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# O Mother, Where Art Thou?: Cummins, Warner, and the “New Domestic”

CHELSEA E. HARPER

Mothers in 19th-century women’s writing seem to be mysteriously absent. Apart from shared characteristics like sentimental style and *bildungsroman* plot structures, a commonality amongst women’s literature of the period is the literal or figurative orphaned state of the protagonist. This trope of the absentee mother in literature, presented alongside the burgeoning Cult of True Womanhood in society, which placed vital importance on female instruction by the mother inside the home, exposes the limitations of such a model. As Chantell writes, “The refusal of domestic fictions like *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Lamplighter* to fix responsibility for female education in “the mother at home” suggests serious ambivalence about the developing cult of motherhood” (149). Gerty Flint, protagonist of Cummins’s *The Lamplighter*, and Ellen Montgomery

of *The Wide, Wide World*, meet their full potential (marriage, career, piety) without the instruction of a mother, nor a consistent model of “true womanhood.” As Sara Lindey writes, “the unruly [sentimental] heroine becomes the model lady if not the proto-New Woman” (6) under the guidance of surrogate parental figures, rather than making herself in the image of her mother. *The Lamplighter*, along with *The Wide, Wide World*, fractures and complicates the ideal of the maternal domestic interior to rebuild it, positing that true domestic bliss cannot be achieved in isolation, but rather, with education and engagement in the community.

Scholarship regarding nineteenth-century women’s fiction has experienced a renaissance in recent decades, after nearly a century of critical neglect. The commercial aims of women writers of the era clashed with the romantic artistic idealism of their contemporary male writers, who accordingly maligned them as a “scribbling” mob. Further, the evangelism and supposed triviality of the subject matter of the domestic novel long precluded such women’s writing from the canon. Much of the scholarship in the last thirty years focuses primarily on depictions of girlhood and family within these forgotten works, as scholars seek to negotiate the relationship between literature and 19th-century mores. Marilyn Francus, on domesticity and motherhood in earlier British fiction, writes, “Eighteenth-century British society insisted upon

domesticity as the most appropriate venue for the fulfillment of a woman's duties to God, society, and herself" (1). Further, "Works of fiction reinforced the gender codes of the period, valorizing women who embodied the characteristics of the domestic woman and demonizing those who did not" (Francus 1). Despite where a woman's day-to-day class realities might place her in the matrix of femininity, she was "expected to adhere to the gender profile exemplified by the domestic code: modest, chaste, pious, compassionate, and virtuous" (Francus 2). Francus then addresses the trope of the motherless protagonist, which she traces back through Richardson and Austen, among others. These narratives, which Francus refers to as "one maternal vanishing act after another" (8), display an initial perverted domestic, erasing the very real role that mothers play in society and preventing a thorough examination of the experience of mothering in the era. Other critics have observed that the biological mothers of sentimental protagonists usually die at a young age in domestic fiction—an educational text, like the Bible serves as a replacement (Chantell 149). To that point, Chantell claims that these novels assert, "living mothers...are limited mothers" (139). Alison Hale writes, specifically of Cummins's *The Lamplighter*, that its pages are "notable for their fascination with fathers, as well as the absence or incapacity of the mothers who appear therein" (210).

Nineteenth-century women's writing, like *The Lamplighter*, nods to these earlier established tropes but provides a more holistic solution for what it portrays as a limiting flaw in the established middle-class order. As Chantell writes about *The Wide, Wide World*, "It is only when [protagonist] Ellen leaves the shelter of her mother's parlor that her voracious intellectual curiosity emerges and can be satisfied" (136). Weinstein, writing about the sentimental "genre's profound awareness of the relative fragility of the biological family" (4) complicates critical misreadings of these once immensely popular texts. However, Weinstein, in contrast with Chantell's earlier article, asserts that the action of women's fiction "take[s] place in the everyday world of the home" and that it is entirely driven by "family and feelings" (8). Chantell resists this conclusion, noting that, "In demonstrating the compatibility of rationality with more traditional 'womanly' ideas, these texts silently emend the deficiencies of the sentimental model" (149). Weinstein does concede that,

[N]ot all sentimental fictions unself-consciously reproduce the formulaic requirements (the child suffers the loss of her parents and is recompensed at the novel's end by getting a spouse), but rather that they have the capacity to interrogate their generic formulations. (7)

Although the two critics disagree on the role of the domestic interior space in sentimental fiction, both

see the ways in which women writers challenge the sentimental model and its prescriptive views of femininity and duty.

Both *The Lamplighter* and *The Wide, Wide World* are deeply evangelical texts—the central guiding force that leads protagonists Gertrude and Ellen to maturity is their complete faith in and submission to God. Significantly, as Giffen and Cadwallader note, evangelical Christianity was one of few avenues by which nineteenth-century women might move beyond the domestic sphere and into a larger community outside of the home (5). Religious piety, which may appear to the contemporary reader as submissive and disempowering to women, figures in these novels as a source of female agency, furthering this essay’s assertion that community is essential to the creation of a domestic ideal. As Hale writes, “Feminine spiritual authority, in particular, was wielded both collectively and, increasingly, individually in the wake of the Second Great Awakening as personal piety and conscience increasingly eclipsed and displaced submission to any particular orthodoxy or practice” (208). Stacy Alaimo’s book *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*, nods to Nina Baym’s work to support this claim: “Nineteenth-century American women writers who wrote ‘domestic fictions’...imagined the values and ideals of the domestic as a source of moral uplift for the wider culture (18). Using this mod-

el, then, they “created analogies between domestic skills and public work that would allow them to sweep their way into the public sphere” (18).

The importance of entry into the public sphere is explicit in the text of *The Lamplighter* and *The Wide, Wide World*. Nan Grant, Gerty Flint’s de facto guardian and tenement landlady insists, “She’s no child of mine...She’s the city’s property—let ‘em look out for her” (Cummins 12). Ellen Montgomery, upon arriving at her Aunt Fortune’s house after being separated from her beloved mamma, laments, “She did not kiss me! She didn’t say she was glad to see me!” (Warner 101). In both instances, the protagonists are torn from their biological parents (by death or illness) and rejected by their caretakers. They are, effectively, expelled from the home, which should have been a location of domestic serenity, into the community, which becomes collectively responsible for each.

Numerous people outside of each girl’s birth family become surrogate mother and father figures throughout the texts; in fact, each girl’s living situation changes dramatically every few years. Weinstein’s essay, “A Sort of Adopted Daughter,” discusses the tenuous status of *Lamplighter* protagonist Gerty’s guardianship and the dearth of antebellum legislation regarding adoption. Gerty and Ellen both experience simultaneous affection for multiple configurations of adopted “families,” despite ownership claims by certain benefactors (Mr.

Graham and Mr. Lindsay, respectively). In these novels,

Freely given love, rather than blood, [is] the invincible tie that binds together individuals as a family, thereby loosening the hold that consanguinity has both as a mechanism for structuring the family and for organizing the feelings of people in it. (Weinstein 9)

Gerty's boundless capacity for love and loyalty and Ellen's eventual ability to love that which is outside of her mother's parlor suggest a universal Christian model of love and brotherhood that the authors put forth as an antidote to the isolation and disempowerment of the "separate spheres" model.

However, literature of the period does not monolithically espouse the belief that woman should enter the public sphere. Where *The Lamplighter* and *The Wide, Wide World* diverge is in how their heroines interact with interior and exterior space. Though Ellen finds community external to her biological family, this intellectual and spiritual exploration occurs indoors. Gerty, however, moves freely throughout external spaces, urban and rural, exemplifying the sort of "New Woman" who can transmit her virtue from the domestic into the public. Cummins's novel places great importance on individual agency and autonomy for women inside and outside of the home, whereas Warner's suggests that a woman's autonomy and purpose remains in the domestic interior. For Warner, community is

intimate, enclosed; for Cummins, interaction with the exterior is essential for the creation of a serene, ideal interior.

Gerty Flint (or Amory?) goes about her day-to-day life with independence uncharacteristic of women in fiction of the era, much less children or adolescent women. Upon moving in with the Graham family, Gerty receives a letter from beloved neighbor, Mrs. Sullivan, summoning her to Boston. Her benefactress, Emily Graham, is concerned about sending her to the city alone, but housekeeper Mrs. Ellis supports Gerty's assertion that she can make the journey alone:

"I don't think it's safe for her to go alone in the coach," said Emily.

"Safe! —What, for that great girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Ellis...

"Do you think it is?" inquired Emily. "She seems a child to me, to be sure; but, as you say, she is almost grown up, and I daresay is capable of taking care of herself. Gertrude, are you sure you know the way from the omnibus-office in Boston to Mrs. Sullivan's?"

"Perfectly well, Miss Emily." (Cummins 111)

Although it is later revealed that Mrs. Ellis has ulterior motives for wanting Gerty out of the house, it still bears notice that, with little encouragement, all of the adults in twelve-year-old Gerty's life place great faith in her ability to travel

on her own. She, unlike Ellen of *The Wide, Wide World*, is neither sheltered indoors nor helpless to move alone. In a similar instance to the solo omnibus ride in *The Lamplighter*, Ellen of *The Wide, Wide World*, at one point, must ride a horse without accompaniment and faces danger at the hands of a Mr. Saunders (Warner 396). Saunders detains Ellen and provokes her horse, Brownie, threatening her safety. Luckily, in a sweeping gesture, John Humphreys, Ellen's adoptive brother and future spouse, comes to her rescue, saving helpless Ellen from Saunders's snare (400). The incident with Saunders is Ellen's retribution for having gone into exterior space without a chaperone; John sternly admonishes her, saying "Ellen, you must ride no more alone.—Promise me that you will not" (401). Motherless Ellen must still adhere to patriarchal standards regarding her enclosure in the domestic sphere; Gerty, who belongs to everybody and nobody, has more freedom to perform subversive activities like "going outside" or "earning an income." Ellen's intellectual curiosity is nurtured but contained indoors, relegated to the subjects that please her benefactors; Gerty's development is enriched, rather than threatened by her experiences in the outside world.

As previously stated, both Gerty and Ellen come to maturity by way of a series of surrogate parental figures and family structures. Separated from their mothers by illness and death, the sentimental

heroines must gain faith and education outside of the womb of the domestic sphere, or at least, in an approximation of it. In *The Lamplighter*, Gerty's benefactress Emily Graham and neighbor Willie Sullivan nurture her education, recognizing her aptitude for learning almost immediately. Provided with materials by Emily and encouragement by Willie, Gerty excels, prompting the narrator to say, "Awaken a child's ambition, and implant in her a taste for literature, and more is gained than by years of school-room drudgery, where the heart works not in unison with the head" (71). An essential aspect of Gerty's development is her religious education, which begins when Gerty's first adoptive father, Trueman Flint, gifts her a figurine in the posture of prayer (31). Gerty doesn't recognize the activity, prompting Willie to ask,

"Don't you ever pray, —pray to God?"

"No, I don't. —Who is God? Where is God?"

Willie looked inexpressibly shocked at Gerty's ignorance, and answered, reverently, "God is in heaven, Gerty."

"I don't know where that is," said Gerty. "I believe I don't know nothin' about it." (32)

Gerty's transformation from ignorance to an angelic state of goodness ("I shall be an angel...I will try to be perfect" [110]) occurs without the aid or guidance of either biological parent—it is implicit in the text, in fact, that transformation is

necessary for Gerty's eventual reunion with her father. It is Gerty's love for her adoptive families, and with it, her piety, that soothes her feral anger and "domesticates" her, making her fit to create and exist within a new type of domestic space.

Though *The Wide, Wide World's* Ellen Montgomery receives some education in the home from her mother, the narrative critiques the women's too-close bond, facilitated by their extreme isolation, as somewhat heretical. Ellen's mother stresses the importance of religious faith, but, inadvertently or not, prioritizes Ellen's love of her mother over her love of God. For instance, when Mrs. Montgomery prepares to leave Ellen at the start of the novel, she purchases a Bible for her, but also a writing desk, with which she provides the following instructive:

"I wish you to be always neat, and tidy, and industrious; depending upon others as little as possible; and careful to improve yourself by every means, and especially by writing to me. I will leave you no excuse, Ellen, for failing in any of these duties. I trust you will not disappoint me in a single particular." (32)

Though the virtues Mrs. Montgomery espouses to her child are admirable, it is worth noting that she specifies that Ellen might improve herself "*especially by writing to [her mother],*" and that the consequence for not doing so would be her mother's disappointment. The values of sentimental motherhood, here, misalign with the val-

ues of the "new" domestic, as imagined by Warner and Cummins; the impetus for self-improvement should always be faith in and submission to God above even family. Upon her separation from her mother, Ellen claims that she "[does] not love the Saviour" (70). When pressed by a gentleman she meets on the boat voyage to her first surrogate parent, she explains her reason for this bold claim:

"Do you not love him, Ellen?"

"I am afraid not, sir."

"Why are you afraid not? What makes you think so?"

"Mamma said I could not love him at all if I did not love him best; and, oh, sir," said Ellen weeping, "I do love mamma a great deal better." (70)

Mrs. Montgomery's religious teaching fails Ellen; their separation is essential for Ellen's development and her eventual full embrace of the Christian god.

The religious education that meaningfully impacts Ellen begins upon meeting Alice Humphreys. During their first encounter, Ellen says,

"Nobody in this world can help me," she said.

"Then there's one in heaven that can," said [Alice] steadily.

"Nothing is too bad for him to mend. Have you asked his help, Ellen?" (150)

Alice then, along with her brother, John,

adopts Ellen as a little sibling and provides her with an education and religious guidance. When Ellen accidentally overhears, through gossip, that her mother has died (345), she falls into a depression that she eventually overcomes through Alice's care and an engagement with her Bible (347). In a conversation with John, Ellen radically changes her earlier position:

“Do you love Christ, Ellen?” She nodded, weeping afresh.

“Do you love him less since he has brought you into this great sorrow?”

“No,” sobbed Ellen; — “*more.*” (349)

When Alice falls ill and dies, Ellen's piety is again tested; Alice implores her to trust in God rather than grieve. She says, “Let us never doubt his love, dear Ellie, and surely then we can bear whatever that love may bring upon us” (428).

Despite the educational and spiritual opportunities afforded them by their surrogate families, Gerty's and Ellen's “adoptions” are not without occasional difficulties and domineering patriarchal figures. In *The Lamplighter*, Gerty's sense of duty is tested when Mrs. Sullivan falls ill; she must confront Mr. Graham and defy his wishes in order to care for her, challenging his authority. She says, “I will never be such a traitor to my own heart, and my sense of right; sorry as I shall be to offend Mr. Graham, I must not allow fear of his anger to turn me from my duty” (144). Though Gerty does in-

deed incur Mr. Graham's wrath, her loyalty to her friends gives her the strength to calmly hold her ground. Conversely, when Ellen's Scottish relatives, the Lindsays, whom the narrator refers to as the “ruler[s] of her destiny” (503), endeavor to “do with her and make of her precisely what they pleased, without the smallest regard to her fancy” (504), Ellen, unlike Gerty, has no recourse to object or leave, besides marriage to John Humphreys. In one instance, Mr. Lindsay manipulates Ellen into drinking wine, which she had never imbibed before, calling her “[his] own child—[his] own little daughter” (518). When he leaves the room, Ellen reflects on the deviant act:

“I have done it now!” thought Ellen, as she sat in the corner of the sofa where Mr. Lindsay had tenderly placed her; — “I have called him my father—I am bound to obey him after this. I wonder what in the world they will make me do next.” (519)

This scene exemplifies the tenuous legality of adoption as discussed by Cindy Weinstein. Ellen only refers to Lindsay as “father” at his request, because she does not feel she has the right to refuse him. Later, Ellen refers to herself as “Ellen Lindsay,” despite there having been no discussion of legally changing her surname. *The Lamplighter's* Gerty has the freedom to leave the Grahams on her own—*The Wide, Wide World's* Ellen must wait until John Humphreys appears to whisk her away

from the “paternal” home to the marital home.

Though both *The Lamplighter* and *The Wide, Wide World* end in the traditional sentimental formulation (marriage to a childhood friend), they offer subversive renderings of a new domestic—one in which women are empowered, to varying degrees, by their love, unwavering religious faith and intellects. Neither girl can rely on sentimental motherhood to spiritually and morally guide their development. It is an active engagement with a vast network of tenuous adoptive “relatives” who encourage education and religion that allows each heroine to carve out an alternate version of the domestic sphere, one that rejects the isolationist tendencies of the prior model and places a high importance upon communal, universal Christian values and the heroines’ ability to transmit them widely. Though the two novels are not monolithic in the ideals of domesticity they advocate, they each challenge the status quo by emphasizing the immense importance of the sentimental heroine’s thorough education and social experiences within and outside of the home.

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**Chelsea Harper** is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in English degree. She plans to eventually achieve something meaningful and to continuously own cats throughout her life.