie takes, from her diet and exercise to the way in which she handles her finances. For modern scholars already

squeamish about analyzing Christian elements in overtly Christian texts, *Elsie* is quite the quagmire; furthermore, their discomfort could only be heightened by the text's Christian boutique publishers and devoted fundamentalist fan base. Thus, while scholars of Baym's and Tompkins' generation may have overlooked Elsie because of her obscurity, Stallcup's statements suggest that current scholars may be unwilling to consider *Elsie* as the basis of sustained critical scholarship because of the text's inherent Christianity.

CHAPTER II

Mapping *Elsie* in relation to "Woman's Fictions"

While the mainstream canon of woman's fiction draws a fine line between adult fiction and juvenile literature, the similarity of girls' books, such as *Elsie*, to woman's fictions has not gone unnoticed. In "Spinning Sympathy: Orphan Girl Novels and the Sentimental Tradition" (2008), Joe Sutliff Sanders focuses on the ways in which popular girl books of the late nineteenth century revive and rework the dominant themes in popular woman's books such as *The Wide, Wide World*, *The Lamplighter*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His article plots the evolution of sentimentalism specifically from woman's books to transitional novels to twentieth century girl books. Sanders writes that there are "two points about the transition from sentimentalism to turn-of-the-century orphan girl stories" that are worth noting: "first, the terms of that transition were controlled by sentimentalism: the formulaic plot in which a disempowered female protagonist uses sympathy to knit the people around her into a group bound by sameness was scripted for girls' novels by fiction of the earlier part of the nineteenth century" (42). The second point of importance revolves around girl books "[working] endlessly to revise [the terms of transition] so they are more suited to girl readers" (42). Sanders examines Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did* (1873) and Louisa May Alcott's *Eight Cousins* (1875) as a transitional novels in which scholars may see the tropes of sentimentalism being forged into the familiar points of orphan girl books, such as *Pollyanna* (1913) and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908). Sanders' scholarship on the transition from sentimental woman's fiction to sentimentally-influenced girls' fiction is

exceedingly well-researched and argued; what I would like to propose is the extent to which the *Elsie Dinsmore* series might prove to be the most compelling and useful example of transitional literature available to modern scholars. Not only does *Elsie* pre-date *What Katy Did* and *Eight Cousins*; the *Elsie* series also spans the entire timeframe in question (1870-1905). Furthermore, *Elsie Dinsmore* outsold *What Katy Did* and *Eight Cousins* – a characteristic that makes it a better indicator of cultural preferences and, therefore a better benchmark of transition. In order to establish *Elsie* as the avatar of transition, it will prove useful to examine the series using a similar framework to Sanders': therefore, like Sanders, I will first examine *Elsie*'s similarity to tropes of woman's fiction – as exemplified by its most lasting example, Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) – to contextualize the sentimental nature of the series' content.[21]

To determine if *Elsie* is, in fact, a transitional novel, it will first be important to establish the tropes of the woman's novel. In her critical introduction to *The Lamplighter*, Nina Baym outlines a number of common characteristics from the body of work she labels as woman's fiction.[22] Baym provides what is perhaps the most succinct summation of these tropes in the following excerpt:

> We begin, then, with the crucial fact that *The Lamplighter* tells a *woman*'s story, a story found with variations in many novels written in the middle of the nineteenth century. A young girl, without financial and emotional support, has to win her own way in the world. She has many trials; she triumphs. Although at the end she

[21] Sanders discusses the work of Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, and Ann Douglas to arrive at a definition of sentimentalism that can "mean both an emphasis on an excess of emotions and a period of literary history in which novels that embraced such an emphasis dominated the library landscape" (42). Sanders' interest in sentimentalism lies in its relationship to children's literature; he acknowledges that "sentimentalism as a genre came to a conclusion by 1880 [; however,] sentimentality certainly did not" (43). For the purpose of this paper, I will use sentimentalism in the generic sense.

[22] Although *The Lamplighter* is an important work of nineteenth-century woman's fiction, for the sake of brevity I do not compare it to *Elsie Dinsmore* in this paper.

> may be rewarded with money and dependable love, she succeeds along the way through her own powers. It is on the development and deployment of these powers that the plot centers. (Introduction x)

Throughout her introduction, Baym outlines a number of other characteristics of these stories: they "comprise a tale of female growth and development" (x); they "register the problems of reconciling individuation with womanhood" (x); they are "concerned with the formation of character in the old-fashioned sense of strengthening within individuals particular traits that are deemed admirable" – particularly self-control and self-discipline (xi); and they are "intended to be useful," that is, didactic (xi). Baym describes how the woman's novel uses "characterization, story, setting, narrator intervention" to focus the reader's attention on a sympathetic heroine who must, over the course of the novel, overcome trials in order to perfect her character (Introduction xi). Further characteristics of these novels center on their status as best-sellers (xii), the presence of "reconstituted" families (xiii), and an emphasis on a rigorous education for the female heroine, which is generally administered by the girl's father (xiii). Last, and perhaps most importantly, woman's novels "[preach] triumph through submission" (xvi) – a woman can attain a powerful, respected place in life if she will submit her will to God's. Because of the Biblical system of power, in which the head of the household is male and children and wives must submit to the will of the man, submission to God's will often has a corollary in submission to man's.[23]

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[23] While Baym remains the definitive voice in the typology of the woman's novel, defining this genre remains a concern among today's scholars. Additional scholars include Erica Bauermeister, author of "*The Lamplighter*, *The Wide, Wide World* and *Hope Leslie*: Reconsidering the Recipes for Nineteenth-Century American Women's Novels" (1991); Suzanne Ashworth, author of "Susan Warner's *Wide, Wide World*, Conduct Literature, and Protocols of Female Reading in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America" (2000); and Gretchen Papazian, author of "'Feed My Poor Famished Heart': Constructing Womanhood through Consumer Practices (2007).

I will use several of these tropes of women's novels as the basis from which to examine *Elsie*'s relationship to sentimentality. Because of its popularity and wider inclusion within the canon, I will use *The Wide, Wide World* as the exemplar of woman's fiction against which to measure *Elsie*. *The Wide, Wide World* follows the life of Ellen Montgomery, a young girl who is approximately ten years old at the beginning of the tale. When her father loses the family's money and her mother grows increasingly ill with consumption, Ellen is sent to live with her father's maiden aunt, Fortune Emerson, on a farm in rural New York – presumably for a short period of time while Ellen's mother recuperates in Europe. The true meat of the story lies in Ellen's road to salvation: the seed of Christianity is planted in her by her mother, but she initially resists God's grace and must come gradually to an acceptance and love of Biblical teachings throughout the course of the novel. Instrumental in this road to acceptance is the Humphreys family – particularly the brother-sister pair of Alice and John Humphreys. Alice acts as a surrogate mother to Ellen and provides her with a model of middle-class Christian femininity; John acts as a stern paternal influence whose moral teachings Ellen never dares to disobey. After Alice's death, the Humphreys family adopts Ellen and allows her to be their new daughter/sister; however, in time, Ellen discovers that her maternal grandparents wish to raise her in their ancestral Scottish home. Ellen leaves rural New York for the wealthy, genteel world of her Scottish family; there, she must resist their worldly influences and remain true to the Christian precepts taught her by the Humphreys. At the end of the narrative, John and Ellen wed, and he brings her back to America.

Volumes one through four of the *Elsie Dinsmore* series follow Elsie through a similar series of events. Elsie's parents married against their parents' wishes at a young age, and Elsie's mother, Elsie Grayson Dinsmore, died in childbirth. Horace Dinsmore, Elsie's father, attends

college at Princeton and then goes to Europe for the first eight years of Elsie's life, leaving Elsie to be raised by her grandparents. Elsie learns a very strict form of Christianity from her Scottish housekeeper and Mammy; her extended Dinsmore family, though, is Christian in name only. When Horace returns from Europe, he takes full charge of Elsie's education and hopes to break her of her strict Christianity so that she will be more suitable for secular society. The first two novels in the series – *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* – center on Horace's and Elsie's struggles over her morality. When Horace threatens to send Elsie to a Catholic convent for her education unless she promises complete obedience to his commands (which sometimes ask Elsie to break her strict keeping of the Sabbath), she falls into a hysterical fever and almost dies. Horace, seeing the error of his ways, repents and becomes a Christian. In the next two volumes, *Elsie's Girlhood* and *Elsie's Womanhood*, Horace and Elsie develop a close relationship, despite his continuing desire to exercise complete control over Elsie's person. Over the course of these two volumes, Elsie meets and falls in love with a con-man, Bromley Egerton (who wishes to wed her to gain access to her fortune); is saved from this decision by her father and his close friend, Edward Travilla; gains control of her mother's considerable assets; marries Edward Travilla; and, by the close of volume four, has multiple children.

As previously noted, woman's fiction typically focuses on a girl who has lost her support system and must find a way to achieve her own happiness and success in the world. The first trope I will explore, then, is the one of loss in fortune – both in a monetary and emotional sense. In *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen finds her once-comfortable life torn asunder when her father loses a lawsuit and her mother's fragile health begins to decline. Ellen's mother tells her the news in this passage:

> "This lawsuit, Ellen, has brought upon us more trouble than I ever thought a lawsuit could, -- the loss of it, I mean."

> "How, mamma?"
> "It has caused an entire change of all our plans. Your father says he is too poor now to stay here any longer; and he has agreed to go soon on some government or military business to Europe."
> "Well, mamma, that is bad; but he has been away a great deal before, and I am sure we were always very happy."
> "But, Ellen, he thinks now, and the doctor thinks too, that it is very important for my health that I should go with him."
> "Does he, mamma? – and do you mean to go?"
> "I am afraid I must, my dear child."
> "Not, and leave *me*, mother?" (11, emphasis original)

In one moment, Ellen's entire world is torn asunder. With her mother, she is accustomed to living a leisurely middle-class life in which servants take care of housework and the majority of meal preparation. Ellen's greatest domestic skill at this point is her ability to make perfect toast and tea for her mother's enjoyment (13). At this juncture in her life, her education has been that of a lady: reading, ciphering, some sewing, and the proper way to serve tea. Furthermore, she has been cared for and taught by a loving mother, whom Ellen adores.

Following her father's poor business decision, though, Ellen finds herself exiled to a land bereft of both emotional and physical comforts. Aunt Fortune, Mr. Montgomery's sister, is the owner of a prosperous farm; however, Aunt Fortune believes in nothing if not the value of hard work and thrift. Because of this belief, Fortune makes Ellen do work around the house – such as washing dishes – and provides Ellen with the minimum number of possessions necessary to survive.[24] Perhaps most distressing to Ellen, though, is the lack of affection Fortune displays for her young niece. Upon arriving unexpectedly at Fortune's house – the result of Mr. Montgomery's failure to write his sister to inform her of Ellen's itinerary – Fortune brusquely feeds Ellen and then sends her to bed. While crying herself to sleep, Ellen thinks: "she did not kiss me! She didn't say she was glad to see me!" (101). After the emotional whirlwind of being separated from her mother, Ellen finds Fortune's lack of affection devastating. Ellen and Fortune

[24] Ellen is particularly upset about the lack of a wash table in her room (Warner 102).

never grow fond of one another; however, Ellen develops a host of friends who are eager to shower her with affection because of her "noble" (293), "modest" (294), and sweet nature. This pattern begins early in the novel, as people are repeatedly drawn to Ellen and give her special treatment because of her good manners and pleasing demeanor. At the beginning of the narrative, an anonymous gentleman assists Ellen with a difficult transaction; she befriends another man on her voyage to Aunt Fortune's, who gives her a book of hymns. She later finds favor with a servant girl, Miss Timmins; Mr. Van Brunt, Aunt Fortune's unacknowledged fiancée and farmhand; Nancy Vawse, the neighborhood ruffian; the Humphreys, her adoptive family; the Marshman and Chauncey families, wealthy benefactors who fall in love with Ellen and give her a pony; and eventually the Lindsays, her maternal family. Despite having no actual goods or skills, Ellen endears herself to others through her charitable actions.

Although she never finds her family impoverished in the same manner that Ellen does,[25] Elsie is familiar with the need to ingratiate herself to an uncaring, unloving extended family for her daily survival. This becomes evident in the opening scene of *Elsie Dinsmore*, in which Elsie's step-grandmother fails to intervene on Elsie's behalf with the governess. Elsie's cousin Arthur has caused her to fail at her lesson, and the governess, Miss Day, subsequently forbids Arthur and Elsie from going on a family picnic. Mrs. Dinsmore intercedes on Arthur's behalf, and he is freed from his punishment. Speaking of Elsie, though, Mrs. Dinsmore "[has] no pity for [Elsie], so full as [she] is of nonsensical scruples" (Finley *Elsie* 14). Because Horace Dinsmore has not yet returned to look after the wellbeing of his daughter, Elsie is often mistreated by this

[25] To be fair, Ellen never comes even remotely close to living in poverty. She goes from middle-class gentility with her parents to living on a prosperous farm with a frugal aunt. She then resumes her middle-class existence with the Humphreys and is ultimately brought into a sumptuous world of wealth with her maternal grandparents. The lack of fortune Ellen experiences is a brief time of losing material comforts; her physical welfare – insofar as her need to eat, be clothed, and have shelter – is never in jeopardy. Compared with other child heroines, such as Anne Shirley from *Anne of Green Gables* or Gertrude Flint from *The Lamplighter*, Ellen's life with Fortune is still privileged and luxurious.

step-grandmother, who resents Elsie for being wealthier and prettier than her own children, as well as finding Elsie's puritanical Christianity distasteful.

Elsie longs for someone to love her; as it is, her mammy, Aunt Chloe, is her one source of earthly comfort. Elsie tells her desire to a compassionate, Christian friend of the family, Rose Allison. Elsie says:

> [My father] has been away almost ever since I was born, and I have never seen him. Oh, how I do wish he would come home! How I long to see him! Do you think he would love me, Miss Allison? Do you think he would take me on his knee and pet me, as grandpa does Enna [one of Mr. Dinsmore's children]? (Finley *Elsie* 17-8)

Unlike Ellen, who received the tender affections of her mother for ten years, Elsie is a pariah among her own family and has subsequently never received anything amounting to fondness from her relatives. When her father does arrive, he is cold and aloof with Elsie – in fact, he looks at her with "displeasure" (Finley *Elsie* 49). Elsie's disappointment is monumental:

> "O papa, papa!" she sobbed. "My own papa, you do not love me – me, your own little girl. Oh, my heart will break! O mamma, mamma! If I could only go to you, for there is no one here to love me, and I am so lonely, oh so lonely and desolate!" (Finley *Elsie* 49-50)

Her desire to please her father and win his affections becomes the focus of her life. To do so, "she always yielded a ready and cheerful obedience to his commands, and strove to anticipate and fulfill all his wishes" (Finley *Elsie* 60). Horace, though, convinced that Elsie is afraid of him and prejudiced against her by the rest of the family, "seldom noticed her, unless to give a command or administer a rebuke" (Finley *Elsie* 60).

Thus, we find that Elsie and Ellen face similar challenges. Both are young girls left to the care of unfeeling relations, and who have an overriding desire to be cherished and loved. Both are able to find that affection by submitting their own feelings and desires to God's will and finding a way to make themselves useful in others' lives, which Baym also acknowledges as a key point in the ideological formation of woman's fiction. This is particularly evident in the way in which they court the imposing paternal figures in their lives. Elsie, terrified as she is of her father, determines to show him her affection by knitting him a purse. We are told that

> She had commenced it before his return, and having spent upon it nearly every spare moment since, when she could feel secure from intrusion, she now had it nearly completed. Ah! Many a silent tear had fallen as she worked, and many a sigh over disappointed hopes had been woven into its bright meshes of gold and blue. (Finley *Elsie* 136)

After she gives him this purse, Horace tells Elsie that he loves her and "for the first time he folded her in his arms and kissed her tenderly" (138). By using her own time and energy to produce something for her father's enjoyment, she is able to make an inroad to his affections. Although Horace and Elsie still face many obstacles on their path to peaceful coexistence, her gift causes Horace to view her as a child he can love.

Ellen also performs domestic tasks to win the affections of an aloof older man – her adoptive father, Mr. Humphreys. After Alice's death, Ellen assumes Alice's duties in order to make life more comfortable for the men of the family. She skims milk, takes care of the parlour cupboard, puts away clothing, and darns clothes. In short, she strives to make herself into a new daughter for Mr. Humphreys. She does not, however, appear to believe that Mr. Humphreys thinks of her as a daughter at this point: although one of Alice's duties was to dust and tidy Mr.

Humphrey's library, Ellen "dared not venture" into the library because Mr. Humphreys has not expressly invited her to go there (457). Too intimidated by Mr. Humphreys to ask permission to enter the library, she instead asks John (460). When John brings the matter up to Mr. Humphreys, "the old gentleman laid his hand affectionately on Ellen's head, and told her she was welcome to come and go when she would; – the whole house was hers" (460). The "grave kindness and tenderness of the tone and action" with which Mr. Humphreys responds overwhelms Ellen, and she cannot finish her breakfast (460). Through these domestic actions, over the following winter, Ellen becomes "the light of the house" and becomes assured of Mr. Humphreys' affections (460).

Through their attention to domestic detail, we find that both Ellen and Elsie are able to win over their stern male guardians. This serves several purposes for the authors. It allows them to instruct their female readers in the cult of true womanhood prevalent in conduct manuals and domestic literature of the day by demonstrating that love and favor are the concomitant rewards of female labor. Perhaps more importantly, by subjugating their own desires for free time or play to making a more comfortable life for others, domestic activity serves as a vehicle through which the girls learn.

Submission, as Baym notes, is primary to woman's fictions. Woman's novels "[preach] triumph through submission," meaning that those women who submit their own desires to God's will ultimately succeed and receive rewards (Baym Introduction xvi). Because of the prevailing Christian belief that men have a place of authority over women and children, in woman's fictions, women often submit to God's will by submitting to the will of their male protectors. This submission can be as subtle as the voluntary giving up of free time to become a figure of comfort to others, as we have seen Ellen and Elsie do; however, these two novels place a much

heavier emphasis on submitting in all areas to one's guardians. They also suggest that the way in which one succeeds in submission is to turn to Biblical teachings: over the course of their respective novels, both Ellen and Elsie learn to conquer their own willfulness by repeated consultation of Scripture.

Ellen's journey to submission is particularly visible throughout the course of *The Wide, Wide World*. Early in the novel, Aunt Fortune opens and reads a letter that Mrs. Montgomery wrote to Ellen. Ellen becomes incensed, saying "'this is *my* letter … 'who opened it?'" (146). When Fortune defends her right to screen Ellen's mail, Ellen "[dashes] the letter to the ground, and livid and trembling with various feelings – rage was not the only one, – she ran from her aunt's presence" (146). This outburst of anger and rebellion – however justified it might seem by our current standards of privacy – certainly does not conform to the model of childhood submission proffered by nineteenth-century woman's books. Thus, Ellen must learn to ignore her feelings of anger and instead treat Fortune with respect and kindness. Alice Humphreys, *The Wide, Wide World*'s model of Christian piety, assists Ellen in this journey. Alice happens upon a distraught, sobbing Ellen immediately following the letter incident and begins to instruct Ellen on the proper Christian manner in which to accept her trials. Alice and Ellen have the following conversation regarding Ellen's devotion:

> "You are grieved to find yourself so unlike what you would be. You wish to be a child of the dear Savior and to have your heart filled with his love, and to do what will please him. Do you? – Have you gone to him day by day, and night by night, and told him so? – have you begged him to give you strength and to get the better of your wrong feelings, and asked him to change you and make you his child?"
>
> "At first I did, ma'am," – said Ellen in a low voice.
>
> "Not lately?"
>
> "No ma'am;" in a low tone still and looking down.
>
> "Then you have neglected your Bible and prayer for some time past?"
>
> Ellen hardly uttered, "Yes."
>
> "Why, my child?"

> "I don't know, ma'am," said Ellen weeping, -- "that is one of the things that made me think myself so very wicked. I couldn't like to read my Bible or pray either, though I always used to before. My Bible lay down quite at the bottom of my trunk, and I didn't like to raise my things enough to see the cover of it. I was so full of bad feelings I didn't feel fit to pray or read either." (151-2)

Alice successfully convinces Ellen to resume reading her Bible and praying, promising that as she does so, Ellen's "causes of trouble [will] grow less" (152).

From this point onward, Ellen obeys her aunt and finds the strength to do so in scriptures and hymns. This is highlighted when Fortune once again interferes with one of Ellen's letters (this time Fortune withholds the letter) and, despite having a face that "was livid and spotted from stifled passion," Ellen is able to resist any outbursts of temper and instead goes to her room (257). Once alone, Ellen seeks solace in memorized scripture and soon finds happiness in the realization that she is successfully moving forward in her quest for the Lord. At the end of the evening on which these events take place, Ellen discovers the letter on her bed, which causes her to "[kneel] down and [give] earnest thanks for this blessing" (264). Through her submission to authority – and hence to God's will – Ellen both gains a deeper understanding of her religion and triumphantly gains access to her coveted letter.

This first true test of submission is repeated numerous times throughout the course of *The Wide, Wide World*, primarily through John Humphreys (Alice's brother and Ellen's future husband). John becomes responsible for Ellen's education and is able to command instantaneous obedience from her. After Ellen languishes in a deep depression upon learning of her mother's death, John orders her back to normal activities; he forces her to stop playing unsuitable games with some other children and practice drawing instead; and he insists that she assist a poor, illiterate Irishman to write a letter, despite her earlier decision not to do so. When John questions her about why she did not initially help the man write his letter, Ellen blushes and admits she

"was not studying at all – [she] was just amusing [herself] with a book – [she] was only selfish and lazy" (463). Through John's constant imposition of rules and activities, Ellen further learns to relinquish her own desires and submit to the will of authority. This prepares her for the greatest submission of all: upon discovering that her maternal grandmother wishes to adopt Ellen and that her parents had wished for her to do so, Ellen agrees to leave the Humphreys and live in Scotland with her family. She leaves the Humphreys – a family she dearly loves – out of "duty" (493) and the need to "do [her] parents' will" (494). Her faithful submission is rewarded in the end of the novel: she is adored by her maternal relations and ultimately marries John Humphreys, who brings her back to America.

While Ellen has a visible trajectory from rebellion to submission, Elsie Dinsmore's path is less clear. Unlike Ellen, Elsie is a Christian from the beginning of *Elsie Dinsmore*; indeed, many of her trials come from her devotion and piety and the problems they create with her secular relatives. Despite Elsie's general status as an exemplum, though, she does struggle with rebellious feelings when authority is misused or used in a particularly harsh manner. In the beginning of *Elsie Dinsmore* (book one in the series), we are told that "little Elsie sat at her desk, striving to conquer the feelings of anger and indignation that were swelling her breast, for Elsie, though she possessed much of 'the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit,' was not yet perfect, and often had a fierce contest with her naturally quick temper" (12). This quick temper reveals itself when her governess treats her unfairly – she tells her superior that she has been "[punished] when [she] doesn't deserve it at all" (14). Immediately following this outburst, though, Elsie opens her Bible and reads that it "is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongly" (15) – a verse that strengthens her resolve to submit meekly to authority in her life.

A family friend, Rose Allison, happens across Elsie at this moment and finds her sobbing. Rose, we soon discover, is a devout Christian and calms Elsie by reciting several Bible verses that highlight Christ's forgiveness. The similarity of this scene to the one that takes place in *The Wide, Wide World* is striking. Both girls have reacted to injustice by growing angry and now regret their actions because of the wickedness it reflects. Both are so distressed by their outbursts that they run away to indulge in a bout of serious weeping. Both are discovered by kind, young Christian women whom they have never met before but who already know the names and situations of the girls. Both are comforted by the Christian companionship these ladies provide and resolve to work harder on their path to piety – work that mandates the girls curtail their own desires and submit to the whims of authority.

Elsie is particularly tested once her father, Horace, takes an interest in her upbringing. He limits her diet – banning dietary staples such as hot bread, coffee, and butter entirely and meat more than once daily (Finley *Elsie* 61-2) and treats such as candy, even on holidays (Finley *Elsie* 238) – and in a scene reminiscent of Aunt Fortune, intercepts one of Elsie's letters from Rose Allison. Although Elsie peacefully submitted to the curtailment of her diet, it is a much greater trial to give up her letter. Although she does not demonstrate any outwardly visible signs of rebellion, she felt "more angry and rebellious toward him than she ever had before" because "it seemed too cruel and unjust to deprive her of her own letters" (*Elsie's Holidays* 96). Once again, Elsie turns to Jesus to take away the burden of this trial and finds the strength to endure the strife between herself and her father.[26]

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[26] The one area in which Elsie refuses to submit to Horace is in anything that goes against her Christian beliefs. In book one, she refuses to play the piano on the Sabbath; Horace, determined to break her will, forces her to sit at the bench until she consents to play. Elsie faints and comes very close to fatally striking her head on a nearby piece of furniture. This incident foreshadows the much larger confrontation between Horace and Elsie that is the subject of book two, *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands*. During a period of illness, Horace asks Elsie to read a secular book to him on the Sabbath. She refuses to do so and he takes escalating steps of punishment to force her into submission: first

As we have seen, both Ellen and Elsie learn the important lesson that submission to one's authority figures is an extension of submission to God's will. Baym notes that woman's fictions emphasize submission in order to show that submission is the way for a woman to achieve victory in novels of this type (Introduction xvi). The question that remains, then, is whether *The Wide, Wide World* and *Elsie Dinsmore* clearly demonstrate that submission to authority attains more desirable results than rebellion. For Ellen, this is contrasted most obviously with her ragamuffin acquaintance, Nancy Vawse. Nancy is saucy, adventurous, physically robust, and courageous – everything that one might wish for the heroine of a twentieth-century girl book – and is subsequently maligned throughout the town as a horrible young girl. We are never told what becomes of Nancy; however, it is seems safe to assume that she does not become a middle-class housewife. For a novelistic form marketed to middle class female readers, marriage to a kind, Christian man of means would certainly be seen as a triumph over being considered an un-ladylike pariah.

Elsie's triumph is even more decisive when we compare her destiny to that of her cousin, Enna. Enna, the spoiled youngest child of Elsie's grandfather and step-grandmother, is one of Elsie's principle tormenters during childhood. As they develop into young women, Elsie continues to obey her father's commands – he determines the style of her dress and hair, who she meets, and who she marries. Enna, in contrast, is unwilling to be ruled by her father. She claims that "if [her father] should undertake to give [her] such an order [regarding hairstyles], [she would] just inform him that [her] hair was [her] own, and [she] should arrange it as suited [her]

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he withdraws his affection from her, banishes her from family functions (such as mealtimes), takes away all of her amusements (save her Bible and school-books), forbids her from speaking to anyone except her governess, separates her from her mammy, and eventually leaves to travel until she will submit to obey him in everything with "entire, unconditional submission" (Finley *Holiday* 146). When this fails to work, Horace threatens to send Elsie to boarding school, and ultimately, to a convent. The specter of Catholicism finally breaks Elsie and sends her into a panicked fever in which she fears for her soul. Horace returns, and, during a several-hour timespan in which he believes Elsie to have died, repents of his harshness and sins, ultimately becoming a Christian because of Elsie's sacrifice.

own fancy" (*Elsie's Girlhood* 80). While Elsie submits to her father and, despite her strong feelings, gives up a con man she falls in love with, Enna says that she "wouldn't give up the man [she] loved for anybody" (*Elsie's Girlhood* 248). Over the course of the next several years, Elsie marries the kind, wealthy Edward Travilla, remains youthful, has several children, and continues to be wealthy. Enna's fate is not so blessed: her husband gambles away his money and then dies in the Civil War, leaving her to depend on the kindness of Elsie's charity. Additionally, the "long indulgence of a fretful, peevish temper had drawn down the corners of her mouth, lined her forehead, and left its ugly penciling here and there over [her] once pretty face, so that it already began to look old and care-worn" (*Elsie's Womanhood* 12). As if premature aging and poverty were not punishment enough for her willfulness, Enna is ultimately injured in an accident, loses her sanity, and returns to a childlike, senseless state for the rest of her life. For young readers, the choice of role model is clear: Enna may have her way and enjoy herself for a time, but Elsie is the clear victor for a life well-lived.

I have now used two of the criteria Baym outlines as central to woman's fiction to demonstrate the similarity present between *Elsie Dinsmore* and the primary example of these works, *The Wide, Wide World*. Although Baym offers several other criteria that define these works – mentioned at the beginning of this chapter – examining them all in detail is outside the scope of this current project. However, it is worthwhile to point out broadly the way in which Elsie and Ellen comply with Baym's additional criteria. As previously discussed, Baym argues that woman's fictions follow the growth and development of young women, show those women struggle to reconcile their individuation with womanhood, focus on the heroine's formation of character, center primarily on the heroine, feature reconstituted families, and often have highly-educated women taught by their fathers or a father figure.

The Wide, Wide World focuses primarily on Ellen. Although it is told from a third-person point of view, the narrator is limited to whatever Ellen is currently experiencing. Because of this focus in narration, the audience is privy to Ellen's development from a child into a young woman. Ellen's development – both physical and spiritual – is the primary concern of the narrative. Through her intimacy with Alice Humphreys and continual devotion to seeing Biblical truth, Ellen "reconciles her individuation with womanhood," but in a way rather unacceptable to modern audiences: because the cult of true womanhood and Christianity both elevate self-discipline, charity, submission, and meekness, Ellen's journey to accepting Christianity also prepares her for life as an ideal woman. She renounces her more individual desires and becomes other-oriented. Apart from its focus on Ellen and her development, *The Wide, Wide World* also contains Baym's other staples of woman's fiction. Ellen belongs to at least two reconstituted families and possibly three: she is first relocated to Aunt Fortune, where she is with her grandmother and surrogate father-figure of Mr. Van Brunt; after Fortune keeps the knowledge of Mrs. Montgomery's death from Ellen, she goes to live with the Humphreys and becomes like an adopted daughter to them (which is solidified following Alice's death); and finally, she is adopted by the Lindsays, her mother's extended family, and goes to live with them in Scotland. In the latter two families, Ellen's education is the pet project of her father figures – John Humphreys and Mr. Lindsay. John loosely fits the bill of a father to Ellen despite their sibling-like relationship – indeed, they call one another brother and sister and eventually marry – because of the absolute control he has over her. Both John and Mr. Lindsay see to it that Ellen's education is thorough, instructing her in philosophy, science, horsemanship, French, and history.

Like *The Wide, Wide World*, the first four books of the *Elsie Dinsmore* series focus almost exclusively on Elsie and her development into a woman. They are also told from a third

person point of view; the narrator, however, is not limited to Elsie's physical presence. At times, we find ourselves amid conversations to which Elsie herself is not privy. Elsie's relationship with her fathers – both earthly and heavenly – drives the action of the first four books. Through these books, we follow Elsie from a young girl of eight to a woman of approximately thirty who is married and has multiple children. Her foray into individuality must also be reconciled with her status as a woman: the one time in which Elsie does anything without consulting her father barely avoids ending in tragedy. She falls in love with the rapscallion Egerton and almost marries into a life of ruin. As a dutiful daughter, though, she sublimates her own desires – losing her only opportunity to express herself as an individual – and obeys her father. Because of the moralistic nature of the series, this denial of self is laudable and saves her from destruction. Like *The Wide, Wide World*, the *Elsie* series also contains several tropes of woman's fictions independent from the titular heroine's development. From childhood, Elsie lives among a reconstituted family consisting of her biological grandfather, step-grandmother, and half-aunts and uncles. Eventually, her father marries her friend Rose Allison and Elsie gains two half-siblings. Also, once Horace becomes a true Christian and he and Elsie are reconciled, he and she move to a home of their own, effectively removing her from her cruel governess. Rather than hiring a new teacher, Horace tutors Elsie in a full course of academic subjects.

In addition to sharing the criteria set out by Baym, *Elsie* contains two similarities to *The Wide, Wide World* that bear examining: their linguistic similarities and reliance on epigraphs. Jane Thompkins describes early domestic works such as *The Wide, Wide World* "not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order" (xi). Similarly, Janet Brown describes Martha Finley's "craftsmanship [as] elementary, even of its kind; [Finley's] stories are made of descriptive generalities, and conversation of the he-said

and then-she-said variety" (76). *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* are, despite their lack of complex prosidy, now valued for what they can show modern-day scholars about popular religious beliefs of antebellum America (Tompkins 149). Because of this, I argue that examining their linguistic similarities – in particular, the use of adverbial couplets – will allow us to see that the linguistic repetitiveness and simplicity that is so often criticized in *Elsie* is present in *The Wide, Wide World*. Like Warner's work, we are meant to value Finley's creation on its moral truth and ability to bring readers to a greater relationship with Christ than on its craftsmanship.

Although both texts rely heavily on what Brown would characterize as "he said, she said" dialogue to further their plotlines, the two authors share a more interesting, subtle tick as writers: the adverbial couplet.[27] That is, both writers – who are already perhaps over-fond of adverbs – at times describe the same action with multiple modifiers. In *The Wide, Wide World*, we find that when Ellen is upset about not receiving a letter from her mother, she goes outside and weeps "sadly and despairingly" (145). Later, Ellen climbs to the top of a ridge and looks out "sadly and wearily" at the surrounding countryside (147). Martha Finley seems similarly afflicted with this desire to over-modify the actions of her heroine. When her father sternly commands Elsie to play the piano for his friends, she "tremblingly and tearfully" goes to obey (*Elsie Dinsmore* 58). At a later time, when Horace wishes Elsie to go to bed early, she "readily and cheerfully" leaves the main drawing room and retires to her chambers (*Elsie Dinsmore* 224).

While the rules of good composition dictate that one reduce and, if possible, eliminate excessive adverbial use, the point I wish to make here is not that *Elsie*'s composition is laudable simply because it is similar to *The Wide, Wide World*'s. This comparison of style serves to highlight the fundamental similarity in Finley's prose to that of *The Wide, Wide World*, which –

[27] For the sake of brevity and the scope of this argument, I find it necessary to omit a comparison of the dialogic components of *The Wide, Wide World* to *Elsie Dinsmore*. Significant portions of dialogue are contained throughout the body of this paper, however, and should provide a sufficient comparison to interested parties.

having been criticized, discussed, and successfully defended – critics no longer feel compelled to address in their scholarship.[28] In contrast, the most recent scholarship written about *Elsie Dinsmore* begins with a lengthy defense of the text as a subject despite being often "denigrated by twentieth-century scholars and pressed into service as examples of the worst excesses of female sentimentality" (Stallcup 300). In terms of their reliance upon adverbs to express the beleaguered range of human sentiment, though, Warner and Finley are more similar than they are different.

Related to their propensity to pepper descriptions with adverbs is the authors' use of epigraphs to act as a gloss on the contents of each chapter. Although epigraphs were widely used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the practice largely declined after 1850 (Baym Appendix 423). Baym explains that epigraphs were intended to "[situate] the work in a larger literary context [and impart] a kind of literariness to it" (Appendix 423). Epigraphs are present in a number of sentimental woman's novels, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The Lamplighter* (1854) – to the extent that one can see it as typical of the form. Warner draws on authors such as Shakespeare, Longfellow, Burns, Milton, Chaucer and Dryden to elevate the meaning of forthcoming chapters. Baym, when examining Warner's epigraphs, concludes that "Warner's list [of cited authors is] a conventional, though streamlined use of literary 'greats,' with the old songs standing for primitive bardic literary origins" (Appendix 424).

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[28] A survey of recent scholarship on *The Wide, Wide, World* reveals that critics of the past decade no longer discuss the text's merit in the defensive language of Baym and Tompkins, who repeatedly admitted the literary shortcomings of these novels but sought to legitimize them based on their cultural currency. Rather, today's critics treat the novel as any other canonized work and write about a variety of subjects without any prefatory material establishing its suitability as a subject: Phong Nguyen discusses the significance of names in "Naming the Trees: Literary Onomastics in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*" (2006); Brandy Parris examines the relationship between labor and emotion in "'Feeling Right': Domestic Emotional Labor in *The Wide, Wide World*" (2005); Gretchen Papazian addresses the rise of female consumerism in "'Feed My Poor Famished Heart': Constructing Womanhood through Consumer Practices" (2007); and Linda Naranjo-Huebl notes the importance of food preparation to domestic novels in "'Take, Eat': Food Imagery, the Nurturing Ethic, and Christian Identity in *The Wide, Wide World, Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" (2007).

Finley, though eager to draw on the epigraph to gloss her own work, is decidedly less conventional in her offerings. She cites unknown authors such as Mrs. Welby (*Elsie* 7), Miss Landon (*Elsie* 45), Mrs. J. C. Neal (*Elsie* 194), and Mrs. Osgood (*Elsie* 214) along with a healthy smattering of Shakespeare, Milton, and the Bible. Finley employs epigraphs for each chapter in her works in the first twelve books of the *Elsie Dinsmore* series (1867-1886); in the thirteenth installment, *Elsie's Friends at Woodburn* (1887), Finley abandons the epigraph and does not use it in the remainder of the series. Finley's evolving use of epigraphs provides a concrete barometer by which to measure the *Elsie* series' progression from woman's fiction to something considered more appropriate to the realm of children. Popular juvenile novels, such as *Little Women* (1868, 1869), *What Katy Did* (1872), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), and *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), all lack epigraphs of any kind. Finley's decision to abandon the epigraph in 1887 can be read as a conscious decision to forsake the more traditional form of woman's literature and cater to a younger juvenile audience. We may read the earlier inclusion of epigraphs as Finley's desire to participate in the more elevated, adult realm of domestic fiction prevalent during the 1850s. Because of this and the extent to which *Elsie Dinsmore* participates in the tropes of woman's fiction outlined by Baym and Tompkins, the *Elsie* series might, in content, linguistic form, and reliance on epigraphs, be categorized as woman's fiction.

If *Elsie Dinsmore* does participate so wholly in the tropes of woman's fiction laid out by Baym, but fails to find acceptance there, where, then, is its place in the pantheon of American letters? Baym forcefully argues that woman's fictions exalt "feminine heroism" whereas juvenile literature uses the same plots to "become didactic instruments for little girls" (*Woman's* 296). After examining the extent to which the first four books of *Elsie Dinsmore* partake in the woman's fictions tropes as typified by *The Wide, Wide World*, it is necessary to pause and

question if the line between woman's fiction and juvenile fiction is as defined as Baym claims. In striving to court respectability for adult woman's fiction of the nineteenth century, did Baym overemphasize the difference between these books and the reviled *Elsie Dinsmore*? Furthermore, can *The Wide, Wide World* truly escape the accusation of being a didactic tool for feminine instruction? As we have seen, Elsie Dinsmore encounters many of the same trials as Ellen Montgomery and both texts exhibit a strong desire to instruct readers in the proper practice of religious devotion. Both texts focus on young girls who must overcome the trials of inhospitable domestic lives by relying on their faith. What is it, precisely, that makes the religious sentimentality expressed in *Elsie* more juvenile than that expressed in *The Wide, Wide World*?

I will explore this question in the following chapter. *Elsie Dinsmore* has been firmly classified as children's fiction for more than a century; thus, I will examine the extent to which the first eight books of the series align with popular juvenile forms of the times in order to understand why *Elsie* is perennially considered a children's book rather than a late example of sentimental domestic fiction.

CHAPTER III

The Rise of the Child

While Baym and Tompkins maintain a sharp divide between domestic novels authored by women for adult consumption and domestic novels written by women for juvenile consumption, scholars of children's literature see more room for equivocation. In *American Children's Literature and the Construction of Childhood* (1998), Gail Schmunk Murray begins her discussion on domestic girls' fiction by citing *The Wide, Wide World* as its genesis (54).[29] Murray argues that Warner's success and *The Wide, Wide World*'s "popularity with women and children alike encouraged a rash of female authors to use similar tropes to develop a devoted audience" (54). Unlike Tompkins and Baym, Murray sees all domestic fictions, both adult and juvenile, as being part of the same storyline – indeed, when reading Murray's description of domestic fiction, the two forms do seem remarkably similar. We are told that

> This literature privileged the home and family as the best context for the character building and moral reformation writers believed must precede the improvement of the larger society. Women or girls usually served as the superior moral force, guiding others (usually male) to a reformation of their character through long-suffering devotion, acts of charity, prayer, and tears. Drawing heavily on the

[29] Murray is not the sole scholar to classify *The Wide, Wide World* as children's fiction. John Seelye's grouping of *The Wide, Wide World* as the starting point of his discussion about *Jane Eyre*'s influence on American children's literature would suggest that he, like Murray, sees it as natural starting point for a discussion on girls' fiction. Gillian Avery includes both *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* as children's books in her expansive survey of American children's literature, *Behold the Child: American Children and Their Books 1621-1922* (1994). Anne Scott MacLeod offers a dissenting voice, instead seeing Warner's work as belonging to the separate realm of "adult Christian evangelical school of fiction" (152).

> theology of the Sunday school movement …, domestic fiction embodied a worldview that took children and their role seriously, not as characters to be acted upon but as ones who could transform and "save" their culture. (54)

Further establishing the link between Murray's broader definition of domestic fiction and Baym's definition of woman's fiction, Murray writes that in domestic children's novels, "heroines found their virtue tested by suffering financial losses, in geographical dislocation, or in being gravely misunderstood by family and friends" (55).

Although Murray's inclusive definition of domestic fiction is certainly one to consider, for the sake of establishing *Elsie Dinsmore*'s place within the larger American canon outside of children's literature, I will not share Murray's view that *The Wide, Wide World* is, in fact, children's literature. Rather, my argument will maintain the distinctions between children's literature and adult literature that are typical in broader academic circles. The question I seek to answer in this thesis is not what *Elsie Dinsmore*'s place is in the canon of children's literature, but where its place is in nineteenth-century American letters generally. As such, I must use the distinctions scholars who study adult literature set forth. However, to determine if *Elsie* adheres more thoroughly to the tenets of woman's fiction than to domestic children's fiction, we must now measure it against the standards of children's literature.

For the children's scholar, domestic fictions are notable because of the value they impart to the role of the child: indeed, in these books "a young woman served as the catalyst for remarkable character improvement for some or all of those with whom she came in contact, and she usually saw this as her chief duty and obligation in life" (Murray 55). Murray sees this as a reflection of the changing belief in the nature of childhood that took place throughout the nineteenth century. Rather than the wicked children in need of rigid rules and punishment that

are prevalent in the early Puritan tradition, writers in the latter half of the nineteenth century portray children as “innately good and innocent,” and therefore capable of serving as “instruments of reformation” (Murray 55).

A key difference between what Baym would characterize as woman’s fictions and what is more broadly recognized as nineteenth-century juvenile fiction lies in their authors’ respective approaches to girlhood. In the more adult domestic sentimental style, as typified by *The Wide, Wide World*, young girls are prim, genteel, focused on domestic tasks, and generally faulty only insofar as they fail to submit to unsympathetic authorities. These girls are children in name only; their behavior paints them as miniature adults. In girls’ fiction, young girls can be adventurous, outdoorsy, talkative, hasty, selfish, shy, vain – in short, anything that a real girl might actually be. Anne Scott MacLeod describes girls’ stories during the latter half of the century in *American Childhood: Essays on Children’s Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1994) as being “focused on character and relationships, as, of course, girls’ lives did as they approached womanhood” (14). In girls’ books, the transition from childhood to womanhood was seen as a time of loss: the loss of independence in deference to becoming a woman and accepting its attached strictures (MacLeod 3-14). Because girls were allowed more freedoms than women, MacLeod argues that female authors of the time return to adolescent heroines on the cusp of womanhood to both relive the romantic vision of childhood and come to terms with their own loss of personal freedoms (23).

In order to demonstrate the ways in which true juvenile fiction treats this time of unrestricted childhood differently than earlier woman’s fictions, we can rely heavily on Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, originally published in two volumes: *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1869). As a contemporary of *Elsie Dinsmore* and the only children’s book of the

nineteenth century to outsell *Elsie*, *Little Women* provides an ideal counterpoint against which to examine the extent to which *Elsie* partakes of the glorified romantic vision of unhindered childhood freedom that grew throughout the latter half of the century and culminated in Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908).

Little Women tells the story of the four March sisters, the daughters of fallen American gentry who must learn to love and prosper despite their relative poverty. The novel takes *The Pilgrim's Progress* as a model and, as such, is overtly didactic: Marmee (Mrs. March) identifies each girl's flaw at the beginning of the narrative and the sisters strive to conquer their faults throughout the tale. Meg must humble her vanity, Jo must conquer her temper, Beth must overcome her shyness, and Amy must rise above her selfishness. Although all four sisters are robust characters, Jo is the most fully developed: a tomboy who writes, plays with boys, cuts off her hair, deplores the idea of sentimental romance, and frequently utters exclamations such as "Christopher Columbus!," Jo personifies the unbridled freedom girls enjoyed until their initiation into womanhood (Alcott 32).

Murray notes that in several ways *Little Women* is unlike the other domestic children's novels of the time. In *Little Women*, Jo desires to be a boy, the March sisters misbehave and at times willfully disobey their parents, the Marches never partake in institutionalized religion or even read the Bible, and Jo is a "forceful personality [whose] outspokenness and chafing at the constraints of propriety kept *Little Women* popular with girls long after the Victorian age had faded away" (Murray 65). Jo's flaws and unwillingness to accept woman's lot – which, together, create the portrait of a *real* girl – are predecessors to types of plucky heroines that would dominate girls' literature from the turn of the twentieth century onward (such as Anne Shirley, Rebecca Randall, and – later – Nancy Drew). Using *Little Women* and Jo as a model for the girl

book heroine, then, we can examine the extent to which *Elsie Dinsmore* participates in this subset of domestic fiction.[30]

Working with the assertion that girls' literature of the nineteenth century gives primacy to childhood and balks against the constraints placed upon girls by their impending maturity, we may first examine the extent to which *Elsie Dinsmore* participates in the genre of children's literature by observing Elsie's attitude towards womanly behavior and growing up. Elsie is always impeccably dressed, decorous, polite, and feminine. In *Elsie's Girlhood*, Elsie quickly grows from a child of ten to a young lady of fourteen. Throughout this development, Elsie is described as "budding into womanhood as far and sweet a flower as ever was seen" (*Girlhood* 46). At this point in life, she reads *The Wide, Wide World* and is so taken with it that she begs to stay up past her bedtime to continue reading.[31] While discussing an appropriate stopping place, she and Horace have the following conversation:

> "Well, have you come to a good stopping place?" he asked, as she presently closed the book and put it aside with a slight sigh.
>
> "No, sir, it is just as bad a one as the other. Papa, I wish I was grown up enough to read another hour before going to bed."
>
> "I don't," he said, drawing her to a seat upon his knee, and passing his arm about her waist. "I'm not ready to part with my little girl yet."
>
> "Wouldn't a fine young lady daughter be just as good or better?" she asked, giving him a hug. (*Girlhood* 52-3)

[30] MacLeod describes these later heroines as romantic children who "redeem simply by being" (155). These girls, such as Rebecca and Anne are "volatile, quick-tempered, sympathetic, and loving" (MacLeod 155).

[31] In a fun point of intersection, Jo March also reads *The Wide, Wide World*, but reacts with considerably more emotion than Elsie. We find that on a given day "Jo spent the morning on the river, with Laurie, and the afternoon reading and crying over 'The Wide, Wide World,' up in the apple-tree" (Alcott 120).

This dialogue reveals that Elsie has no fear of growing older. Rather than as an imposition on her childhood freedom and curtailment of her personality, for Elsie, adulthood is seen as a time of greater freedom to make one's own life decisions.

Her optimism for the freedom of adulthood is justly rewarded in the next installment, *Elsie's Womanhood*. While her father demands absolute obedience and insists on being involved in every minute aspect of Elsie's daily life, her husband allows her complete freedom. Soon after being married, Elsie and Travilla have a discussion in which she points out that she "promised to obey" in her wedding vows, and so is prepared to do something Travilla had told her to do (*Womanhood* 118). In response, Travilla says, "Hush, hush! … I mean to have left that out. And did I not tell you that you were to have your own way that night and ever after? You've already done enough obeying to last you a lifetime" (*Womanhood* 118-9). Finley's attitude towards the respective merits of childhood and adulthood, as demonstrated by these two examples, falls decidedly on the side of adulthood. As a child, Elsie suffers at the hands of a cruel extended family, an initially cruel father (who, though Christianized throughout the series, remains stern), and a mercenary con artist who attempts to marry her money; as an adult, Elsie commands a sizable fortune, is married to a man who never commands her to do anything, and enjoys unparalleled health and happiness. Of the two estates, adulthood is clearly the more desirable condition.

In *Little Women*, Jo is not imbued with Elsie's ability to live with decorum and grace; furthermore, Jo does not mirror Elsie's positive attitude towards adulthood as a time of greater freedom. From the outset of *Little Women*, we learn that Jo uses "slang words," such as "jolly set," and whistles like a boy (8-9). When her older sister, Meg, lectures Jo about acting more ladylike, Jo vehemently responds:

> I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look prim as a China-aster. It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boys' games and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy, and it's worse than ever now, for I'm dying to go fight with papa, and I can only stay home and knit like a poky old woman. (9)

Already discontent with the trappings of girlhood, Jo finds the prospect of entering her prime and abiding by the stricter rules society places upon women dreadful. Once she and Meg reach marriageable age, Jo rebels even more thoroughly against the idea of growing up. Indeed, upon learning that Meg is engaged, Jo is upset and goes "up to her refuge in the garret [to confide] her troubles to the rats" (244). The following conversation takes place between Laurie (the boy who lives next door) and Jo the evening Meg is engaged, and reveals Jo's reluctance to move on from childhood:

> "There's no knowing what may happen in three years," said Jo, thoughtfully.
>
> "That's true! Don't you wish you could take a look forward, and see where we shall all be then? I do," returned Laurie.
>
> "I think not, for I might see something sad; and every one looks so happy now, I don't believe they could be much improved," and Jo's eyes went slowly round the room, brightening as they looked, for the prospect was a pleasant one. (246)

Rather than revealing an optimistic spirit that believes the future will be filled with things equal or superior to the joys of childhood, Jo has the sense that something valuable is lost in the transition from girl to woman. Unlike Elsie, who recognizes the restrictions childhood places on

her free will and leisure, Jo focuses on the destructive effect marriage and womanhood have on her family unit. The same life events, then, take drastically different tones in the two novels: for a reader of *Elsie*, growth is the natural progression of God's plan and womanhood is a time of increased freedom and happiness; for a reader of *Little Women*, growth can bring rewards, but is a destructive force that ruins the tender affections of childhood home and hearth.

In addition to featuring girls who were not eager to enter into adulthood, girls' books are characterized by genuinely flawed heroines whose personalities are forever colored by their innate temperaments. In chapter 2 of this thesis, I discussed Elsie's temper; although we are told that Elsie is naturally quick-tempered, she perpetually submits her own feelings to God and learns to endure all things peacefully. While a quick temper is certainly a flaw by domestic fiction standards, Elsie's temper (as well as Ellen Montgomery's) is already almost wholly tamed when compared to that of girl book heroines. For instance, Jo and Amy March both demonstrate considerable tempers during a poignant scene of *Little Women*. After being denied in her request to accompany Jo and Meg to the theatre, Amy burns the manuscript of one of Jo's novels. Intent on punishing Amy, Jo decides to go ice-skating without taking her along, despite a previous promise to do so. When Amy follows uninvited, Jo intentionally leaves Amy to fend for herself on the treacherous river. We are told that

> Jo heard Amy panting after her run, stamping her feet, and blowing her fingers, as she tried to put her skates on; but Jo never turned, and went slowly zigzagging down the river, taking a bitter, unhappy sort of satisfaction in her sister's troubles. She had cherished her anger till it grew strong, and took possession of her, as evil thoughts and feelings always do, unless cast out at once. (85)

Because of her anger, Jo does not warn Amy about a thin patch of ice and Amy predictably falls in. Perhaps less predictable is that everyone is ultimately unharmed: Laurie rescues Amy, Amy does not even catch a cold from her dunking, and Jo learns the lesson of forgiveness without having to endure any life-long regrets.

The tempestuousness of temper that both March sisters exhibit – though entirely realistic in a family of young girls – is quite different from the type that Elsie and Ellen demonstrate. Elsie's temper flares when she has been treated unjustly, such as when her governess punishes her for a crime that her cousin committed. Even then, Elsie demonstrates her temper simply by crying and defending herself (actions for which she feels horrible mere moments later).[32] Jo and Amy, in contrast, are quick to react negatively to that which displeases them: Amy, in a fit of rage, burned Jo's manuscript; Jo, eaten with seething resentment, leaves Amy to fend for herself. In the pilgrim's quest to cast off her burden of sin, the March sisters will have a much heavier load to bear than Elsie and her ideological sister, Ellen Montgomery.

While all domestic fiction sought to teach children the proper manner in which to behave, the girls' books of the latter nineteenth century are characterized by greater psychological subtlety than the blatantly overt religious messages contained in woman's fictions such as *The Wide, Wide World*. Moral improvement is a concern of these books – the girls are still expected to grow up to be good, Christian women who influence the behavior of those around them – but they are also, and perhaps more so, interested in developing complex narratives of childhood and growth. Indeed, the lack of direct references to Christianity in *Little Women* made it somewhat of a black sheep among moralistic ladies of the 1860s and 70s – Sunday School libraries would not buy it and some parents would not allow their children to read it (Murray 64). The only religious

[32] This example was discussed in length in Chapter 2 of this thesis, p. 38-9.

text the March sisters appear to read throughout the novel is *Pilgrim's Progress*, which, despite its highly moral message, is not technically a scriptural text. Furthermore, Marmee does not often sermonize to her girls, but allows them to learn from their own failures.

Perhaps the most decidedly religious moment of *Little Women* occurs in a conversation between Jo and Marmee following the ice-skating incident. Marmee reveals that she, too, has a quick temper that she has learned to control through constant policing and help from Mr. March and the Lord. She tells Jo:

> My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning, and may be many; but you can overcome and outlive them all, if you learn to feel the strength of your Heavenly father as you do that of your earthly one. The more you love and trust Him, the nearer you will feel to Him, and the less you will depend on human power and wisdom. His love and care never tire of change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of life-long peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidingly as you come to your mother. (92)

This interaction, in which no Bible was referenced, no hymn sung, is nonetheless highly effective in moving Jo's conscience. She resolves from then on to not "let the sun go down on her anger" (92) and strive for self-denial and self-control.

Despite discussing good behavior and morality, *Little Women* does not show children the fruits of sin in a manner consistent with didactic literature of the time, wherein the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. Jo complains against this ethic when attempting to get her stories published, for she "could not consent to depict all her naughty boys as being eaten by bears, or tossed by mad bulls, because they did not go to a particular Sabbath-school, nor all the

good infants who did go, of course, as rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts to angels, when they departed this life, with psalms or sermons on their lisping tongues" (379). Although this divine retribution was popular in the early half of the nineteenth century, by the latter half girls' books were more in line with Jo's sensibilities. In *Little Women*, for example, Laurie smokes, drinks, flirts, and is always one wrong step away from a worldly life; rather than permanently punishing him for his flaws as one might expect in didactic fiction, Alcott allows him to grow gradually up and see the value in hard work and extending charity to those in need. Laurie is happily married to Amy at the end of *Good Wives*, and is a good man without ever mentioning religion. Indeed, his moral compass seems to be his desire to please the March sisters, who themselves are rarely seen in an overtly religious light. This evolution – in which novels instruct readers in morality by allowing children to overcome their flaws gradually and with minimal religious instruction – is continued into the twentieth century, most notably in *Anne of Green Gables*.

When compared to these juvenile texts, *Elsie Dinsmore*, *The Wide, Wide World*, *The Lamplighter*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – novels devoured by adolescents of the mid-nineteenth-century – are rather abysmally out of place. Filled with myriad prayers, hymns, Bible verses, and sermonizing, the novels can – at times – read like devotionals rather than a narrative. Elsie brings specific Biblical instruction into every moment of her life, as seen in this interaction with and Horace, which takes place after she has sprained her ankle:

> "Take me on your knee again, if you please, papa," she said, "and then will you read a little to me? I would like it so much."
>
> "I will do anything that will give my little girl pleasure," he replied, as he once more lifted her gently, and placed her in the desired position.
>
> "What shall the book be?" he asked. "One of the new ones I bought you the other day?"

> “Not that, tonight, if you please, papa. I would rather hear from an old book,” she answered, with a sweet smile lighting up her little pale face. “Won’t you please read me the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah?”
>
> “If you wish it, dearest. But I think something lively would be much better – more likely to cheer you up.”
>
> “No, dear papa. There is nothing cheers me up like the Bible, it is so sweet and comforting. I do love to hear of Jesus, how he bore our griefs and carried our sorrows.” (*Holidays* 47-8)

This is but one instance of a very typical interaction for Elsie, in which she turns all conversation back to scriptures and often recites snippets of her favorite verses to comfort and console those around her.

Another telling instance of how the religious vein included in the *Elsie* series treats morality is in the various fates doled out to its Christian and secular characters. Without fail, Christian characters are ultimately rewarded with material riches, happy families, and good health until their final days. Elsie, though her faith and strength are thoroughly tried during *Elsie Dinsmore* and *Elsie’s Holidays at Roselands*, passes the test and is rewarded with every possible good. She is the wealthiest woman in Virginia, marries an indulgent man, has numerous well-behaved children, is practically unscathed by the destruction of the Civil War, and – even when widowed – has the constant support of her father in all things. Christian characters – such as Adelaide Dinsmore, Rose Allison, Lester Leland, and Captain Raymond – often endure trials for a time, but never anything that cannot be overcome. Unrepentant characters, on the other hand, often suffer in the extreme. As we have previously seen, Enna Dinsmore, Elsie’s young aunt, is a selfish, worldly girl whose impetuousness leads her into poverty, widowhood, and insanity. Additionally, as the series progresses, Enna’s child, Molly, falls down the stairs and becomes an invalid after being forced by Enna to wear high heels. In *Elsie’s Children*, Enna is in a carriage accident that deprives her of her reason to the point that she is subsequently called a “poor

lunatic" (*Children* 120). She never recovers her reason, but lives in childlike stupidity until her death in *Grandmother Elsie*. Although certainly unpleasant to Elsie during their childhood, Enna is not appreciably worse than the March sisters. She is petty, desirous of pretty things and wealth, and quickly angered when she does not have her way – in short, she is a combination of Meg, Jo, and Amy March. Unlike these girls, though, Enna is severely punished for her personality flaws and made into a worldly woman who rejects the teachings of Christ to her own detriment.[33]

When compared to the adventurous heroines of nineteenth-century girl novels, then, the *Elsie Dinsmore* series seems rather out of place: Elsie accepts her femininity and views adulthood as a time of increased freedom; Elsie's flaw is that she has not yet learned to submit her will completely to the tyrannical rule of her secular family; and Finley incorporates Biblical passages into her moralistic story in which good people prosper and bad people suffer. On the surface, there seems to be little to distinguish the *Elsie* series as type of children's fiction different from *The Wide, Wide World*; indeed, *Elsie*'s sense of deep morality and insistence on suffering has much more in common with the sentimental tradition of adult books from this time period than from tales of unbridled childhood freedom. However, the *Elsie* series contains several characteristics that mark it as a member of the emergent girl book genre and are likely responsible for its exclusion from the woman's fiction canon.

Perhaps first and foremost, the *Elsie Dinsmore* series is just that – a series. Woman's domestic books, such as *The Wide, Wide World*, *The Lamplighter*, *St. Elmo*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the numerous writings of E.D.E.N. Southworth, have the stories of the heroine contained

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[33] Enna is by no means the only sinner to suffer an undesirable fate in *Elsie Dinsmore*. Elsie's cousin Arthur, who begins gambling and smoking at a young age, dies in the Civil War. Another of Elsie's worldly relations, Virginia Conly, marries a man against the advice of the Dinsmore men; her husband turns out to be impoverished and prone to drinking, leaving Virginia to live in a dirty tenement in New York in *Grandmother Elsie*.

within a singular volume. Novels written for girls, such as *Little Women*, *Elsie Dinsmore*, *What Katy Did*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Pollyanna* carry the action of a plot throughout multiple books in a series. Although the first four books in the *Elsie* series cover the same time period in Elsie's life as *The Wide, Wide World* does Ellen's, by the simple virtue of being broken into smaller installments, the *Elsie* series seems more approachable to readers.[34] Additionally, the emergent market for girls' fiction came to rely heavily upon the series as a way to gain revenue from young readers already attached to their favorite characters. By nature of the twenty-eight books that follow Elsie's life, then, the *Elsie Dinsmore* books are physically more closely related to children's fiction than adult novels.

Another way in which *Elsie Dinsmore* is related to the form of the children's novel is in the range of experiences its titular heroine is allowed to encounter. Like the girls in *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables*, Elsie not only becomes betrothed, but actually marries and has children. Also similar to *Little Women* and *Anne*, the later volumes of the *Elsie* series revolve more fully around her children and grandchildren than Elsie herself. In girls' stories, then, we find that the girl – however much her freedom may be curtailed by womanhood and marriage – exists beyond the bloom of her youth; in woman's domestic novels, a girl is interesting only insofar as she is eligible for marriage. *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter*, for instance, both end with the betrothal of their respective heroines, essentially making these works a continuation of eighteenth-century British courtship novels such *Evelina* and *Belinda*.[35] In both

[34] In terms of sheer volume, the *Elsie* series even devotes more text to covering Elsie's development: *Elsie Dinsmore* (253 pages), *Elsie's Holiday at Roselands* (274 pages), *Elsie's Girlhood* (300 pages), and *Elsie's Womanhood* (287 pages), for a total of 1,114 pages covering Elsie's life from a girl of eight to a married woman. In comparison, *The Wide, Wide World* is 583 pages long.

[35] In the originally published version of *The Wide, Wide World*, the narrative ends with Ellen living in Scotland with her maternal relatives and John Humphreys' implied intention to marry her when she comes of age. It is not until the release of an unpublished chapter (made available in 1987) that we see Ellen married.

form and the scope of narration, then, we find *Elsie* more in keeping with girl novels than with woman's fictions.

The final manner in which the *Elsie* series can be defended as children's fiction is in the power Elsie herself holds as a heroine. Anne MacLeod writes that *Elsie* "owes a good deal to the adult Christian evangelical school of fiction and therefore belongs partly to pre-Civil War tradition. But the overdrawn sentiment of Finley's story, and her insistence on both the innocent purity of her heroine and on her power to redeem others, place the book within the developing romantic strain in children's fiction" (152-3). MacLeod thus observes:

> Elsie Dinsmore is a dreadful creation, whose incestuously emotional relations between father and daughter appall the post-Freudian reader, but it is interesting for its peculiarly radical mix of old and new in children's literature. The religious intensity of the story is old-fashioned, particularly in the pages of unadorned preaching, and so is Finley's insistence on Elsie's submissiveness, not as a child so much as Christian. Yet the overriding fact of the novel is that Elsie is the clear winner in every contest between child and adult, even (or especially) when the adult is her parent. Finley made high moral drama of parent-child relations, with the child at the center, and ascendant. It was a giant step in the direction of romanticizing childhood. (154-5)

MacLeod's argument, though valid in many ways, bears some examination. For MacLeod, the *Elsie* series romanticizes childhood because Elsie wins her altercations with her father; what MacLeod fails to consider, though, is that Elsie only engages in and wins battles in which Horace asks her to violate her conscience. Elsie triumphs over adults because she has the moral high ground. Her moral high stature comes not simply by merit of being a child – she has

no starry-eyed insights into the natural world around her – but through her constant and dutiful submission to Biblical teachings. After Horace's conversion at the end of *Elsie's Holiday at Roselands*, Elsie never again defies her father's commands and the balance of power is corrected. We find, then, that *Elsie Dinsmore* elevates the child not so much as the center of the narrative, but as the morally correct agent. A similar power dynamic exists between the burgeoning Christian Ellen Montgomery and the resolutely irreligious Aunt Fortune: Fortune and Ellen have numerous altercations, but Ellen is always the righteous party who wins the sympathy of everyone she meets.

The *Elsie Dinsmore* series has been consistently characterized as children's fiction – by mainstream scholars such as Baym and Tompkins, by children's literature specialists, and, as seen in Chapter 1 of this thesis, by today's publishing industry. While we have seen that it partakes in several of the key elements of children's fiction, such as its packaging and storylines, the moral tone of the series is out of step with the adventurous, romantic vision of the child that rose to preeminence by the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, Elsie's priggish morality and lachrymose nature are principally responsible for her fall from favor during the twentieth century. Therefore, while *Elsie* is classified as a child's book and continues to be marketed as such in both academic and popular circles, I suggest that the series may be best seen as one of the last instances of woman's fiction to appear in the American presses.

CONCLUSION

John Seelye, who so eloquently stated that Elsie should be “not only sent to a garret room but kept forever locked away” (138), makes the point of entitling one of his chapters “Painful Matters: The Wide, Wide Underworld in Warner’s book and its Sequel, *Elsie Dinsmore*” (113). In so doing, Seelye – perhaps unwittingly – paves the way for us to view *Elsie Dinsmore* as a domestic woman’s novel. As I have shown in this thesis, the *Elsie Dinsmore* series certainly does participate in many of the tropes of woman’s fiction best exemplified by *The Wide, Wide World*; what I hope to propose is that we take the next step in establishing the series – as Seelye suggests – as part of the same conversation with Warner’s work. Furthermore, in acknowledging *Elsie* as part of the ongoing woman’s fiction tradition, we may also learn to value *Elsie*’s contribution to the gradual evolution of sentimental female writing into children’s fiction.

A number of hurdles must be overcome if the canon of American sentimental literature is to benefit from a reexamination of *Elsie Dinsmore*. Perhaps most pressing is the need to examine the series with an eye similar to that of Tompkins – that is, to read *Elsie* not to criticize its linguistic failings or overt moralizing, but to study the series for its value as a cultural indicator of nineteenth-century America. *Elsie*’s popularity alone entitles it to that much consideration. Next, scholars will need to put aside their reluctance to examine *Elsie* from a Christian perspective. In Christian didactic writings, ignoring the importance of the religious framework of the text is fruitless and poor scholarship. To date, Jackie Stallcup stands alone in having analyzed the way in which *Elsie* functions within a Christian system. The last obstacle to *Elsie*’s success is

in determining its generic status – an inquiry that leads to the larger question of whether any true distinction exists between woman's fictions and juvenile literature.

As I discussed over the course of this thesis, the line between woman's fiction and girls' fiction is blurred at best. Both forms center on the development – physical and moral – of young girls and the trials they must overcome to reach adulthood. One option open to scholars, then, is to collapse this distinction entirely. Scholars of children's literature have largely already done this, incorporating Baym's and Tompkins' woman's fictions into a broader scope in the development of juvenile fiction. However, within the American canon – and the scholars who attempt to define canonical texts – woman's books such as *The Wide, Wide World* occupy a more elevated realm through their distinction as adult literature.

While collapsing the line between adult and juvenile literature might be particularly relevant in the case of sentimental American fiction written for and consumed by women, the implementation of said collapse is unlikely. Surveys of nineteenth-century American literature are already weighted against female writers; to suggest that one remove Hawthorne or Melville from a syllabus to make room for *Elsie Dinsmore* would likely invite derision. Thus, I believe *Elsie Dinsmore*'s value lies in a very specific niche: acting as the text of choice to demonstrate the transition from adult woman's fictions that predominated in the 1850s and the girls' series books that would rule the early twentieth century. Thus, *Elsie* can re-enter the American canon in conversations specifically bent on the development of female writings in the nineteenth century.

In such a context, the *Elsie* series becomes eminently useful to illustrate the progression of female concerns. In *Elsie*, we find a great deal of instruction about the manner in which an upper-class lady is meant to behave, making the series a continuation of the long-established conduct literature tradition. Particularly relevant are the manner in which Elsie chooses a

husband only with paternal approval and dispenses of her money through charitable acts. Also typical of feminine writings of the time, the *Elsie* series fictionalizes the American debate over diets that flourished in the nineteenth century. Reformers of the time (including such luminaries as Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau) were convinced of the moral power of a healthy, balanced diet. In her *Treatise on Domestic Economy, for the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (1841), Catherine Beecher focuses on the negative effects an unhealthy diet can have on "the social core of America," and recommends a largely vegetable diet – with a limit of meat to once daily – to help alleviate the potential overindulgence (Elbert and Drews 3). As an instructor, one might use Horace's strict dictates on Elsie's diet as an entre to a larger discussion of American dietary reform. Because of Bronson Alcott and Thoreau's interest in both dietary reform and social reform of the American slavery system, a discussion on dietary reform in *Elsie* might further lead into a natural discussion of abolitionism and Northern attitudes towards the institution of slavery. Because of the highly paternalistic attitude with which Finley approaches all instances of slavery and the enslaved, *Elsie Dinsmore* can be a useful tool for opening a dialogue about residual Northern sympathy for slavery. Indeed, the intersection provided by Aunt Chloe – the mammy figure in both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Elsie Dinsmore* – places *Elsie Dinsmore* in conversation with Stowe's racially insensitive antislavery work.

In addition to partaking in the larger trends of American women's writings, the *Elsie Dinsmore* series can be singularly utile in providing an example of how sentimental writings developed throughout the end of the nineteenth century. As a child-centric narrative in which the young girl acts as a redemptive agent to all, *Elsie* veers more towards juvenile literature of the day. As a devout Christian whose primary goal is to submit her will to both her earthly and heavenly fathers, Elsie retains the vestiges of self-effacing femininity best personified by Ellen

Montgomery. Its serial nature allowed Finley to evolve in both form and subject as overtly Christian narrative became increasingly unpopular; this evolution is perhaps best noted in Finley's abandonment of epigraphs in 1887, a move which places the latter *Elsie* books in better company with later children's books.

If the *Elsie Dinsmore* series is to find new life as part of the established American body of letters, now is its time. With its rising popularity among Christian parents, adaptations and companion materials, and increasing mentions by academics, *Elsie* is currently experiencing a Renaissance of sorts. For a new generation of scholars born in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the *Elsie* series has always been readily available to purchase in its entirety. Although the availability of a text does not guarantee that it will be read, the number of graduate-level studies that include *Elsie Dinsmore* – three in the past three years[36] – suggest a new generation of scholars may be more open to studying this text instead of exiling it to an empty garret. With this new influx of interest and a concerted effort to reclaim *Elsie*'s name from ignominy, the *Elsie Dinsmore* may finally find a place in the American canon.

[36] See p. 17 of this thesis for a complete list.

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