Stories of little women in American literature

1. Sabrina Vellucci, "Piccole donne crescono: *gender* e letteratura per l'infanzia", *Ácoma. Rivista Internazionale di Studi Nord-Americani*, 39, 2010, pp. 70-86.
2. Steven Mintz, "Childhood Battles of the Civil War", in *Huck's Raft. A History of American Childhood*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 118-32.
3. Daniel Shealy, "Little Women in Its Time", in Gregory Eiselein and Anne K. Phillips, eds, *Critical Insights: Little Women*, Armenia, NY, Salem Press, 2015, pp. 29-40.
4. Meredith Goldsmith, "Dressing, Passing, And Americanizing: Anzia Yezierska's Sartorial Fictions", *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 16, 1997, pp. 34-45.

Either 5a or 5b:

5a. Susan E. Honeyman, "*What Maisie Knew* and the Impossible Representation of Childhood", *The Henry James Review*, 22, 2001, pp. 67–80.
5b. Roisín Laing, "*What Maisie Knew*: Nineteenth-Century Selfhood in the Mind of the Child", *The Henry James Review*, 39, 2018, pp. 96–112.
6. Fulvia Sarnelli, "No Growth for Happy Kids: The Circuit of Representation and Identification in *What Maisie Knew*, the Novel and the Movie", *Letterature d'America*, 171-172, 2018, pp. 117-47.

LA LETTERATURA PER L'INFANZIA

Piccole donne crescono: *gender* e letteratura per l'infanzia

*Sabrina Vellucci**

Let us renounce the effort to reconcile these two irreconcilable things – art and young girls.
George Moore, *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals*

Il "pianeta delle ragazzine" è un pianeta roccioso, aguzzo, con vasti deserti.
Antonio Faeti, *Ronja e le altre*

Nonostante le dichiarazioni d'intento degli autori, che spesso nelle prefazioni definivano i loro romanzi destinati "ai fanciulli e alle fanciulle", negli anni successivi alla Guerra civile si afferma negli Stati Uniti una letteratura per adolescenti in cui le prerogative di *gender* diventano costitutive della definizione del genere letterario stesso.[1] Tale stretta relazione, eredità dell'Inghilterra vittoriana, era effetto della nota tendenza a dividere i sessi in "sfere separate". Di conseguenza, laddove si reputava opportuno introdurre i ragazzi alle cose del mondo, alle fanciulle si prescriveva protezione da ogni ombra che potesse corromperne l'innocenza. In base a tale teoria, che eserciterà una presa durevole sulla cultura (bianca e *middle-class*) statunitense esacerbando la polarizzazione dei modelli pedagogici, i primi erano liberi di leggere quello che preferivano, mentre era acceso il dibattito sulle letture più adatte alle seconde. Se, come ha osservato Philippe Ariès, l'infanzia è stata tradizionalmente depositaria di pratiche obsolete, la cultura delle ragazzine del diciannovesimo secolo, meno dinamica, meno tecnologica e meno avvezza a preoccupazioni di tipo evolutivo (che erano tutte focalizzate sulla corretta formazione dei futuri uomini della nazione), rappresenta, per molti aspetti, l'epitome di quel fenomeno.

Oltre alle politiche educative, le strategie editoriali che nello stesso periodo si stavano perfezionando ebbero un ruolo determinante nella differenziazione del pubblico: alla nascita del *girls' book* contribuì l'iniziativa di Thomas Niles, socio del-

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1. Sulla connessione tra "gender" e "genre" nel diciannovesimo secolo, si veda Virginia Holly Blackford, *Out of This World: Why Literature Matters to Girls*, Teachers College Press, New York-London 2004, pp. 57 e sgg.

la casa editrice Roberts Brothers di Boston, il quale, nel settembre del 1867, chiese a Louisa May Alcott di scrivere una "girls' story" – un nuovo genere in cui narrare la vita di "tipiche ragazze americane in una tipica famiglia americana".[2] La richiesta fu ribadita qualche mese dopo tramite il padre di Louisa, il filosofo e pedagogo Bronson Alcott, che si era rivolto all'editore per la pubblicazione dei propri saggi. Pare che tale insistenza fosse motivata dallo straordinario successo contemporaneo della narrativa realistica e avventurosa per ragazzi di "Oliver Optic".[3] Con fiuto infallibile, Niles aveva intuito che un mercato omologo potesse aprirsi per la letteratura indirizzata al pubblico delle giovanette e, scoraggiando l'inclinazione di Louisa May per il genere fiabesco, spinse la promettente autrice a cimentarsi in quell'esperimento. Con riluttanza, nel maggio 1868, Alcott iniziò a lavorare al libro che avrebbe dato origine alla serie di *Little Women*. A giugno, Alcott spedì a Niles i primi dodici capitoli, che l'editore trovò noiosi – un'impressione condivisa dalla stessa autrice, la quale, tuttavia, non si perse d'animo e continuò a scrivere, convinta della necessità di "libri semplici e vivaci per le ragazzine" e dell'opportunità di supplire a tale mancanza.[4] Il romanzo si rivelò, come è noto, un bestseller e agì da spartiacque nella lunga carriera della scrittrice: progressivamente sottoposta alle pressioni degli editori e del pubblico, Alcott avrebbe ceduto alle richieste del mercato dedicandosi quasi esclusivamente alla letteratura per ragazzi, un genere per il quale affermava di non avere inclinazione e da cui non traeva gratificazione in quanto autrice.

Una volta scoperta la redditività dei prodotti specializzati in funzione del sesso – e, in maniera crescente, dell'età – del lettore, le case editrici iniziarono ad adottare politiche sempre più mirate. Benché le ragazzine leggessero volentieri i libri destinati ai loro fratelli, assai di rado si verificava il contrario: la possibilità di segmentare la produzione letteraria, escludendo lettori potenziali, presumeva l'esistenza di un vasto mercato editoriale e di condizioni economiche favorevoli. Fu la constatazione che le vendite dei libri per l'infanzia non avevano subito flessioni significative nel periodo bellico a spingere gli editori ad aumentare gli investimenti in quella fascia di mercato. Contestualmente si affinarono le tecniche per tenere vivo il desiderio di nuove storie nel giovane pubblico, il cui soddisfacimento avrebbe dato luogo alla produzione su larga scala di questa letteratura. Si consolida allora la strategia delle pubblicazioni in serie, una pratica specialmente adatta ai li-

2. Cit. in Norma Johnston, *Louisa May: The World and Works of Louisa May Alcott*, Beech Tree Books, New York 1995, p. 168. Ove non altrimenti specificato, nei riferimenti bibliografici la traduzione italiana dei testi citati è di chi scrive.

3. Pseudonimo del reverendo William Taylor Adams (1822-1897), curatore del celebre *Oliver Optic's Magazine* (1867-1875) e prolifico autore di romanzi e racconti che fecero registrare vendite senza precedenti – tra questi *The Boat Club, or The Bunkers of Rippleton: A Tale for Boys* (1855) diede il via alla *Boat Club Series*, una delle più popolari dell'autore. Si veda Sarah Wadsworth, *Louisa May Alcott, William T. Adams, and the Rise of Gender-Specific Series Books*, "The Lion and the Unicorn", XXV, 1 (2001), pp. 17-46.

4. Cit. in Elaine Showalter, *Introduction*, in Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*, Penguin, New York 1989, p. xvii.

bri per ragazzi, che essendo acquistati dagli adulti necessitavano di una immediata riconoscibilità.

L'ambientazione domestica unita alla forte vena didattica ed edificante che fino a quel momento avevano caratterizzato la narrativa per l'infanzia rimasero, in parte, prerogative della letteratura per giovanette, dalla quale era esclusa di regola la componente avventurosa e del divertimento. Basti pensare al successo della serie *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867-1905) di Martha Finley, ambientata in una piantagione del Sud nel periodo postbellico e imperniata su valori rigidamente conservatori. L'eponima protagonista incarna il tipo della "Good Good Girl" vittoriana, la "bambina senza macchia […] la cara ragazza buona, bionda, asessuale, dea della *nursery* o dell'orfanotrofio",[5] nonché, da adulta (la serie comprende ventotto volumi che seguono le vicende di Elsie dall'età di sette anni fino alla vecchiaia), il vieto modello della "True Woman", arrendevole e piena di abnegazione.

Il *boys' book*[6] sarebbe nato proprio in contrapposizione alla pedanteria di questo genere di testi, come fuga dalla domesticità: sia Thomas Bailey Aldrich (consideratone l'iniziatore) sia Mark Twain, autori, rispettivamente, di *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1869) e *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), scrivevano contro la dicotomia "Good Boy / Bad Boy" della letteratura vittoriana. Twain dichiarò più volte l'intenzione di parodiare i testi noiosamente moraleggianti di quella tradizione e scrisse storie in cui la convenzione del lieto fine, che premiava i ragazzini buoni, era invertita.

La liberazione dei ragazzini nei mondi fittizi della narrativa a essi dedicata, dove gli adulti appaiono inesorabilmente antagonisti, lasciò indietro le compagne di lettura. La popolare espressione "boys will be boys" non poteva avere equivalenti per le ragazzine, incoraggiate ad assumere atteggiamenti "adulti" e responsabili all'avvento della pubertà e a leggere testi che perlopiù presentavano esempi mirati ad addestrarle al ruolo cui erano destinate in virtù del potere di "influenza" morale che avrebbero acquisito. Perciò, anche quando scrittori ed editori intravidero le potenzialità di una letteratura d'evasione per ragazze (cui si giunse solo sul finire del secolo), non ne incoraggiarono la produzione. D'altra parte, tale possibilità pareva estranea a una cultura ancora profondamente pervasa dall'ideologia evangelico-provvidenziale del periodo prebellico – un complesso di discorsi indagato di recente anche attraverso la storia materiale dei giochi praticati dai fanciulli dell'epoca, che testimonia il doppio status delle ragazzine, rappresentate al contempo come eternamente infantili e prematuramente adulte.[7]

5. Leslie Fiedler, *Amore e morte nel romanzo americano*, Longanesi, Milano 1983, pp. 289-291.

6. La codificazione del *boys' book* è stata attribuita a William D. Howells, il quale, in una recensione al libro di Aldrich, scrisse: "sembra che nessun altro abbia pensato di raccontare la storia della vita di un ragazzo con un desiderio altrettanto grande di far vedere come è e non di insegnare come dovrebbe essere" ("Atlantic Monthly", January 1870, p. 124, cit. in John W. Crowley, *Little Women and the Boy-Book*, "New England Quarterly", LVIII, 3 (Settembre 1985), p. 385).

7. Si veda per esempio, Melanie Dawson, *The Miniaturizing of Girlhood: Nineteenth-Century Playtime and Gendered Theories of Development*, in Caroline F. Levander e Carol J. Singley, a cura di, *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2003, pp. 63-84.

In questa prospettiva, se non fu Louisa May Alcott a "inventare" il *girls' book*, di sicuro la scrittrice ebbe il merito di "ri-generare" una forma letteraria di matrice essenzialmente prescrittiva e religiosa (persino la fortunata serie *Gypsy Breynton* [1866-67], di Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, ancorché distintamente innovativa, grazie soprattutto alla presenza di un'antesignana, avvincente protagonista *tomboy*, era stata commissionata dalla Massachussetts Sabbath Society, che produceva testi per le "Sunday schools"). Distaccandosi da quel filone, del quale critica il carattere lacrimoso e moraleggiante, *Little Women* dà vita a una narrazione realistica, caratterizzata da accenti sia comici sia drammatici, che conferiscono alle storie una vivacità inconsueta, e destinata a diventare lo standard della letteratura per giovanette. Il soggetto dell'adolescenza femminile si rivelerà non solo una miniera d'oro per l'autrice in cerca di fama e denaro, ma anche uno strumento utile a dare voce ai dibattiti contemporanei sulla (ri)definizione del "femminile". Soprattutto nel primo volume della serie (cui seguiranno *Little Men* e *Jo's Boys*), il discorso sull'adolescenza è sviluppato insieme al tema della vocazione e della formazione dell'identità della scrittrice. I conflitti della protagonista Josephine March rispetto al ruolo di "piccola donna" trovano una corrispondenza nelle battaglie letterarie per la ricerca del suo "vero stile", tematizzando in maniera autoreferenziale i processi di riconfigurazione del genere letterario.

Come i romanzi di Alcott, anche quelli di Susan Coolidge, autrice della popolare "Serie di Katy", produssero un relativo, temporaneo, affrancamento del *girls' book* dalla trama domestico-sentimental-edificante. Pubblicato nel 1872, *What Katy Did* fu egualmente sollecitato da Thomas Niles per l'editore Roberts Brothers. Al primo volume ne seguirono altri quattro, *What Katy Did at School* (1873), *What Katy Did Next* (1886), *Clover* (1888) e *In the High Valley* (1891), ma è soprattutto ai primi tre che la serie deve la sua fama. *What Katy Did* fu da molti considerato un epigono del celeberrimo testo alcottiano probabilmente perché la schiettezza e le debolezze caratteriali di Jo, che avevano fatto affezionare tanti lettori, si ritrovano nel personaggio di Katy, con la quale molte ragazzine s'identificavano. Il romanzo riscuote un'immediata popolarità anche in Inghilterra, dove "The Independent" definisce Susan Coolidge la "nuova Alcott" e la serie ha maggiore fortuna che negli Stati Uniti.

Le innovazioni introdotte in questi testi non potevano, tuttavia, annullare l'ineludibile componente didattica e normativa, funzionale al ruolo "pubblico" e tuttavia vincolato che le autrici si erano ritagliate, dal momento che l'attività di scrittura delle donne delle classi medie era ritenuta accettabile solo se giustificata da intenti di utilità e di educazione ai doveri morali associati alla sfera domestica. I molteplici livelli di esclusione rilevati nella ricezione critica della letteratura per l'infanzia – tali da far reclamare la necessità di riferirsi a parametri diversi nel valutarne i testi – tendono perciò a complicarsi quando si passi a considerare il *girls' book*, a lungo ritenuto un genere marginale, "inconciliabile" con qualunque aspirazione "artistica", poiché scritto da donne (quelle "scribbling women" che tanto infastidivano Nathaniel Hawthorne), rivolto a un pubblico giovane e per giunta di sesso femminile (quindi sprovvisto degli strumenti adatti ad apprezzare i valori e lo stile della grande letteratura, particolarmente "impressionabile" e privo di senso critico), e determinato, pressoché invariabilmente, da fattori di tipo economico.

La scarsa stima di cui godevano le autrici dei bestseller di metà Ottocento è sta-

ta spesso ricondotta allo sprone commerciale che presiedeva, per molte di loro, alla decisione di dedicarsi alla professione della scrittura. Un elemento che appare particolarmente significativo nel caso della letteratura per giovanette. Già nel 1827 Lydia Maria Child affermava: "I libri per l'infanzia sono i più redditizi, e […] io sono americana abbastanza da preferire il denaro alla fama letteraria".[8] Come si è visto, il denaro fu sempre al centro delle preoccupazioni di Louisa May Alcott, che dichiarava di scrivere "spinta dalla necessità più che dall'ispirazione".[9] Tra i motivi che indussero Sarah Chauncey Woolsey a intraprendere la carriera letteraria, all'età relativamente avanzata di trentacinque anni, con lo pseudonimo di "Susan Coolidge" (per il quale manifesterà in seguito una decisa insofferenza), vi fu la necessità di provvedere al sostentamento della famiglia dopo la morte del padre. Coolidge scelse di non pubblicare i libri per fanciulle sotto il proprio nome probabilmente a causa dei suoi natali in una famiglia dalla consolidata tradizione accademica (tra gli antenati di Sarah vi erano Jonathan Edwards e Theodore Dwight, mentre un suo zio, Theodore Dwight Woolsey, fu rettore dell'Università di Yale dal 1846 al 1871), che le imponevano di evitare la pratica di un genere così poco prestigioso. L'autrice decise infatti di dare alle stampe con il proprio nome quelle che riteneva le opere serie, fra cui i tre volumi di poesie, *Verses* (1880), *A Few More Verses* (1889), *Last Verses* (1906), pubblicato postumo, e l'edizione di *The Letters of Jane Austen* (1892). Anche nel caso di Elizabeth Stuart Phelps la scelta di dedicarsi alla letteratura per ragazzine fu determinata da motivi economici, ovvero dal desiderio di emanciparsi dall'atmosfera opprimente di Andover, la cittadina universitaria culla del cristianesimo evangelico ortodosso del New England dove suo padre insegnava teologia. Quando era ancora una scrittrice in erba Phelps praticò con assiduità il filone narrativo didattico-edificante delle "Sunday schools", per il quale in seguito dichiarò di non avere mai posseduto alcuna inclinazione.[10] Non appena le condizioni finanziarie glielo consentirono – quando, nel 1868, all'età di ventiquattro anni, pubblicò *The Gates Ajar*, che vendette oltre duecentomila copie ed è tradotto in francese, olandese, tedesco e italiano – Phelps si dedicò alla letteratura "adulta".

All'interno del declassato genere della letteratura giovanile, insomma, si stavano delineando precise distinzioni, al punto che, per esempio, autori già noti non disdegnavano di scrivere occasionalmente per il giovane pubblico maschile, mentre alla letteratura per ragazzine non era concesso tale privilegio e chi poteva sceglieva di abbandonarne la pratica quanto prima possibile. I testi fondativi di questo (sotto)genere sembrano essere nati per caso, quasi a dispetto delle stesse autrici. La poco lusinghiera reputazione che ha accompagnato la letteratura per fanciulle sin dal momento della sua affermazione è attestata dalla definizione che ne diede il critico

8. Cit. in Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 1994, p. 66.

9. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy e Madeleine Stern, a cura di, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*, The University of Georgia Press, Athens 1995, p. 118.

10. Si veda Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters From a Life*, James Clarke & Co., London 1897, p. 81.

britannico Edward J. Salmon, autore di *Juvenile Literature As It Is* (1888), forse il primo volume interamente dedicato alla letteratura per l'infanzia angloamericana: "La letteratura per giovanette svolge una funzione molto utile. Grazie a essa le fanciulle possono leggere storie non troppo infantili e, al contempo, rimanere al riparo dall'influenza di romanzi che dovrebbero essere letti solo da persone capaci di discernimento".[11] Come potevano, dunque, le autrici che si cimentarono in questo genere non ambire a distinguersi nel campo della letteratura "adulta", o non ritenere la produzione per ragazzine solo un utile, spesso necessario, mezzo di sostentamento?

Nel canone del diciannovesimo secolo erano peraltro non di rado inclusi romanzi per ragazzi, ma quando si afferma il *girls' book*, negli anni Sessanta dell'Ottocento, il processo di separazione tra cultura alta e cultura popolare – e tra letteratura adulta e letteratura per l'infanzia – era avviato, e avere accesso a entrambi i livelli stava diventando sempre più difficile. Il caso di Alcott è esemplare: se nella prima fase della sua carriera l'autrice riusciva a pubblicare sia sul "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper" sia sul prestigioso "Atlantic Monthly", negli anni successivi le sue opere non apparvero più sul secondo, benché questo continuasse a recensirle (non senza qualche impaccio, che, tuttavia, non era avvertito nel caso del *boys' book*, verso cui William D. Howells non fu avaro di lodi).

Di pari passo con la crescente compartimentazione dei generi letterari, nella seconda metà del diciannovesimo secolo una spinta estetizzante, che promuoveva il romanzo a forma d'arte, indusse autori come Henry James e George Moore a definire inadatte al giovane pubblico femminile le proprie opere, che riguardavano "fatti della vita da cui costoro dovevano essere 'protette'" e presentavano una inerente complessità che esigeva "non solo la maturità ma anche la capacità critica prerogativa di chi possiede un'istruzione superiore".[12] Quasi a sancire tale segregazione, e rispecchiando il paternalismo di queste posizioni, nella recensione di *Moods* (1864), rara incursione di Alcott nel romanzo di argomento adulto (oltre a *Work* [1873]), James rimprovera all'autrice di ignorare la problematicità della natura umana e di essere per questo inadeguata a trattare le grandi passioni.[13] In seguito, invece, James stronca un romanzo per ragazzi di Alcott, *Eight Cousins; or the Aunt Hill* (1875), a causa della personalità troppo articolata della protagonista, una ragazzina precoce e irriverente che, secondo l'autore, rende il testo poco adatto a educare il pubblico giovane.[14] Ciò che era apprezzato in una narrazione seria non poteva più essere accettato in un libro per ragazzi. La critica bifronte di James segnala che

11. Cit. in Shirley Foster e Judy Simons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of 'Classic' Stories for Girls*, Macmillan, London 1995, p. 1.

12. Felicity A. Hughes, *Children's Literature: Theory and Practice*, "ELH", 45 (1978), pp. 542-61, cit. in Mavis Reimer, *"These two irreconcilable things – art and young girls": The Case of the Girls' School Story*, in Beverly Lyon Clark e Margaret Higonnet, a cura di, *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys: Gender in Children's Literature and Culture*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1999, p. 40.

13. Henry James, *Miss Alcott's "Moods"*, "North American", 101 (July 1865), in Louisa May Alcott, *Mutevoli umori*, trad. e cura di Daniela Daniele, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1995, p. 246.

14. Henry James, recensione di Louisa May Alcott, *Eight Cousins; or the Aunt Hill*, "The Nation", 21 (14 Oct. 1875), cit. in Tessa Hadley, *What Maisie Knew: Elders and Betters and Henry James*, "English", 46 (1997), p. 215.

le barriere tra la narrativa adulta e quella infantile, così come quelle fra maschile e femminile, si erano consolidate.

Le categorie delle donne e delle adolescenti (alle quali del resto era ancora generalmente preclusa l'istruzione superiore di livello accademico) iniziarono così a essere inglobate nella composita figura della "giovanetta", che venne a incarnare l'antitesi della letterarietà. Al volgere del secolo i guardiani del gusto sarebbero divenuti ancora meno disposti a trattare seriamente la letteratura giovanile, e in particolare quella scritta da donne; e se alla fine dell'Ottocento Louisa May Alcott e Harriet Beecher Stowe erano le uniche sopravvissute al processo di selezione del canone, all'inizio del Novecento anch'esse ne sarebbero state estromesse.[15]

I giudizi sul valore letterario erano poi complicati da pregiudizi di casta. In una società che si autodefiniva priva di classi, dove la lingua costituiva uno dei pochi segni di distinzione, le espressioni *slang* impiegate da una scrittrice come Alcott contribuivano al disconoscimento delle qualità letterarie della sua opera – anche se, qualche anno dopo, la creazione di un "vernacolo americano" avrebbe conferito a Mark Twain la dignità di autore "classico".[16] Nemmeno il celebrato realismo di *Little Women* è stato immune da banalizzazioni, visto che l'ispirazione autobiografica dell'opera ha indotto alcuni critici a decretare la vita dell'autrice più interessante della sua arte, sminuendo le qualità della sua scrittura – un luogo comune spesso associato alla letteratura per ragazzine, la cui sostanza autobiografica era frequentemente sottolineata dalle stesse autrici per prevenire gli atteggiamenti censori, retaggio del New England puritano, ancora diffusi verso i testi di finzione, specie se rivolti al pubblico giovane.

Alla stabile prominenza di *Little Women* nell'immaginario comune non ha sempre corrisposto, dunque, un equivalente consenso critico. Tra la fine dell'Ottocento e i primi decenni del Novecento quasi tutte le pubblicazioni riguardanti l'autrice apparvero in contesti "popolari", mentre, almeno fino agli anni Quaranta, non c'è traccia di Alcott sulle riviste letterarie di stampo accademico. Negli anni Venti e Trenta, l'ormai consolidato *establishment* critico-letterario annoverava generalmente l'opera dell'autrice nella categoria deteriore del sentimentalismo. Sono rappresentative in tal senso le secche censure di F. Scott Fitzgerald, che in *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* fa definire le sorelle March "sciocche femminucce", e di Ernest Hemingway, che (senza avere letto il libro, pare) si rivolse a Lavinia Russ dicendo: "Sei così radiosa e piena di infantile spensieratezza che dovresti portare con te *Piccole donne*".[17] Ancora negli anni Cinquanta, in saggi destinati a divenire dei classici, quali *The American Adam* di R. W. B. Lewis o *The American Novel and Its Tradition* di Richard Chase, non ci sono riferimenti ad Alcott. Si dovranno attendere gli anni Sessanta e Settanta perché l'interesse nei confronti dell'autrice riaffiori gradatamente.

Come nel caso di Alcott e della sua opera, la scarsa fortuna critica del *girls' book*

15. Si veda Beverly Lyon Clark, *The Case of the Girls' Book, in Kiddie Lit: The Cultural Construction of Children's Literature in America*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 2003, p. 116.

16. Ivi, pp. 114-15.

17. Cit. in ivi, p. 107.

è proseguita fino agli ultimi decenni del ventesimo secolo, quando alcune studiose hanno cominciato a riflettere sul disinteresse e sui pregiudizi intorno ai libri per ragazzine, diffusi persino nei critici più attenti alla componente ideologica delle teorie estetiche e nelle aree che indagano la produzione culturale del cosiddetto margine. Nei primi anni Novanta Beverly Lyon Clark evidenziava "la scomoda relazione tra la teoria femminista e la critica della letteratura giovanile", e rifletteva sulla svalutazione del concetto di infanzia nella cultura contemporanea, che sarebbe all'origine dell'"ansia d'immaturità" di molte autrici (e studiose) e della conseguente disattenzione nei confronti del genere: "[le autrici] temono che la creazione letteraria possa essere associata alla procreazione e che, insieme al frutto della procreazione, loro stesse possano essere ritenute infantili".[18] L'ambivalenza del pensiero femminista nei confronti della letteratura per l'infanzia avrebbe dunque a che fare con un atteggiamento conflittuale rispetto alla maternità, e con la difficoltà di riconoscere una soggettività autonoma al/la bambino/a e quindi di assumerne la prospettiva: "Siamo così adulto-centrici che gli unici bambini che noi critici riusciamo a considerare siamo noi stessi".[19] Il fatto che ognuno sia stato bambino favorisce, poi, la tendenza a ritenere ovvia la comprensione di ciò che significhi trovarsi in tale posizione. Perciò "il bambino" è spesso guardato nella prospettiva dell'adulto che diventerà, oppure in funzione delle sue relazioni parentali – della maternità, in particolare – e difficilmente è preso in considerazione in sé e per sé. A questo mancato riconoscimento è altresì riconducibile una contraddizione fondamentale della letteratura per ragazzi, una contraddizione quasi mai esplicitata, che Jacqueline Rose individua nella "impossibile relazione" tra adulti e bambini sulla quale tale letteratura sarebbe costruita:

> La letteratura per l'infanzia istituisce un mondo in cui lo scrittore viene prima (in quanto autore, creatore, mittente) e il bambino viene dopo (in quanto lettore, prodotto, destinatario), ma dove nessuno dei due entra nello spazio intermedio. Non esiste, in tal senso, un altro corpus letterario basato così apertamente su una differenza inconfessata, quasi una spaccatura, fra autore e destinatario.[20]

A dispetto delle chiare parentele e analogie tra scrittura femminile e libri per bambini (la maggior parte dei quali oltre a essere scritti sono anche, almeno dal secolo scorso, prevalentemente curati, studiati e acquistati da donne), la teoria femminista – sia di stampo psicoanalitico sia culturale o storico-sociale – stenta, in un primo momento, a estendere i parametri della ricerca oltre le categorie di *gender*, classe, etnicità, orientamento sessuale fino a includere quella di *età*. Così, per esempio, in uno degli studi a tutt'oggi più esaustivi sul romanzo domestico statunitense di

18. Beverly Lyon Clark, *Fairy Godmothers or Wicked Stepmothers? The Uneasy Relationship of Feminist Theory and Children's Criticism*, "Children's Literature Association Quarterly", 18 (1993-94), p. 171.

19. Ivi, p. 172.

20. Jaqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Macmillan, London 1994, pp. 1-2.

metà Ottocento, Nina Baym considera la letteratura per fanciulle una sorta di corruzione del genere, che verrà soppiantato definitivamente a partire dal 1870: "La storia dell'eroismo femminile diventa allora uno strumento didattico per ragazzine […] distruggendo le tensioni creative che avevano prodotto la narrativa domestica del decennio 1850". Anche se, prosegue Baym, "[t]ra gli epigoni del romanzo domestico *Piccole donne* è l'opera più riuscita tecnicamente, […] si tratta pur sempre di un libro per l'infanzia".[21] Analogamente, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert e Susan Gubar annoverano la letteratura per l'infanzia tra i "generi minori", spesso praticati dalle autrici che riuscivano così a eludere la reclusione in un silenzio angelicato: "Date tali deboli soluzioni a ciò che appare essere stato un problema insormontabile, come poteva esistere una grande tradizione letteraria delle donne?".[22] Là dove si dimostra l'esistenza di una importante tradizione di scrittura femminile ottocentesca, come in questo fondamentale studio, alla letteratura per l'infanzia non è concesso di farne parte. Ancora a proposito della letteratura popolare statunitense di metà Ottocento, Jane Tompkins sostiene la necessità di considerare il lavoro culturale svolto dai testi, i quali dovrebbero essere letti come tentativi di ridefinizione dell'ordine sociale, esempi delle modalità in cui una cultura riflette su se stessa articolando e proponendo soluzioni ai problemi caratteristici del periodo. Tuttavia la studiosa sembra non concedere pari dignità alla letteratura giovanile. Deplorando la scarsa considerazione riservata a *The Last of the Mohicans*, afferma che questo, "come i romanzi di Warner e Stowe, ha finito con l'essere ritenuto più adatto ai ragazzi che agli adulti".[23] Eppure, il metodo proposto da Tompkins, che richiede la modifica dei criteri di valutazione dei requisiti formali di un'opera, si presta idealmente a uno studio del *girls' book*, le cui sorti critiche presentano affinità con i bestseller di metà Ottocento.

I numerosi studi dedicati alla scrittura femminile ottocentesca trascurano, insomma, la letteratura per l'infanzia e il ruolo che essa esercitò nella cultura contemporanea, riflettendo la tendenza della critica femminista *mainstream* (bianca) a ignorare ciò che non riesce a fare proprio.[24] Lacuna, questa, che denota lo statuto singolare del genere – l'unico nel quale autori e critici non appartengono di regola al pubblico di lettori presunto dal testo – e, per estensione, del *girls' book*, al quale ora iniziano a essere riconosciute potenzialità euristiche rispetto a questioni quali la definizione dei livelli di cultura, la costruzione dell'infanzia e quella del lettore attraverso il testo o del consumatore attraverso il prodotto, i meccanismi di formazione del canone.[25]

Tra le prime a sostenere le "buone ragioni" per applicare la teoria femminista

21. Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1978, p. 296.

22. Sandra M. Gilbert e Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* [1979], Yale University Press, New Haven 2000, p. 72.

23. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, Oxford University Press, New York 1985, p. XII.

24. Clark e Higonnet, *Girls, Boys, Books, Toys*, cit., p. 5.

25. Si vedano ivi, p. 1, e Clark, *Kiddie Lit*, cit.

alla letteratura per l'infanzia, Lissa Paul, alla fine degli anni Ottanta, osservava che sia la letteratura femminile sia la letteratura per ragazzi occupano una posizione periferica nell'ottica delle istituzioni letterarie ed educative, e identificava il terreno comune a entrambe nella condivisione di temi e motivi (come la scena domestica e circoscritta dell'azione) e nell'adozione di un linguaggio che denota l'alterità caratteristica dell'esperienza delle donne e dei bambini nelle società patriarcali.[26] A distanza di quasi due decenni dal seminale *Enigma Variations*, Paul ritiene la teoria femminista un patrimonio acquisito della critica della letteratura dell'infanzia, riconoscibile soprattutto nell'applicazione dei parametri della "revisione" e della "riscoperta" di testi dimenticati, grazie al disvelamento di modelli sessuati attraverso i quali le studiose hanno iniziato a collocare le origini delle costruzioni ideologiche del *gender*.[27] È quest'ultimo un processo in particolar modo evidente nel periodo a cavallo tra la fine dell'Ottocento e l'inizio del Novecento, quando i valori del colonialismo e del patriarcato si stavano attivamente inscrivendo nella cultura e la crescente polarizzazione dei generi, funzionale alla propagazione di quei discorsi (per cui il femminile, insieme all'infanzia, era associato all'"altro" primitivo, bisognoso di guida), induceva a considerare elementi quali l'effeminatezza maschile e la mascolinità femminile sintomi di degenerazione della società.

Nell'ambito della teoria femminista, la ricezione critica del *girls' book* degli ultimi tre decenni ha avuto nondimeno una storia complessa e mutevole. Gli orientamenti hanno oscillato da una concezione deterministica del suo potere di influenza sulle menti impressionabili delle fanciulle a letture attente ai messaggi sovversivi celati nel sottotesto e alle possibili interpretazioni che lettrici "resistenti" avrebbero potuto mettere in atto, fino alle interpretazioni legate alla teoria della ricezione, che attribuiscono a chi legge la capacità di ricostruire il testo a proprio piacimento ignorando del tutto gli intenti autoriali.

L'importante ruolo delle giovani fruitrici del testo letterario è stato evidenziato, per esempio, da Virginia Blackford, che ha analizzato un campione di adolescenti riscontrando inaspettate identificazioni con i personaggi e sofisticate competenze estetiche.[28] In particolare, l'indagine ha messo in luce come le adolescenti tendano spesso a immedesimarsi con la figura del narratore, manifestando una forte consapevolezza delle regole dei generi letterari e una spiccata propensione ad adottare una prospettiva onnisciente e fluttuante attraverso i vari punti di vista, a prescindere dalle categorie di identità. Considerazioni che possono valere ancor più per la ricezione del *girls' book* ottocentesco, nel quale la voce narrante esercita un forte controllo sulla narrazione e stabilisce un rapporto confidenziale con la lettrice per guidarla nell'interpretazione dei fatti. L'educazione alla lettura, realizzata nei frequenti "a parte" che interrompono il corso delle vicende, richiama l'attenzione sugli elementi costitutivi della narrazione da una prospettiva esterna a es-

26. Lissa Paul, *Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows About Children's Literature*, "Signal", 54 (settembre 1987), p. 187.

27. Lissa Paul, *Feminism Revisited*, in Peter Hunt, a cura di, *Understanding Children's Literature*, Routledge, London-New York 2005, pp. 114-27.

28. Blackford, *Out of This World*, cit.

sa. Tale caratteristica impedisce l'identificazione totale con i personaggi e le vicende, mettendo di fatto in discussione il processo di accomodamento ai valori di cui la stessa voce narrante dovrebbe farsi promotrice. Al contempo, evidenziando la natura dialogica del testo, questa istanza narrativa induce a pensare alla creazione dell'opera come a qualcosa che avviene all'interno di una comunità, secondo una logica di interrelazione fra autrice e lettrici.[29]

Sul fronte opposto, tra le fautrici dell'interpretazione del *girls' book* come infallibile strumento di propagazione dell'ideologia egemone, Deborah O'Keefe osserva che la trama spesso racconta il processo attraverso cui la protagonista, inizialmente indipendente e attiva, si trasforma in una creatura remissiva, dipendente e rispettosa delle convenzioni. Ovvero l'immagine stereotipica dell'"eroina orizzontale", passiva e docile nella sua magnifica immobilità, che ha incantato generazioni di lettrici.[30] I personaggi, le trame e i temi dei libri per ragazze in cui è promosso l'ideale della passività femminile avrebbero pertanto influito negativamente su schiere di lettrici, incoraggiandole a emulare quel modello. Sulla stessa linea di pensiero, Deirdre Baker sostiene che i libri molto amati nell'infanzia possono rivelarsi a posteriori "amici infidi" i cui effetti dannosi, derivanti dall'accettazione incondizionata della intrinseca giustezza del loro messaggio, esercitano una presa duratura sul lettore: posto preminente in questa tipologia è occupato da testi quali *Little Women* e *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) della canadese L. M. Montgomery, in cui entrambe le protagoniste rinuncerebbero alle proprie aspirazioni letterarie per rientrare nell'alveo della domesticità,[31] trasformando il *Künstlerroman* in una storia convenzionale di iniziazione alla femminilità adulta *middle-class*.

Al pari di Jo March e Anne Shirley, diversi personaggi dei libri per fanciulle appaiono all'inizio contraddistinti dalla vocazione per la scrittura e, in generale, da una spiccata attitudine per le attività legate alla parola, così come dalla propensione a vivere in mondi di fantasia. Katy Carr, in *What Katy Did*, è autrice di racconti dai titoli fantasiosi e dalle vicende tanto avvincenti quanto improbabili, che dopo essere stati definiti "spazzatura" dalla zia vengono letteralmente messi al rogo (un altro motivo ricorrente dei romanzi). Tale censura suscita in un primo tempo il moto di ribellione della scrittrice in erba, ma ben presto la rivolta lascia il posto a un atteggiamento quiescente. In seguito, gli unici testi prodotti da Katy sono biglietti di auguri in rima; nei volumi successivi non vi sarà più alcun cenno alla sua vena letteraria. Nel mettere in scena la rinuncia a perseguire il talento per la scrittura delle protagoniste, storie siffatte illustrerebbero una comune iniziazione alla consapevolezza della propria impotenza, delineando la parabola discendente della protagonista dalla posizione di autore/autorità all'accettazione del ruolo di semplice personaggio.[32] "Ironicamente, le storie che più colpiscono la fantasia sono quelle

29. Si veda Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 1997, p. 123.

30. Deborah O'Keefe, *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Misled by Their Favorite Books*, Continuum, New York 2000, p. 12.

31. Deirdre F. Baker, *When Good Books Go Bad*, "The Horn Book Magazine" (Maggio/Giugno 2006), pp. 279-84.

32. Si veda Gilbert e Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, cit., p. 161.

che avranno maggiori probabilità di produrre effetti insidiosi a posteriori, proprio a causa della loro potenza immaginativa", scrive Baker.[33] Prima di lei, facendo riferimento alla forte valenza ideologica del finale normalizzato di *What Katy Did*, anche Kimberley Reynolds indicava il *girls' book* come principale agente di addestramento ai ruoli di genere. Dotati di una irresistibile forza persuasiva, questi romanzi, basandosi sul presupposto che le lettrici condividano i valori propugnati nel testo, indurrebbero chi legge a desiderare il conformarsi della protagonista alla norma come unica possibilità di risoluzione della crisi innescata dall'intreccio e come condizione necessaria per il lieto fine.[34]

Tali interpretazioni, tuttavia, non prendono in considerazione le capacità critiche delle fruitrici dei testi né la loro abilità nell'attuare strategie di lettura selettiva o "liberatoria", che consentono di serbare nella memoria le porzioni di romanzo più gratificanti per l'immaginazione scartando quelle in cui il personaggio rientra nei canoni tradizionali della caratterizzazione.[35] Anne Scott MacLeod, che pure rintraccia in *Caddie Woodlawn* (1935) – il romanzo di Carol Ryrie Brink ambientato sulla frontiera del Wisconsin negli anni Sessanta dell'Ottocento – il modello di una "sindrome" attraverso cui la ragazzina *tomboy* è trasformata in una compita fanciulla, ritiene il motivo ricorrente dell'invalidità una metafora rivelatrice dell'ambivalenza delle scrittrici. L'illustrazione della rinuncia obbligata alla libertà fisica e immaginativa dell'infanzia, in seguito alla malattia, costituisce di per sé una denuncia degli effetti debilitanti dei codici che regolavano la vita delle donne. Non si può pertanto leggere questi romanzi senza udire "un acuto grido di indignazione […] dietro l'apparenza levigata e corretta".[36]

Di fronte agli ingombranti aspetti normativi del *girls' book*, le studiose non potevano mancare di interrogarsi sulle possibili radici della fascinazione che, nonostante tutto, questo ha esercitato su generazioni di lettrici per oltre un secolo. Così, per spiegare la fama duratura di *Little Women*, Catherine Stimpson ha introdotto il concetto di "paracanone", che, nella valutazione di un testo, rivendica la capacità di suscitare l'affetto e il piacere del lettore a prescindere dalle considerazioni di carattere estetico;[37] strategia che, pur aprendo spazi al "canone" dell'infanzia, reinserisce questa letteratura in una posizione subordinata. Altre studiose si sono soffermate sulle reazioni negative che il finale del romanzo continua a suscitare nei lettori. Il disappunto e la riluttanza a considerare la conclusione un lieto fine – il ma-

33. Baker, *When Good Books Go Bad*, cit., p. 282.

34. Kimberley Reynolds, *Girls Only? Gender and Popular Children's Fiction in Britain, 1880-1910*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London 1990, p. 129.

35. Si veda, a questo proposito, Angela E. Hubler, *Can Anne Shirley Help 'Revive Ophelia'? Listening to Girl Readers*, in Sherrie A. Inness, a cura di, *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures*, New York University Press, New York 1998, pp. 266-84.

36. Anne Scott MacLeod, *The Caddie Woodlawn Syndrome: American Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, in Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger et al., *A Century of Childhood, 1820-1920*, The Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum, Rochester 1984, p. 113.

37. Catharine R. Stimpson, *Reading for Love: Canons, Paracanons, and Whistling Jo March* [1990], in Anne K. Phillips e Gregory Eiselein, a cura di, *Little Women*, Norton, New York 2004, pp. 584-99.

trimonio di Jo con il maturo e posato Friedrich Bhaer – dimostrano il potere sovversivo del disegno di Alcott, nel quale sono inscritti elementi capaci di "far detonare" il modello della "piccola donna".[38] Sempre a proposito della condanna da parte di pubblico e critica della scelta del finale, e della rappresentazione di Jo da adulta, Michelle Massé ha prospettato la possibilità che questa sia indotta dalla delusione delle aspettative adolescenziali vissuta dagli stessi lettori.[39]

Puntando l'attenzione sulle contraddizioni interne al testo, queste riletture, frutto dell'influenza del poststrutturalismo e del pensiero femminista francese degli anni Ottanta, hanno sancito la canonicità di *Little Women*, riconoscendo la forza del romanzo nella discordanza tra messaggio esplicito e sottotesto e nella rappresentazione di conflitti culturali centrali per l'epoca, ai quali non è data una piena risoluzione.[40] L'ambivalenza risultante dalla contrapposizione di istanze di accomodamento e istanze di resistenza alla norma, il cui grado di intenzionalità da parte dell'autrice è impossibile stabilire, conferirebbe al romanzo la capacità di dialogare con le generazioni successive. Come già ricordato, la risonanza di *Little Women* è altresì riconducibile alle profonde tensioni metanarrative che lo animano. La rappresentazione di Jo è incentrata sulle attività di scrittrice, drammaturga e attrice attraverso le quali il personaggio mette in scena i propri dilemmi di *gender*. I frequenti richiami al processo di creazione del testo, che rendono esplicita la costruzione della lettrice come soggetto, mettono in luce anche la costruzione del personaggio come attore/autore. Ed è proprio la presenza del personaggio-autore a evidenziare uno scarto rispetto alla tradizione letteraria precedente. A proposito di *Northanger Abbey* (1818), la cui eroina presenta numerose affinità con le protagoniste del *girls' book* ma non procede oltre lo stadio di lettrice, Gilbert e Gubar suggeriscono che "[c]osì come Catherine Morland rimane una lettrice, Austen si presenta come 'semplice' interprete e commentatrice di storie precedenti, mostrando quindi di voler modestamente dimorare in una costruzione narrativa edificata da altri".[41] Le autrici di libri per ragazzine, mai dimentiche del "potere della modestia", paiono mosse invece dal desiderio di divenire architetti dei propri edifici letterari e, attraverso l'esempio dei personaggi, invitano le lettrici a immaginare storie di cui essere protagoniste.

Personaggi dotati dell'insolita capacità di costruire la propria identità sfidando le convenzioni sociali popolano, per esempio, un sottogenere del *girls' book*, il ro-

38. Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, *"Portrait(s) of the Artist": Little Women* [1993], in Phillips e Eiselein, *Little Women*, cit., p. 621; si veda anche Showalter, *Introduction, Little Women*, cit.

39. Michelle A. Massé, *Songs to Aging Children: Louisa May Alcott's March Trilogy*, in Janice M. Alberghene e Beverly Lyon Clark, a cura di, *Little Women and the Feminist Imagination: Criticism, Controversy, Personal Essays*, Garland, New York 1999, p. 325.

40. Si vedano a questo proposito Judith Fetterley, *Little Women: Alcott's Civil War*, "Feminist Studies", V, 2 (Estate 1979), pp. 370-83; Angela Estes e Kathleen M. Lant, *Dismembering the Text: The Horror of Louisa May Alcott's Little Women*, "Children's Literature", 17 (1989), pp. 98-123; Mary Elliott, *Bad Endings and Subversive Middles in Nineteenth-Century Tomboy Narratives and Twentieth-Century Lesbian Pulp Novels*, "Legacy", XV, 1 (1998), pp. 92-97.

41. Gilbert e Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, cit., p. 145.

manzo di ambientazione scolastica, che assume rilevanza nel contesto delle trasformazioni dei modelli di femminilità in atto nella seconda metà dell'Ottocento. Nel *girls' school story* sono altresì evidenti le potenzialità della narrativa per ragazzine di interrogare le teorie della letteratura giovanile contestandone alcuni assiomi. Le storie ambientate nelle "boarding schools", i convitti per fanciulle, lasciano da parte gli intenti moralistici, le connotazioni di classe (l'ambientazione scolastica, avulsa da altri contesti e fondata sulla separazione in base ai gruppi d'età, crea un virtuale livellamento sociale) e i conflitti famigliari. In particolare, questa forma mette in discussione il tema della ricerca da parte del personaggio adolescente di un'identità autonoma, poiché la narrazione verte tipicamente intorno a una nuova cultura fondata su una società di pari, contraddistinta da un vocabolario proprio e da valori condivisi che privilegiano la comunità rispetto al singolo. Con un antecedente significativo in *The Governess; or the Little Female Academy* (1749) di Sarah Fielding, ritenuto il "primo romanzo giovanile inglese",[42] il genere è stato spesso escluso dalle valutazioni critiche, oppure giudicato solo una pallida imitazione del *boys' school story*, che fiorisce in Gran Bretagna con *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) e narra le avventure dei ragazzi nei college. La versione femminile, che si diffonde in un secondo tempo, raggiunge la popolarità con *A World of Girls* (1886) di L. T. Meade e, negli anni Venti e Trenta del Novecento, sarà definitivamente consacrata grazie ad autrici come Angela Brazil. Negli Stati Uniti il genere non riscuote lo stesso successo. Un testo come *What Katy Did at School* (1873) di Susan Coolidge, che segue peraltro di qualche anno la pubblicazione di *Gypsy's Year at the Golden Crescent* (1867) di Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, è considerato una rarità. Proprio a *What Katy Did at School* è stato attribuito il merito di aver innovato la *school story* di matrice britannica, caratterizzata da un tono eminentemente didattico e moraleggiante, e di avere introdotto al di là dell'Atlantico "un tipo di protagonista femminile la cui popolarità non è mai tramontata".[43]

Se nella *school story* per giovanette la trama domestica subisce una cospicua diversione, con *Little Men* (1871), il secondo volume della serie di *Little Women*, Alcott "ri-genera" la versione maschile di questa forma "addomesticandola" ai valori della famiglia, posti a guida di un'istituzione educativa per fanciulli.[44] Una storia per ragazzi scritta da una donna rappresentava un dato inconsueto ma non privo di conseguenze. Clark scrive a questo proposito di "cross-gendering" per indicare il travestitismo letterario dell'autrice, che segnala una profonda destabilizzazione delle categorie di *gender* e di genere letterario; se un'opera come questa "può, in parte, riprodurre l'esistente, confermando lo status quo, […] in essa albergano altresì i germi della sovversione".[45] Sul piano delle convenzioni letterarie, i sovvertimenti di Alcott fanno dialogare la *school story* con il romanzo do-

42. Reimer, *"These two irreconcilable things – art and young girls"*, cit., p. 51.

43. Si veda Amy Cruse, *The Victorians and Their Reading*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1936, p. 236.

44. Beverly Lyon Clark, *Regendering the School-Story: Sassy Sissies and Tattling Tomboys*, Garland, New York 1996.

45. Ivi, p. 20.

mestico in una nuova sintesi dialettica che introduce il termine femminile in un genere dal quale era stato per definizione escluso. Un'irruzione che disloca lo statuto del testo poiché, pur narrando di ragazzini, *Little Men* non appartiene al filone del *boys' book* né a quello della *school story* ma confonde i parametri di entrambi in una nuova forma che combina scuola e famiglia, adulti e bambini, maschile e femminile.

Come i *sequel* di *Little Women*, ambientati entrambi in istituzioni educative ispirate a una pedagogia avanzata, altri *girls' books* coevi appaiono caratterizzati da istanze progressiste di valorizzazione della modernità. È stata osservata, per esempio, la mobilità geografica dei personaggi, i cui spostamenti dalla provincia ai grandi centri, o da Est verso Ovest, non sono, tuttavia, mai definitivi. Nei loro periodici ritorni questi personaggi incarnerebbero una tendenza alla transitività che conduce "avanti e indietro attraverso i confini che separano la campagna dalla città, il regionale dalla modernità urbana, il diciannovesimo secolo dal ventesimo".[46] L'ibridismo delle protagoniste rappresenterebbe allora una forma di resistenza alle istanze di specializzazione del moderno, un tentativo di mantenere la tensione tra i due termini, impedendo che il mondo pastorale dei piccoli centri diventi "l'altro" della vita urbana. Il genere stesso del *girls' book* attua una serie di mediazioni tra moderno e pre-moderno, agricolo e industriale, provinciale e urbano, rivelando le molteplici crescenti implicazioni delle adolescenti con la cultura del consumo, visibili soprattutto in una seconda generazione di opere, quali *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903) di Kate Douglas Wiggin, *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912) di Jean Webster, *Pollyanna* (1913) di Eleanor H. Porter, oltre alle serie dedicate alle "college girls" già popolari alla fine del diciannovesimo secolo.[47]

L'attenzione teorica che gli Stati Uniti e l'Inghilterra hanno riservato allo studio dell'adolescenza anche nell'ambito storico e sociale ha indotto qualche studioso, all'inizio degli anni Novanta, a riflettere sull'"imperialismo accademico" degli *youth studies*[48] e a mettere in luce come la ricerca svolta in paesi quali il Canada, l'Australia, il subcontinente indiano, l'Africa e la stessa Europa fosse giocoforza basata su teorie che, essendo promulgate dal centro del capitalismo occidentale, avevano scarsa rilevanza per la situazione dei giovani appartenenti a contesti politici e culturali diversi. Al contempo si evidenziava come, persino nella diade Stati Uniti-Inghilterra, molte delle teorie e dei modelli ritenuti universalmente validi non fossero applicabili a tutti i giovani.

Nello stesso periodo, numerose indagini hanno documentato la "perdita di sé" delle adolescenti, alla quale concorrono, tra l'altro, le pratiche di un sistema educa-

46. Marjorie Pryse, *"I was country when country wasn't cool": Regionalizing the Modern in Jewett's A Country Doctor*, "American Literary Realism", XXXIV, 3 (Primavera 2002), p. 217.

47. Peter Stoneley, *Consumerism and American Girls' Literature 1860-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2003.

48. Christine Griffin, *Representations of Youth: The Study of Youth and Adolescence in Britain and America*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 4.

tivo che scoraggia l'assertività e la fiducia nelle proprie capacità.[49] Lyn Mikel Brown e Carol Gilligan, per esempio, individuano un fenomeno ricorrente nell'età evolutiva femminile in base al quale bambine schiette e sicure di sé all'età di otto o nove anni si trasformano in adolescenti che, all'età di tredici o quattordici, hanno imparato a mettere a tacere la propria voce in nome dell'accettazione sociale.[50] Il contemporaneo boom di studi sulla *girls'* (o *grrrls'*) *culture* non ha impedito di rilevare, al volgere di quel decennio, una persistente e diffusa tendenza a trascurare le adolescenti. Il numero crescente di lavori sul *girls' book* non ha spodestato *Little Women* dalla posizione di pietra di paragone per lo studio della letteratura giovanile e della scrittura delle donne. Tuttavia, nel momento in cui i *gender studies* si alleano con gli studi culturali e postcoloniali, le interpretazioni del romanzo, da quelle moderatamente revisioniste a quelle più radicali, diventano un punto di partenza per nuovi orientamenti. Non solo gli evidenti limiti della democraticità del testo di Alcott, come della maggior parte dei libri per giovanette dell'epoca (in cui il tema della "razza", per esempio, risulta del tutto assente), ma il riconoscimento della declinazione bianca e *middle-class* di molte analisi hanno determinato la consapevolezza che la definizione di *Little Women* come "*il* mito femminile americano" non è più sostenibile. Il significato dell'opera sarebbe piuttosto da ricercare nella collocazione sociale, nelle convenzioni interpretative e nei bisogni percepiti delle differenti comunità di lettrici (e di lettori):[51] la longevità del romanzo consentirebbe così di osservare permanenze e discontinuità nelle modalità di lettura che scaturiscono, in epoche diverse, dalle distinte appartenenze etniche, sociali, generazionali.

Con il riconoscimento delle analogie nelle dinamiche di potere delle società patriarcali e postcoloniali, la critica ha mirato a liberarsi della prospettiva eurocentrica e *middle-class* per intraprendere un approccio globale e multilingue, in cui si tenda a scomporre la metafora infanzia/primitivo e a includere narrazioni nelle quali *tutte* le adolescenti possano finalmente riconoscersi. All'inizio del ventunesimo secolo, l'interesse per il *girls' book* pare consolidarsi, anche se persino la canonicità di un "classico" come *Little Women* non è ovunque indiscussa; tuttavia, nel campo dell'istruzione universitaria statunitense, per esempio, nonostante l'incremento dei corsi di letteratura per l'infanzia e l'occasionale sdoganamento dello studio dei libri per fanciulle nei dipartimenti di inglese, chi si laurea in Letteratura o in Storia spesso termina gli studi senza avere mai avuto occasione di conoscere le culture delle ragazze degli ultimi due secoli.

49. Mi riferisco a lavori quali: Carol Gilligan e Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1992; Carol Gilligan, Nona Lyons e Trudy Hanmer, a cura di, *Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1990; Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Ballantine Books, New York 1994; American Association of University Women, a cura di, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, AAUW, Washington, DC 1991.

50. Brown e Gilligan, *Meeting at the Crossroads*, cit.

51. Barbara Sicherman, *Reading Little Women: The Many Lives of a Text*, in Phillips e Eiselein, *Little Women*, cit., p. 637.

In Italia, il libro per ragazzine proveniente dagli Stati Uniti è stato accolto da una ricezione circospetta: *Piccole donne* apparve per la prima volta in traduzione nel 1908 e all'epoca l'editore Carabba ritenne opportuno far precedere il testo da un'ampia prefazione "in cui veniva velatamente consigliata una lettura guidata che prevedesse il filtro di un adulto per non lasciare sole le fanciulle di fronte a tematiche così *scottanti*";[52] da quel momento fino al 2006 si contano circa sessanta traduzioni del romanzo. In un panorama segnato dal didascalismo di una visione strettamente pedagogica della letteratura per ragazzi, almeno fino al secondo dopoguerra, e contraddistinto dal carattere sovranazionale del repertorio della letteratura giovanile, Alcott e le sue epigone angloamericane hanno rappresentato un modello per la tradizione italiana dei libri per ragazzine, che ha una storia molto recente. Nel 1989 una tappa importante è segnata dalla nascita della collana mondadoriana Gaia Junior, nella quale spicca l'opera di Bianca Pitzorno con le sue storie avventurose di bambine che "costituiscono ormai un significativo risarcimento nei confronti di un apparato di negazioni da sempre edificato entro le ottiche con cui si raffigura l'infanzia".[53] Ai romanzi di questa autrice "sovversiva" (nella definizione di Alison Lurie[54]), "in grado di rielaborare le astuzie eversive della più sofisticata tradizione ottocentesca", la critica riconosce ormai "un posto nella recente genealogia dei classici".[55]

Come scrive Clark a proposito di *Piccole donne*, c'è da sperare che tali occasionali riconoscimenti non siano funzionali a lasciare intatto "il ghetto della letteratura per l'infanzia" e che, d'altra parte, la crescente attenzione della critica non sia in realtà un segnale del progressivo allontanamento del romanzo dall'immaginario delle ultime generazioni. Con lei possiamo quindi augurarci che i primi tentativi di prendere seriamente in considerazione il capolavoro di Alcott, e il genere del libro per ragazzine, rappresentino "un vero passo avanti per la ricostruzione e la revisione" dell'opera di questa autrice e della letteratura per l'infanzia nel suo complesso.[56]

52. Marina De Rossi, *Processi formativi e narrazione. Identità e progettualità del Sé rileggendo un'autrice del passato: Louisa May Alcott*, CLEUP, Padova 2003, p. 167.

53. Antonio Faeti, *Bianca Pitzorno, Andersen Archivio 1989*, Feguagiskià Studios Edizioni, Genova 1989, cit. in Mirca Casella, *Le voci segrete. Itinerari di iniziazione femminile nell'opera di Bianca Pitzorno*, Mondadori, Milano 2006, p. 57.

54. Alison Lurie, *Don't Tell the Grown-ups: Subversive Children's Literature*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston-Toronto-London 1990.

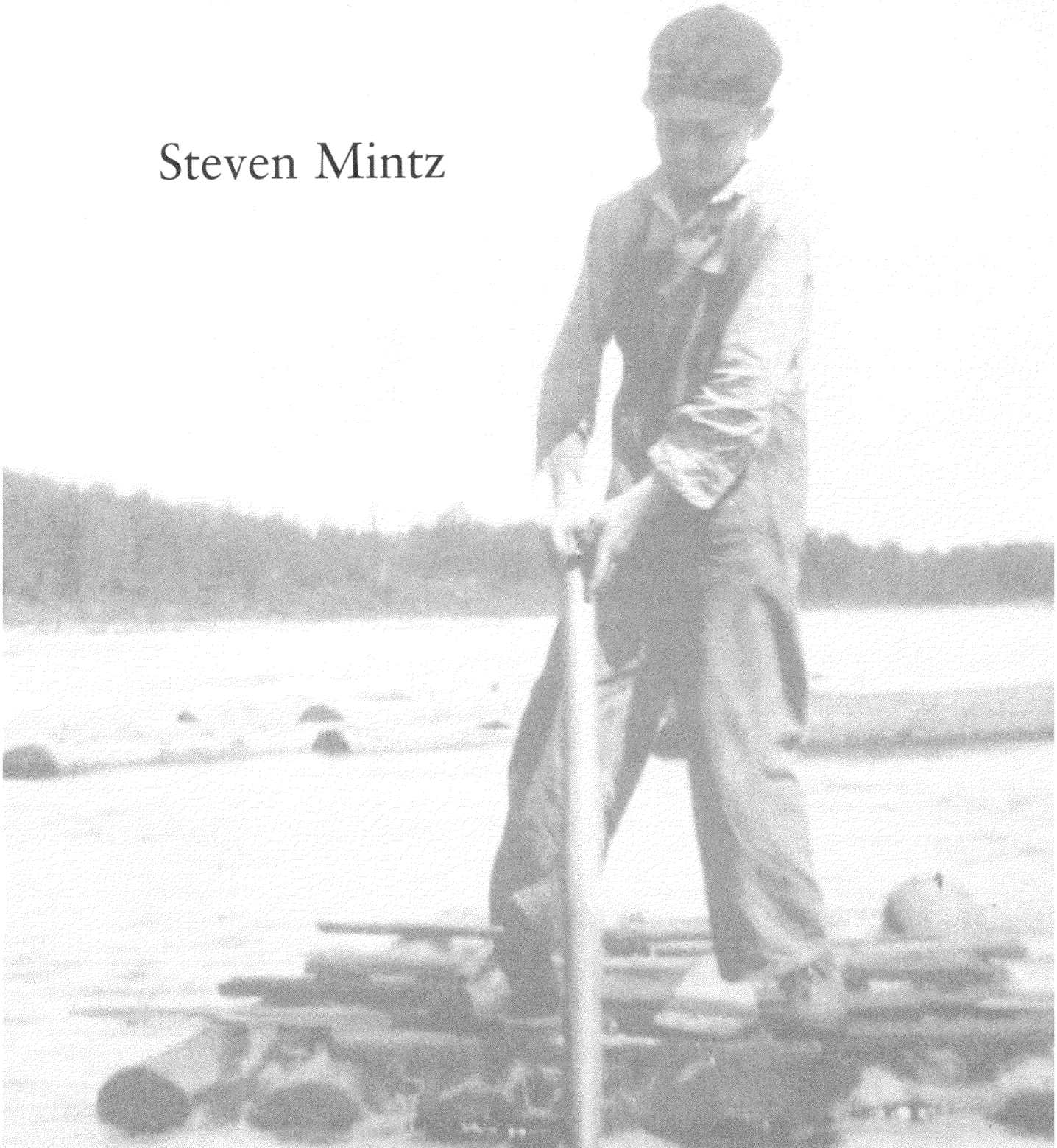
55. Emy Beseghi, *Introduzione*, in Casella, *Le voci segrete*, cit., pp. 10, 9.

56. Clark, *The Case of the Girls' Book*, cit., p. 127.

Huck's Raft

A History of American Childhood

Steven Mintz



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Title page illustration: Photograph of Charles Lindbergh at about age ten, rafting on the Mississippi River near Little Falls, Minnesota, around 1912. Courtesy of the Lindbergh Picture Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

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Childhood Battles of the Civil War

BORN INTO SLAVERY on the Georgia Sea Islands in 1848, Susie Baker was six when she and a brother began to live with her maternal grandmother in Savannah. At a secret school run by a free black woman, she learned to read and write. For two years, she wrote, "We went every day about nine o'clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at a time." Later she received additional instruction from another free black woman, a white playmate, and her grandmother's landlord's son.[1]

In April 1862 an uncle led Susie and his own family to a Sea Island under Union control. Although she was only fourteen, she became a laundress for the 33d U.S. Colored troops, one of the Union Army's first black regiments, and led a day school for forty African-American children and a night school for adults. She also nursed wounded soldiers. At first the wounded and bloody soldiers shocked her, but soon she grew accustomed to the sight. "It seems strange," she later wrote, "how our aversion to suffering is overcome in war. How we are able to see the most sickening sights and instead of turning away, how we hurry to assist in alleviating their pain."[2]

In times of war, age lines blur, new demands are made of the young, and children cannot be insulated from adult realities. The Civil War was no exception. The war brought excitement, but also anxiety and privation. It disrupted families, separated children from their fathers and brothers, and thrust the young into the heated political debates of the times. Unlike later wars in American history, young people were involved

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This youth, known only as Taylor, served as a drummer with the 78th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry. The 78th Regiment played a crucial role in helping the North maintain control over the Mississippi River and dividing the Confederacy in two. Courtesy of the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

in all aspects of the Civil War, including fighting on the battlefield. William Black, the youngest wounded soldier, was twelve when his left hand and arm were shattered by an exploding shell. An unknown number of soldiers—probably around 5 percent—were under eighteen, and some were as young as ten. Others served as scouts or nurses for the wounded. Yet even those who did not participate in the war itself saw their lives altered by the conflict. During wartime young people had to grow up quickly, assuming the responsibilities of absent relatives. At Atlanta, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg, the young experienced war's harshest realities; yet far from the battlefront, the conflict intruded into children's games, magazines, and schools.[3]

Even after the war ended, its repercussions continued to be felt. Parents grew more protective of their children, and "child protection" became a watchword for reform societies seeking to address such social problems as child abuse and neglect. Children's experience during the Civil War permanently altered a generation of Americans, who in turn transformed American society in the years that followed. For the children of former Confederates, the war's legacy was apparent in the formation of organizations such as the Sons and the Daughters of the Confederacy, which sought to ensure that their parents' sacrifices had not been in vain. Meanwhile the children of former Union soldiers took the lead in promoting hiking, camping, and competitive sports to provide their offspring with a "moral equivalent of war." The experience of children during the Civil War forces us to rethink popular assumptions about children's fragility. It demonstrates young people's resilience, but also the indelible impression that war leaves on children's lives.

"What storeyes I shall have to tell when I get home," sixteen-year-old William Wilbur Edgerton wrote his mother shortly after he joined the 107th New York Volunteer Infantry in 1862. Since the age of twelve, Wilbur had taken on a series of odd jobs: fiddle playing, barrelmaking, blacksmithing, and laboring as a farm hand and a factory worker. When the war broke out, he enlisted, and two months later he fought in the battle of Antietam on the bloodiest day of the Civil War. In a letter to a younger brother he described the experience. "The balls flew around my head like hail stones," he wrote, "and sounded like a swarm of bees." His brother would "have no idea what it is to souldier off in a strange country whare your comrades are a dieing off fast and no noing how soon before your time will come." Unlike a friend who deserted, he declared, "I am no *coward* and I never will *disgrace* the *name* of *Edgerton* by *desertion* or *Sneeking* out of *danger* like some have."[4]

The stories of boys and girls in blue and gray read like fiction. Indeed,

their exploits provided the basis for dozens of Civil War novels. Kentucky-born William Horsfall was thirteen when he ran away from home in December 1861 to serve as a drummer in the Union Army's First Kentucky Infantry, and just fourteen when he earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for saving the life of a wounded officer caught between Union and Confederate lines at the battle of Corinth in Mississippi. Pinkus Aylee, who served in a black regiment, was sixteen years old when he rescued a young white soldier who had been wounded and left for dead. Soon afterward both young men were captured and taken to Andersonville, the dreaded Confederate prison camp in Georgia where at least 12,000 of 30,000 Union prisoners died. Aylee was hanged immediately, but the white soldier survived to tell their story. Not all child soldiers were boys. Perhaps 400 women, including seventeen-year-old Mary Scaberry of the 52d Ohio Infantry and nineteen-year-old Rosetta Lyons Wakeman, took on male aliases in order to serve in the Civil War. As a soldier, Wakeman explained, she was able to live as "independent as a hog on the ice."[5]

In 1861 President Lincoln announced that boys under eighteen could enlist only with their parents' consent. The next year he prohibited any enlistment of those under eighteen. But heavy casualties led recruiting officers to look the other way when underaged boys tried to enlist, and thousands participated in the conflict as drummers, messengers, hospital orderlies, and often as full-fledged soldiers. They carried canteens, bandages, and stretchers and assisted surgeons and nurses. Many young soldiers signed up as drummers, who relayed officers' commands, signaling reveille, roll call, company drill, and taps. In the heat of battle, many carried orders or assisted with the wounded; at least a few picked up rifles and participated in the fighting. Their motives for enlisting varied, including patriotism and a desire to escape the boring routine of farm life or an abusive family. A few were jealous of older brothers, and some young northerners were eager to rid the country of slavery. For some young Confederates, there was a desire to repel northern invaders from their soil. One southern boy made his feelings clear with words colored by irony: "I reather die then be com a Slave to the North." Many letters convey a conviction that the hand of providence was at work in this terrible conflict, and that blood needed to be shed if the nation was to fulfill its destiny.[6]

Children employed a variety of ruses to enlist. Ned Hunter assured a recruitment officer in Mississippi that although he was fifteen years old, he "can shoot as straight as any who has signed today." Charles E. Goddard, who was sixteen when he enlisted in the First Minnesota Regiment in late April 1861, simply lied about his age. Fifteen-year-old Elisha Stockwell Jr.

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A young "powder monkey" stands next to a 100-pound gun on the U.S.S. *New Hampshire.* Powder monkeys carried explosives on board warships. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

persuaded a friend's father, a captain in the Union army, to accompany him to the recruiting station. "The Captain got me in by my lying a little, as I told the recruiting officer that I didn't know how old I was but I thought I was eighteen."[7]

Like Henry Fleming, Stephen Crane's farmboy protagonist in *The Red Badge of Courage,* the young soldiers' romantic illusions about military glory evaporated under the harsh realities of combat. They suffered hunger, fatigue, and discomfort, and gradually lost their innocence in combat. Every aspect of soldiering comes alive in their letters and diaries: the

stench of spoiled meat, the deafening sound of cannons, the sight of maimed bodies, and the randomness and anonymity of death. Excitement over enlistment swiftly gave way to the boring routines of camp life and marches. Because of a lack of equipment, fifteen-year-old Thomas Galwey and other members of the Eighth Ohio Regiment paraded in civilian clothes and drilled with "wooden guns, wooden swords, and cornstalks." "Day after day and night after night did we tramp along the rough and dusty roads," sixteen-year-old John Delhaney, a Confederate soldier, wrote, "neath the most broiling sun with which the month of August ever afflicted a soldier . . . scarcely stopping to gather the green corn from the fields to serve us for rations."[8]

Homesickness afflicted many young soldiers. John Delhaney described his feelings on his first night in camp: "The strange faces and forms . . . were not calculated to allay my uneasiness of mind or lighten my hearts or its cares." Teased by older soldiers, young soldiers suffered from inadequate food, clothing, and shelter. Charles Nott, a sixteen-year-old New Yorker, said that during the winter months coffee was the only warm food he had. "The pork was frozen and the water in the canteens solid ice, so we had to hold them over the fire when we wanted a drink." On a snowy night he and three other soldiers only had four blankets, "two of them wet and frozen," to cover them.[9]

William Bircher was fifteen when he enlisted as a drummer boy in the Second Veteran Volunteer Infantry in 1861. At first his diary entries recorded his excitement in training with his regiment, but soon his tone grew somber. His regiment fought at the battle of Chickamauga after marching for days without shoes; William had to wrap his bleeding feet in rags torn from his own uniform. The young drummer boy described eating rotten food and drinking putrid water from puddles. He recalled:

> After we had been in the field a year or two the call, "Fall in for your hard-tack!" was leisurely responded to by only about a dozen men . . . Hard-tack was very hard. This I attributed to its great age, for there was a common belief among the boys that our hard-tack had been baked long before the beginning of the Christian era. This opinion was based upon the fact that the letters "B.C." were stamped on many, if not, indeed, all the cracker-boxes.[10]

Complaints about provisions appeared in many letters. "Rats are found to be very good for food," a Union boy wrote in his diary, "and every night many are captured and slain." "They are so tame," he observed, "that they hardly think it worth while to get out of our way when we meet them."[11]

The young soldiers' most lasting impressions were of the dead and

wounded. Sixteen-year-old John Cockerill, a musician in a Confederate unit at the battle of Shiloh, "passed the corpse of a beautiful boy in gray who lay with his blond curls scattered about his face and his hands folded peacefully across his breast." Cockerill admitted: "At the sight of the poor boy's corpse, I burst into a regular boo-hoo." General Ulysses S. Grant's son never forgot the sights after the siege of Vicksburg in 1863. "Here the scenes were so terrible that I became faint," he wrote, "and making my way to a tree, sat down, the most woebegone twelve-year-old in America." Fifteen-year-old Thomas Galwey of the Eighth Ohio Volunteer Infantry offered a particularly vivid picture of the face of battle: "Lieutenant Delaney is shot . . . Lieutenant Lantry, poor fellow, is annihilated instantly, near me. The top of his head is taken off by a shell. Our company is narrowing more and more . . . Fairchild is bleeding; Campion falls, mortally wounded; Jim Gallagher's head is badly grazed, and he rolls, coiled in a lump, down into a ditch." When the war was over, only 97 of the unit's 990 men mustered out.[12]

War, they quickly discovered, was hell. The boy soldiers described drinking water from creeks stained red with blood, and piling up corpses to make a windbreak for a field surgeon's operating theater. Edward Spangler, a sixteen-year-old Pennsylvania private who suffered a leg wound at Antietam, saw "hundreds of prostrate men with serious wounds of every description." "Many to relieve their suffering were impatient for their turn upon the amputation tables," he noted glumly, "around which were pyramids of severed legs and arms. Many prayed aloud, while others shrieked in the agony and throes of death." Some young soldiers, like Henry Graves, gradually grew desensitized to violence. He wrote that he was able to "look on the carcass of a man with pretty much the feeling as I would do were it a horse or hog." But many others suffered from "soldier's heart," or what later generations would call battle fatigue, shell shock, or post-traumatic stress disorder.[13]

The accounts of young Union prisoners at Confederate prison camps are especially harrowing. Sixteen-year-old Michael Dougherty was shocked by the sight of "different instruments of torture: stocks, thumb screws, barbed iron collars, shackles, ball and chain. Our prison keepers seemed to handle them with familiarity." William Smith, a fifteen-year-old soldier in the 14th Illinois Infantry, was shaken by the physical appearance of prisoners at Andersonville in Georgia, a "great mass of gaunt, unnatural-looking beings, soot-begrimed, and clad in filthy trousers." Ranson J. Powell, who was just thirteen years old and barely four feet tall when he left his home in western Maryland to serve as a drummer with the Union Army's 10th Virginia Regiment, was captured and confined at

Andersonville, where his daily rations consisted of a teaspoon of salt, three tablespoons of beans, and half a pint of unsifted cornmeal, and water came from a nearby creek that also served as the camp's sewer. When fifteen-year-old Billy Bates managed to escape from Andersonville, he weighed just sixty pounds.[14]

The war's impact was not confined to the front lines. Far from the battlefields, the war also intruded upon children's lives. In August 1864 an Atlanta girl wrote in her journal: "I was ten years old today. I did not have a cake. Times are too hard. I hope that by next birthday, we will have peace in our land." Carrie Berry was one of many children whose lives were turned upside down by the war. Despite her youth, she had to care for her pregnant mother and a sickly younger sister. She cooked, cleaned, sewed, and scavenged for nails and lead that she could trade for food. Each night she lived in dread of cannon shells. "One has busted under the dining room which frightened us very much," she wrote. "One passed through the smokehouse and a piece hit the top of the house and fell through." After the Union Army under William Tecumseh Sherman captured the city, new fears arose: "Some mean soldiers set several houses on fire in different parts of town." In her journal she confessed that she "could not go to sleep for fear that they would set our house on fire."[15]

Near the battlefront, children, black and white, witnessed the destruction of farms and villages. Their letters and diaries describe foraging soldiers, exploding shells, burning cities, mangled corpses, and stacks of human limbs. A few gave directions to scouts or nursed the wounded, while others sold gingerbread or buttermilk to soldiers or foraged battlefields for souvenirs. Some were wounded or killed by stray shots or shells. Children near the battle lines grew up rapidly during wartime. "In these few months, my childhood has slipped away from me," wrote Celine Fremaux, a twelve-year-old from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who was responsible for six younger siblings, including a newborn brother. "Necessity, human obligations, family pride and patriotism had taken entire possession of my little emaciated body." At an early age, children learned to improvise. Evelyn Ward of Blandensfield, Virginia, explained what she did when stores ran out of candy. "We used to cut down the sorghum cane," she recalled, "peel off a joint, and chew the pith." Eight-year-old Annie Marmion, whose father was a physician in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, remembered that "the great objects in life were to procure something to eat and to keep yourself out of sight by day, and keep your candle light hidden by night; lights of every kind, being regarded as signals to the Rebels, were usually greeted by a volley of guns."[16]

Children near the battle lines were vitally affected by the events sur-

rounding them. Before the battle of Gettysburg, fifteen-year-old Tillie Pierce saw free blacks fleeing the town, fearing reenslavement by the approaching Confederate forces. She described "men and women with bundles as large as old-fashioned feather ticks slung across their backs, almost bearing them to the ground. Children also, carrying their bundles, and striving in vain to keep up." During the battle, many children huddled in cellars while cannons shook their homes' foundation. Fifteen-year-old Albertus McCreary carried buckets of water to the soldiers. Army surgeons transformed Sue Chancellor's house into a makeshift hospital. "They had taken our sitting room as an operating room," she recalled, "and our piano served as an amputating table." Young Jeanie McCreary assisted the nurses and surgeons. "I never thought I could do anything about a wounded man," she wrote following the battle, "but find that I had a bit more nerve than I thought I had." Two weeks after the momentous battle was over, Annie Young wrote a cousin. "I have lived a lifetime in the past few weeks," she said, "and yet, to look back, it seems like some fearful dream. God grant that . . . none I love, may ever pass through such scenes or witness such bloody, fearful sights! Words can give you no conceptions. It was perfect agony."[17]

As the war dragged on, hardship on the southern home front grew intense. In the besieged city of Vicksburg, Mississippi, families sought refuge in cliffside caves. A stray shell left one child, Lucy McCrae, buried under a mass of earth. "The blood was gushing from my nose, eyes, ears, and mouth," she later wrote, "but no bones were broken." Youngsters participated in bread riots in Richmond, Virginia; Montgomery, Alabama; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Columbia, South Carolina. A Richmond girl defended the looting: "We are starving. As soon as enough of us get together we are going to take the bakeries and each of us will take a loaf of bread. That is little enough for the government to give us after it has taken all our men."[18]

For some children far from combat, war was an enthralling adventure. Seven-year old Theodore Roosevelt, a New Yorker who had two uncles in the Confederacy, enjoyed playing "Running the Blockade." When Jeanette Gilder was nine, she ran away to join the Union army. A colonel sent her back home, but she was unrepentant. "I was marched off to bed," the recalled, "but I made a tent of my sheets, and with a broom for a musket, drilled myself till I was so tired that I fell asleep." But for many other boys and girls, the war meant taking on adult responsibilities. Twelve-year-old Marion Drury had "to assume the work and responsibilities of a man because most of the farmhands had gone into the army." Anna Shaw, who was fourteen in 1861, grew up in the wilds of Michigan,

and later became an important suffrage leader, took on her father and brothers' jobs. In addition to sewing, cleaning, and caring for boarders, she taught school and cleared fields.[19]

Perhaps the most striking development was the politicization of childhood. Even young children got caught up in the heated political debates of the time. In a school composition that he wrote in 1861, eleven-year-old Edward Bellamy, the author of the utopian novel *Looking Backward,* marveled at how "this great nation gathered determination with God's help to forever crush treason from this continent." Katie Darling Wallace of Glencoe, Virginia, who was also eleven, expressed the opposing viewpoint in her journal in July 1863. "I think our people did right to invade the enemy's country," she wrote. "It is the only way to bring them to their right senses." The ideas and emotions articulated by adults infected children as well.[20]

During wartime the games young people played, the entertainments they enjoyed, and the books and magazines they read were saturated with war imagery. Schoolbooks, which had avoided controversy before the war, became politicized to an astonishing extent. The *Union ABC* began: "A is for America, land of the free." A Confederate textbook asked its readers: "If one Confederate soldier can whip seven Yankees, how many soldiers can whip 49 Yankees?" The *Geographical Reader for the Dixie Children* provided a Confederate perspective on the causes of the war:

> In the year 1860, the Abolitionists became strong enough to elect one of their men for President. Abraham Lincoln was a weak man, and the South believed he would allow laws to be made, which would deprive them of their rights. So the Southern States seceded, and elected Jefferson Davis for their President. This so enraged President Lincoln that he declared war, and has exhausted nearly all the strength of the nation, in a vain attempt to whip the South back into the Union.

In occupied parts of the South, schools became contested terrain, where students, administrators, and parents battled over course content, school activities, and songs. In New Orleans schools, Confederate sympathizers wore mourning ribbons and refused to participate in pro-Union ceremonies.[21]

Children's magazines, which had studiously avoided the slavery issue before the war, incorporated war themes into their stories and poems. Some, such as "The Soldier's Little Boy," a tale about a dying boy whose father was killed at Antietam, prepared the young for the realities of death. A few children actually published their own wartime newspapers. In the fall of 1862 an editorial in one of these papers, the Concord, Mas-

sachusetts *Observer,* declared: "War must become the daily vocation of us all."[22]

The martial spirit also infected play. Boys held mock parades, skirmishes, and drills. Boys in Shenagno, Pennsylvania, formed their own military company, elected a thirteen-year-old captain and held weekly drills in a nearby schoolyard. A Virginia mother, Margaret Junkin Preston, wrote that her children's "entire set of plays have reference to a state of war." Her five-year-old son George "gets sticks and hobbles about, saying that he lost a leg at the second battle of Manassass; tells wonderful stories of how he cutt off yankees' heads, bayoneted them, &c." Politics became an integral part of young people's experience. Seventeen-year-old Lizzie H. Corning, who lived in Concord, New Hampshire, listened to political

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War Spirit at Home, by Lilly Martin Spencer, 1866. As a mother reads a newspaper while holding an infant on her lap, her children celebrate Ulysses S. Grant's victory at the battle of Vicksburg in 1863 by marching and banging pots. Courtesy of the Newark (New Jersey) Museum.

speeches, went to view battlefield panoramas, and raised money for the troops. Many children collected books for soldiers and participated in fundraising events (know as "sanitary fairs") during the war's last two years to support soldiers' aid societies, soldiers' homes, and hospitals. Northern girls raised money and collected supplies for Union troops by selling handicrafts, foods, and even kisses. Some knitted mittens and rolled bandages for soldiers. Clara Lenroot remembered scraping "away at the linen, making fluffy piles of the soft lint" used to pack soldier's wounds.[23]

Little Women, Louisa May Alcott's tale of four girls growing up in Civil War New England, remains the classic depiction of how middle-class girls were transformed by the war into responsible adults. Its portrait of the headstrong Jo, beautiful Meg, shy Beth, and temperamental Amy, and their struggle to cope with genteel wartime poverty, provided generations with insight into what it was like to grow up during the Civil War, separated from one's father. In real life, too, girls' lives were shaken by war and forced into early maturity. Emma Le Conte, the daughter of a Columbia, South Carolina, chemistry professor, declared that the war left her feeling dreadfully depressed. "It commenced when I was thirteen," she wrote, "and I am now seventeen and no prospect yet of its ending. No pleasure, no enjoyment—nothing . . . but the stern realities of life." Compared with other South Carolina families, hers was doing well when they ate two meals a day, including a dinner consisting of a small piece of beef, some cornbread, potatoes, and hominy. But as the war dragged on, her family's situation deteriorated. Their diet consisted of rancid salt pork and stringy beef. She had to knit her own stockings and wear homespun undergarments. The situation became so stressful that she found herself unable to read. Nevertheless, she remained convinced of the righteousness of the Confederate cause, and rejoiced in President Lincoln's assassination. "Hurrah!" she wrote. "Old Abe has been assassinated! It may be abstractly wrong to be so jubilant, but I just can't help it . . . We have suffered till we feel savage."[24]

Far from weakening family bonds, wartime separation intensified many fathers' commitment to their children. James Garfield, the future president, worried that his daughter would forget him, asked his wife to ensure that her memory of "papa, papa" not fade away. "Have her say it, so that when I come she may know to call me." Joshua Chamberlain, a hero at Gettysburg who later received Robert E. Lee's formal surrender at Appomattox, was much more cautious. "If I return," he wrote, "they will soon relearn to love me. If not, so much is spared them." Soldiers' letters to their wives and children abounded with paternal advice about children's

diet, medical care, dress, and education. In an 1862 letter to his son, Confederate Major General Mansfield Lovell expressed pleasure that his son's arithmetical skills were improving: "You do not take to it easily or naturally and for that reason will have to apply yourself more studiously, than you would to anything that you learned without trouble." "Write me as often as you wish," he continued. "It will help to improve you in writing in expressing your thoughts."[25]

Especially striking are the number of soldiers' letters that discuss politics with their children. During the Civil War, soldiers were driven to fight not simply by loyalty to fellow members of their unit or fear of disgracing themselves in the eyes of their community, but by deeply held political and moral beliefs, which they communicated to their children. In an 1864 letter to his daughter Loula, Tobias Gibson, an ardent Confederate, complained that "American ideas of liberty have totally changed" since the Union army of occupation had arrived in Louisiana. "As far as I know the white children are to grow up in ignorance or mix in the same cabin with the Negro with the same Yankee Marm for the teacher!" But many letters were much more personal. Twenty-two-year-old Henry Abbott wrote his five-year-old brother that "when you get mad & begin to cry, it makes the rebel bullets come a good deal nearer to me." Henry was killed in battle in 1864. In a letter to her father, sixteen-year-old Maria Lewis of Ebensburg, Pennsylvania, wrote: "O papy should eny thing happen I know it would kill mammy and when I was sick I was so afraid I would die and not get to see you but I am spared and hope to see you again." Her father, Captain Andrew Lewis of the 40th Pennsylvania Regiment, died on July 2, 1862, near Richmond, Virginia.[26]

In an 1884 address, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., who was twenty when the Civil War began, and twice seriously wounded in battle, believed that his generation had "been set apart by its experience. Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire." The Civil War had a profound and lasting impact on American culture and society, and the children who grew up during the war learned lessons that they carried into the postwar years. Among many future intellectuals and reformers, the war bred a contempt for softness and sentimentality and a deep distrust of political ideologies. Wartime experience encouraged an emphasis on organization and professionalism that was evident in postwar efforts to care for orphans and the children of the poor. The experience of the Civil War also fueled a search for moral equivalents to war, including an emphasis on competitive sports and the strenuous life, which had a powerful impact on postwar middle-class boyhood. One group, the children of abolitionists, perpetuated prewar idealism by continuing to

work for racial justice. These descendants of the original abolitionists took a leading role in postwar efforts to establish schools and colleges for African Americans, the struggle against lynching, and the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909.[27]

In the South, defeat nurtured nostalgia for the "Lost Cause" and the social order that children's fathers and older brothers had fought to defend. At the war's end, Emma Le Conte lamented: "For four years there has been throughout this broad land little else than the anguish of anxiety—the misery of dear ones sacrificed—for *nothing!*" But later the view that the war had been a waste gave way to a far different outlook. Edwin H. McCaleb, who became a Confederate officer when he was only seventeen, embodied the attitudes that shaped the white southern response to Reconstruction. He deplored the assassination of President Lincoln but also deeply resented any attempts by the North to promote racial equality. "We would gladly substitute white for slave labor," he wrote in 1865, "but we can never regard the Negro our equal either intellectually or socially."[28]

After northern Republicans seized control of Reconstruction from President Andrew Johnson, denied representatives from the former Confederate states their congressional seats, and wrote the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, guaranteeing African Americans equal protection of the laws and giving black men the vote, many young southern whites responded with violence. Having endured wartime hardship and a postwar sense of powerlessness, they sought to reassert their white supremacist racial ideology. Organizations such as the Sons of the Confederacy and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, which arose after the war, expressed reverence for the sacrifices of the Civil War generation and took the position that sectional reunion required the North to allow the South's "natural" leaders to solve the region's racial problems without outside interference. Efforts to segregate, disenfranchise, and control the South's black population through legislation and violence were part of the war's legacy to the younger generation, which venerated its Confederate fathers and sought to reassert control over African Americans who had not been raised under slavery.[29]

Perhaps the Civil War's greatest impact on children was on family life. Like the American Revolution, the Civil War produced huge numbers of orphans and impoverished fatherless families. In Boston in 1865 an estimated 6,000 vagrant children lived on the streets; in New York the figure reached 30,000. More than 100 bodies of newborn children were found in empty barrels or in the rivers in New York each month. By the late 1860s charitable societies were caring for more than 12,000 dependent

children in New York City alone. To cope with the worsening problem of dependent children, eight states opened institutions to care for dead soldiers' orphans in 1865 and 1866, and a decade after the war, Pennsylvania subsidized the care of more than 8,000 soldiers' orphans. Conditions in these institutions were horrendous. In Illinois's Soldiers' Orphans' Home, which had only two bathrooms and no playground or infirmary, a three-year-old was scalded to death when older children were placed in charge of the baths.[30]

Many fathers returned home to discover that their children did not recognize them. To five-year-old Hamlin Garland, his father seemed like "only a strange man with big eyes and [a] care-worn face." Some men, socialized to a soldier's life, found it difficult to readjust to domesticity. One boy later recalled: "My father brought back from two years' campaigning . . . the temper and habit of a soldier." Noting that "the moments of tenderness were few," he said that he and his siblings soon learned "that the soldier's promise of punishment was swift and precise in its fulfillment."[31]

In a reaction to wartime disruptions, postwar parents strengthened and intensified family bonds. Middle-class parents responded to the war's traumas through an intensified commitment to a protected, prolonged childhood. Parents who had been rushed to adulthood sought to provide their offspring with a sheltered childhood. They not only kept their children home longer than in the past, but also emphasized the idea of insulating children from the harsher realities of adult life. But the war also altered—and diminished—the father's role in the family. While they remained authority figures of last resort, postwar fathers were more disengaged from family life than their antebellum counterparts and more likely to participate in activities outside the home, such as fraternal orders and men's clubs. The war itself may have contributed to this reorientation by intensifying the mother-child dyad even as it drew many men outside the home. For many men, the military had promoted male bonding, while for many women, the experience of managing homes on their home encouraged them to assert new authority over the family in the postwar years.[32]

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Little Women in Its Time

Daniel Shealy

In August 1868, as Louisa May Alcott was correcting proofs for part one of *Little Women*, she confided in her journal: "It reads better than I expected. Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it; and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it" (*Journals* 166). When Thomas Niles, editor at Roberts Brothers publishers of Boston, first approached the thirty-five-year-old Alcott about writing a book aimed at a female audience, the author was unsure of her topic: "Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it" (*Journals* 165-166). Alcott turned the real-life escapades and tribulations of herself and her three sisters, Anna, Elizabeth, and May, into the fictionalized adventures of the March sisters, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. In turn, she created a family that readers as varied as Edith Wharton, Theodore Roosevelt, Gertrude Stein, and J. K. Rowling have cherished for almost 150 years. In an early review of 10 October 1868, *The Commonwealth*, a Boston newspaper, declared: "Few writers bear along with them so successfully the expressions, desires, sympathies and feelings of children as Miss Alcott, and the happy consequence is that her portraiture of child-life is real, penetrating and abiding" (qtd. in Clark 61). With the publication of *Little Women*, Alcott created one of the first realistic American children's books. It was to be a significant work, one that changed the landscape of children's literature.

Three years before *Little Women*, the golden age of children's literature began in America with the publication of Mary Mapes Dodge's *Hans Brinker; Or, the Silver Skates* (1865), a work that combined history and geography with a dramatic, yet sentimental, realistic plot. The 1860s also saw a boom in magazines devoted to children that would escalate throughout the last half of the century. However, most literature for children prior to the Civil War was designed more for moral instruction or education than entertainment.

Children could read the didactic works of Samuel Goodrich's series of "Peter Parley" books or the numerous adventures of Jacob Abbott's Rollo character. Even *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867), the first in a series of over twenty-five books by Martha Finley (1828–1909), who used the pseudonym Martha Farquharson, featured a character so insistent upon proper moral and religious behavior that she would sit in protest at her piano stool for hours rather than play secular music on a Sunday.

Compared to Elsie Dinsmore, Alcott's Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy seem like real girls. They have faults, and they make mistakes. But how they attempt to correct their faults is what makes the book realistic. Such a difference in the type of literature for children was not lost on some reviewers. *Putnam's Magazine*, in its December 1868 review of *Little Women*, announced: "Verily there is a new era in this country in the literature for children . . . Most Sunday-school books were stories of unnaturally good and pious boys and girls, who, however, were not attractive enough to rouse a desire of imitation in the youthful breast" (qtd. in Clark 67). By re-imagining her own childhood and those of her sisters, Alcott created characters with whom her readers identified. Avid readers adapted chapters of the novel for amateur plays; others started their own newspapers, like the Marches' "Pickwick Portfolio." Many enthusiastic young girls wrote to Alcott insisting that Jo marry Laurie.

While *Little Women*, as Alcott herself noted, was based upon her own parents and siblings, whom she often referred to as the "pathetic family" (*Selected Letters* 122), the novel was also very much a product of its time. Today, *Little Women* possesses a patina of nostalgia for a simpler life. However, to readers in the late 1860s, the book was modern, addressing issues and concerns of many young women and families: the uncertainties of war and its aftermath, the growing pains of industrialization and immigration, and the struggles for gender equality. The central question Alcott grapples with is one that readers, then and now, must settle for themselves: How does a young girl grow into womanhood—not the cult of true womanhood that Alcott herself had been part of—but a new type of womanhood, one marked by independence and equality? The answer that Alcott

gives in *Little Women* transformed this story of an impecunious family into a classic American novel.

Although *Little Women* is not often thought of as a Civil War novel, the war permeates part one. Opening in December 1861, the book focuses on life at home during the war. Mr. March's absence as a chaplain in the army creates an ongoing tension in the book. From the very first page, Alcott reveals a hole in the family's unity and happiness when Jo declares: "'We haven't got father, and shall not have him for a long time.' She didn't say 'perhaps never,' but each silently added it, thinking of father far way, where the fighting was" (*Little Women* 11). Alcott heightens the tension in Chapter 15, as a telegram informs the family that Mr. March has fallen gravely ill. Thoughts of him fill the sisters' minds—and the readers'—until he finally makes his appearance, healthy but weak, in the penultimate chapter of part one.

Louisa May Alcott, a fervent abolitionist like her parents, well knew the suffering that entire families experienced during the Civil War. She herself longed to be able to serve her country. When the Concord Artillery of the State Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Militia, departed on April 19, 1861, in anticipation of conflict, Louisa confided in her journal: "A busy time getting them ready, and a sad day seeing them off; for in a little town like this we all seem like one family in times like these . . . as the brave boys went away perhaps never to come back again. I've often longed to see a war, and now I have my wish. I long to be a man; but as I can't fight, I will content myself with working for those who can" (*Journals* 105).

Along with her mother, sisters, and other prominent Concord families, including the Emersons, Louisa was part of the Women's Aid Society in Concord, formed in 1861, sewing clothing and preparing bandages for the soldiers. In Chapter 1 of *Little Women*, Jo knits blue army socks, but moans: "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 and fight with papa, and I can only stay at home and knit like a poky old woman" (13). Even Marmee arrives home late on Christmas Eve because she was preparing boxes to ship to Union soldiers for the holiday. War casts a pall of uncertainty in part one, an uneasiness that

many of Alcott's first readers vividly recalled when encountering the book in 1868.

Alcott, like her fictional counterpart Jo March, yearned to join the war effort. Once she turned thirty years old in November 1862, Alcott applied for a position as nurse and served in that capacity at the Union Hotel Hospital in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC. Arriving in December 1862, just as the first of the dying and wounded soldiers were brought in from the killing fields of the Battle of Fredericksburg, Alcott was thrust suddenly into the horrifying results of war. She quickly learned that impartial death chose no side. While the cost of the Civil War was enormous, approximately seventy-five billion dollars by today's comparisons, the human costs were staggering. In *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, Drew Gilpin Faust observes: "The number of soldiers who died between 1861 and 1865, an estimated six-hundred-twenty thousand, is approximately equal to the total American fatalities in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War combined" (xi). Contracting typhoid fever in mid-January 1863, Louisa returned to Concord with her father's assistance. Adapting the letters she had written to her family into an episodic story, Alcott published *Hospital Sketches* serially in the Boston *Commonwealth* in May and June 1863. As the first account of a Civil War hospital, Alcott's work attracted attention, inspiring noted abolitionist James Redpath to publish *Hospital Sketches* in book form that August. It proved to be Alcott's first real success as a writer, at least in the New England region.

However, the Civil War was not the only great change Alcott experienced. By 1860, the United States' population was not one that its Founding Fathers would have recognized. The great Irish Potato Famine of 1845–1852 had brought a million Irish immigrants to America. Because of their poverty, their lack of education, and especially their Catholic religion, the Irish were discriminated against, and many Americans thought these foreigners could never be assimilated into the country. German, Eastern European, and Chinese immigrants arrived in greater numbers than ever before,

most of them with little access to education, employment, housing, or health care. Poverty brought with it crime, violence, physical abuse, and vice. Opposition to such a large influx of immigrants also grew as Nativist political parties were formed to attempt to limit United States citizenship. By 1860, Boston's population was over 36 percent foreign-born and the problems were myriad.

In *Little Women*, Alcott hints at these disparities in Chapter 7, "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," when Amy tosses her contraband pickled limes out the schoolroom window and the pupils discovered "that their feast was being exulted over by the little Irish children, who were their sworn foes" (59). The Irish children, who must have shouted in delight at this unexpected treat, could never afford to pay for an education—unlike Amy and her classmates. Instead, their life's dictionary was the street. Alcott also gives us a brief, but accurate, portrayal of the poverty endured by German immigrants when the Marches take Christmas breakfast to the Hummels in Chapter 2. Walking the backstreets of town, the angels of charity soon discover the reality: "A poor, bare, miserable room it was, with broken windows, no fire, ragged bed-clothes, a sick mother, wailing baby, and a group of pale, hungry children cuddled under one old quilt, trying to keep warm" (Alcott, *Little Women* 21). Although Alcott depicts the problems of immigration, she also, through her portrayal of Professor Bhaer, shows how successful immigration can be. Bhaer wishes to assimilate into American culture and is able to do so with his marriage to Jo, just as his own sister had married an American. *Little Women* demonstrates that nineteenth-century America was truly becoming a melting pot of cultures. At the same time, the novel does not hide the fact that such changes have costs rooted in poverty and ignorance.

The Alcott family was indeed familiar with poverty—their own and others. Abigail Alcott was a staunch defender of the poor, exhibiting constant kindness and charity. From 1848 to 1850, she served as a social worker—a "City Missionary"—where she viewed the horrible living conditions of the poor. After leaving her paid position, Abigail opened her own employment office (an "intelligence office") in order to find suitable work for the needy,

noting, "We do a good work when we clothe the poor, but a better one when we make the way easy for them to clothe themselves, the best when we so arrange society as to have no poor" (qtd. in Barton 143). Just as Marmee encourages her daughters to assist the needy in *Little Women*, so too did Abigail Alcott inspire her own daughters to help others. But Mr. March's letters home to his "little women" also affect the sisters' thoughts and actions, just as Bronson Alcott's ideas for a more perfect society and individual had a profound impact on his daughters, especially Louisa. Abigail's brother, Rev. Samuel Joseph May, once said of Bronson: "He was radical in all matters of reform; went to the root of all things, especially the subjects of education, mental and moral culture" (qtd. in Dahlstrand 49).

Born on November 29, 1832 (a birthday she would share with her father, Bronson Alcott), Louisa May Alcott was a child of the age of reform in the United States. She grew up surrounded by Transcendentalist writers in Concord and Boston, including her father, who thought that all people possessed divinity, a belief that branded them as heretics to many of the old religious order. Even Bronson Alcott had, with the assistance of the British reformer Charles Lane, established a utopian community called Fruitlands, in rural Harvard, Massachusetts in the summer of 1843. This experiment in consociate living, however, failed by the following January, leaving the Alcotts homeless and Bronson a depressed man. But the whole nation seemed caught up in the winds of change—not just the Transcendentalists. The activist Alcotts took part in most of the major movements: abolition, assistance to the needy, education reform, and woman's rights, among others. Some of the most prominent leaders of reform were among the Alcotts' family friends: Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Theodore Parker, and Lucy Stone. Influenced by her parents' active involvement in changing the individual and society for the better, Louisa herself took up the banner of change.

Alcott's interest in reform began with her parents' involvement in the anti-slavery movement. Bronson Alcott was an early member of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833–1870), which was

founded by his friend Garrison. Abigail Alcott, perhaps inspired by the actions of her abolitionist brother, joined the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society and later the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. As fervent abolitionists, the Alcotts also opened their homes to escaped slaves as a stop on the Underground Railroad. Alcott herself knew many of the anti-slavery leaders, or at least heard them speak as they mobilized financial and moral support: Angelina and Sarah Grimke, William and Ellen Craft, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman. John Brown visited Concord in the late 1850s, meeting with its leading abolitionists. Recent Harvard graduate Benjamin Franklin Sanborn, a friend to the Alcotts and teacher at a new private academy in town, even joined Brown's cause as part of the "Secret Six," a group of prominent citizens who helped finance Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. After the failed October 1859 attack upon the federal arsenal, Louisa recorded in her journal: "Glad I lived to see the Antislavery movement and this last heroic act in it" (*Journals* 95). As both an onlooker and a participant in the anti-slavery movement, Louisa's desire for change led to her involvement in other types of reform. One of the most effective keys to reform was, of course, education. The ability to enlighten an individual or one's self was the first step in reform, and Alcott had learned much about education from her father.

Bronson Alcott, born in 1799, was the son of a poor farming family in Connecticut. Self-educated, he worked as a peddler, traveling as far as the Carolinas to sell his domestic wares before finding a teaching position in Connecticut, where in 1827 he met Abigail May, the daughter of the well-to-do merchant, Colonel Joseph May, a prominent Bostonian. She was captivated by the tall philosopher and his "earnest desire to promote better advantages for the young" (qtd. in Dahlstrand 49). The two married at King's Chapel in Boston in 1830. Bronson soon earned a reputation as an excellent teacher, and, in 1834, he opened a new school in the Boston Masonic Temple. At this "Temple School," he initiated a number of educational reforms: children had their own desks and the environment was aesthetically pleasing. Class was conducted by the Socratic method, and students were instilled with the

Transcendentalist idea of divinity within. Corporal punishment was not permitted. Dorothy McCuskey notes that Bronson:

> paid particular attention to the development of the imagination, partly because he felt it was neglected elsewhere, and partly because he considered the child to be dependent upon it before reason and judgment develop. For this reason he used stories, pictures, and imaginative poetry . . . Singing and instrumental music he valued as a means of cultivating the ear and voice, and he liked marching and dancing to music. (47–48)

Bronson was fortunate to have as instructors, at various times, three women who were more educated than he. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, an important figure in the Transcendentalist movement, and her youngest sister Sophia Peabody (future wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne) both taught at the school and were far superior to Bronson in their language skills, especially Greek and Latin. Margaret Fuller, a feminist, a Transcendentalist, and later author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), also taught at the Temple School. Bronson's educational reforms can be seen in Peabody's *Record of A School* (1835) and his own *Conversations with Children on the Gospel* (1836–1837). His practices, as reported in these books, prompted an outcry from conservative Boston, who believed Alcott, along with his Transcendentalist friends, was a religious heretic. Enrollment dwindled, and Bronson eventually closed the Temple School in June 1838, moving the few remaining students to a smaller school in his house on Beach Street in Boston. When Bronson enrolled a young African American girl, Susan Robinson, parents objected and withdrew their children. In June 1839, the school closed, and Bronson Alcott's career as a teacher was over.

Louisa, who as a child visited the Temple School, was educated primarily at home; however, her father's educational reforms found their way into *Little Women*. In Chapter 7, "Amy's Valley of Humiliation," Alcott uses Mr. Davis, Amy's teacher, to criticize American education. Comparing Davis to Dr. Blimber, the inept head of the boys' school in Charles Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848), Alcott notes: "Mr. Davis knew any quantity of Greek, Latin,

Algebra, and ologies of all sorts, so he was called a fine teacher; and manners, morals, feelings, and examples were not considered of any particular importance" (*Little Women* 58). After reprimanding Amy for possession of the pickled limes, Mr. Davis physically punishes her by striking her hand with a ruler, an act that prompts Marmee to declare, "I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching, and don't think the girls you associate with are doing you any good" (61). Bronson's emphasis on student-centered education can also be seen in Chapter 11, "Experiments," where Marmee allows the girls to discover on their own the value and need for domestic chores. In addition, at the conclusion to part two of *Little Women*, Alcott introduces readers to the newest student of Jo and Professor Bhaer's school at Plumfield: "a merry little quadroon [a person who is one-fourth black], who could not be taken in elsewhere, but who was welcome to the 'Bhaer-garten,' though some people predicted that his admission would ruin the school" (377). Although the quadroon mysteriously disappears in the March family sequels, the character is clearly inspired by Bronson's defiant act of integration some thirty years earlier. In many ways, *Little Women* exemplifies how education is not just facts learned in a classroom, but instead part of the very fabric of one's life. Alcott would go on to explore her father's education theories in *Little Men* (1871) and its sequel *Jo's Boys* (1886). While Alcott was active in various reform movements, she was perhaps most strongly drawn to the struggle for woman's rights.

Louisa May Alcott was fifteen years old when the first woman's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York in July 1848. As the daughter of abolitionists, Alcott was taught to regard everyone as equal. Both Bronson and Abigail Alcott supported the woman's rights movement (the singular "woman" stressed the importance of the individual as well as alluding to Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, one of the first important books to treat the rights of a woman seriously), and Alcott herself began to take an active part in the fight. Having read Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* as a teenager, Alcott believed she had every

inherent right to achieve her own independence and self-reliance. As Alcott was writing *Little Women* in 1868, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony began publishing their feminist newspaper *The Revolution*. As part two of the novel appeared in April 1869, the two suffragists organized the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA). However, some people, including Alcott, thought the organization too strident, especially in its demand that women be given the vote at the same time as African Americans. This demand, they felt, would slow the effort of freedmen to obtain the right to cast their vote. The clash caused many supporters in the New England Woman's Suffrage Association, led by Julia Ward Howe and Lucy Stone, to consider creating a new organization. The American Woman's Suffrage Association was formed in November 1869, and in 1870, the organization began publishing the *Woman's Journal*, a mouthpiece for its ideas. Alcott herself would contribute a number of articles or letters to this paper.

With such stirring social change in the political air as Louisa May Alcott was writing *Little Women*, much of that zeitgeist could not help but find its way into the novel—most notably in the subject of marriage. While part one ends with the impending marriage of Meg and John Brooke, part two centers on marriage in various ways, so much so that Alcott jokingly told her editor that a friend had suggested "Wedding Marches" as its title (*Selected Letters* 119). Even reviewers noted that the novel went beyond the normal fare of juvenile literature. The Massachusetts *Springfield Daily Republican* writes that the March sisters "are girls with the instincts of womanhood strong and active . . ." (qtd. in Clark 62). Alcott had explored marriage in several of her earlier works, most notably her first novel *Moods* (1864), where the young protagonist Sylvia Yule discovers, only after marriage, that she is unprepared to take a husband. Alcott believed that in a democratic society, marriage must be egalitarian and a home should be built on love and mutual helpfulness, a lesson eventually learned by Meg when she arranges for her wealthier friend to buy her expensive dress fabric in order to provide her husband John with a winter coat. Even Jo's marriage to Friedrich Bhaer proves to be one of equals, despite the howls of

protest Alcott heard from her first readers. Although Alcott originally wished for Jo to remain unmarried, she well understood the realities of the late 1860s. Women had so few opportunities for employment. In addition, the Civil War had devastated the pool of available husbands. Elaine Showalter notes: "As a couple, Jo and Bhaer have both values and feelings in common; they share an interest in educational reform, in new ideas, and in practical philanthropy. Most important he understands her need to work" (62). In fact, as early as October 1856, Alcott had depicted an independent woman and egalitarian marriage. In her story "The Lady and the Woman," published in the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*, Alcott's protagonist Kate Loring declares:

> An affectionate or accomplished idiot is not my ideal of a woman. I would have her strong enough to stand alone, and give, not ask, support. Brave enough to think and act, as well as feel. Keen-eyed enough to see her own and other's faults, and wise enough to find a cure for them. I would have her humble, though self-reliant, gentle, though strong; man's companion, not his plaything; able and willing to face storms, as well as sunshines, and share life's burdens, as they come. (35)

These are the same qualities that Marmee would like to see in her daughters. What Alcott describes here is not a pious, pure, passive, and domestic young woman, but a modern one—a woman of the nineteenth century.

Little Women is very much a novel of its time, but it also transcends its time as Louisa May Alcott creates a universal family with many of the same struggles that still exist today. At the conclusion of the novel with the entire family around her, Jo declares her future plans: "I want to open a school for little lads—a good, happy, homelike school, with me to take care of them, and Fritz to teach them" (*Little Women* 374). Thus, the novel ends much as it began—with thoughts of reform. From the identification of the March sisters' burdens to the education of Jo's boys at Plumfield, *Little Women* demonstrates the ability to improve both one's self and society. One would expect nothing less from Louisa May Alcott,

who once closed her letter to the feminist newspaper the *Woman's Journal*, "Yours for reforms of all kind" (*Selected Letters* 238).

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DRESSING, PASSING, AND AMERICANIZING: ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S SARTORIAL FICTIONS

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DRESSING, PASSING, AND AMERICANIZING: ANZIA YEZIERSKA'S SARTORIAL FICTIONS

Anzia Yezierska's fiction returns repeatedly to moments in which her heroines experience triumphant moments of self-affirmation through their attainment of an Anglo-American standard of beauty. Most famously, Sara Smolinsky, heroine of Bread Givers (1925), announces her entrance into the Americanized middle-class profession of *teacherin* with her purchase of a "plain serge" suit from the College Shop of a Fifth Avenue department store. Yezierska was not alone in identifying clothing as an important means of Americanization for Jewish women; social workers urged immigrant women to redress themselves American-style, some even before leaving Ellis Island.[1] Consumerism served these women as a powerful means of Americanization.

A variety of social theories inspired social workers in their efforts to reclothe immigrant women. Principal among them was the work of Thorstein Veblen, who in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1898) had analyzed the role of consumption in the enforcement of class distinctions. For Veblen, the development of the leisure-class begins with the possession of women and slaves. Women in primitive cultures are trophies, serving only as refections of the wealth of their husband or master. In modern cultures, women retain their status as trophy, but modern cultures, women retain their status as trophy, but affirm it through the performance of conspicuous consumption, which demonstrates their incapacity for work. Conspicuous consumption, leisure, and waste join forces to signify leisure class identity.

In Veblen's analysis, the classes are bound together by patterns of emulation and invidious comparison. "The possession of property" becomes a "requisite to that complacency which we call self-respect" (31).[2] In order to maintain a secure sense of class identity, one accumulates possessions equal in amount and quality to that of the class with whom one identifies. Internal competition characterizes the leisure class; competition across class boundaries marks the community as a whole. The lower classes place themselves in invidious comparison with the leisure class, and struggle to attain the same level of possessions. The psychological ramification of invidious comparison is a sense of inferiority or lack shared by all the members of a community, for when the "normal, average individual"

> has reached what may be called the normal pecuniary standard of the community, or of his class in the community, this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average

standard. (TLC, 31)

Women occupy a particularly important role in cultures based on conspicuous consumption. Through dress, they continue to signify their status as trophy; Veblen notes that the adornments of leisure-class women's dresses denote the similarity of their role in the culture with that of servants. Corsets and high heels emphasize the uselessness of the leisure-class woman, whose body is too confined to perform productive labor. With the emergence of the leisure-class, Veblen argues, even the desired shape of the female body changes: the beautiful woman suggests her unfitness for labor by the "delicacy" of "the hands and feet, the slender figure, and especially the slender waist" (TLC, 147). Women are especially imprisoned by leisure-class culture and its cycles of emulation, yet in their role as domestic consumers, they are also primarily responsible for its perpetuation. As women entering the middle-class and desiring to emulating the dominant standard of beauty embodied by American leisure class, Yezierska's heroines are particularly susceptible to what Veblen describes as the danger of the culture of consumption. As this essay will argue, Yezierska's fiction mines the possibilities and limitations of Jewish female self-affirmation within that culture.

Fashion symbolizes both the pleasures and the dangers of Americanization for the heroine of Yezierska's first novel, Salome of the Tenements (1923), in which the author conducts an uneasy dance with the notion of the self-transformative powers of fashion and consumption. From the very first pages of the novel, Yezierska plunges her readers into a world of object culture in which subjects read others through sartorial signs and codes. As Sonya Vrunsky, a ghetto journalist modeled on Yezierska's friend Rose Pastor Stokes, interviews John Manning — a millionaire reformer based on both Graham Pastor Stokes and John Dewey — her "heart" is "pierced by the cultured elegance of Manning's attire" (2).[3] Manning, on the other hand, notes that "femininity flared through" Sonya's "unrevealing uniform of blue serge," a traditional working-class fabric. Yezierska immediately establishes a contrast between hand-made and ready-made, the "hidden quietness" of expensive fabrics and the "shininess" of cheap ones. The "hand-made quality" of Manning's clothing elevates it to a work of art, derogating that of Yezierska's heroine. As if Yezierska were giving us a primer of Veblenesque emulation, Sonya's encounter with Manning throws the "unspeakable cheapness" of her surroundings into stark relief: she abruptly realizes she must transcend the "limp calico dresses of scarlet and purple, gaudy blankets of pink and green checks" that hang in tenement shop-windows and drift from their Laundry-lines (ST, 5). The contrast between color and colorless in which Sonya's critical eye engages marks the first step in her Americanization.

Sonya's yearning for the "hidden quietness" that Manning's clothing emanates turns an immigrant narrative into a search for aesthetic and romantic fulfillment. Manning's Puritan heritage and Christ-like manner cause Sonya to fall instantly and dramatically in love with him. In order to attract him, however, she insists she must have the accoutrements of American beauty. Because other characters in the novel accuse Sonya of being a "vamp," Sonya believes she must repress her exoticism to win him. But "Shopping for Simplicity," as Yezierska entitles the novel's second chap-

ter, is more difficult than Sonya anticipates. The dress shops of the Lower East Side offer only "cheap feathers" and tacky trimmings, imprisoning Sonya in "the tyranny of the cheap ready-mades." Sonya's search for a costume that offers what Veblen calls "the mark of honorific costliness" leads her to Jacques Hollins, formerly Jaky Solomon, a Lower East Side tailor who has successfully "passed" into the dominant culture as a fashion designer.

Hollins's passing has emasculated him: Yezierska characterizes him as "delicate" and "faun-like" (ST, 68) with white, long-nailed fingers and a high, quavering voice. Hollins's "French-American name" and his effeminacy underscore the particularly liminal position of the Americanized East Side Jew. The reader first sees him as Jaky Solomon, tailoring suits for wealthy, crass German Jewish women. The profits of his ability to "push away [their] fat" (ST, 18), to repress signifying characteristics of the immigrant female body, take him to Paris to an apprenticeship with a famous designer. Returning to New York with "a personal wardrobe which any man of the fashionable world might have envied," he remarks himself as the "new Oracle of Fifth Avenue fashion" (20). Sonya gains entry to his Fifth Avenue salon by threatening to expose him: "Tell Mr. Hollins," she informs his assistant, "that an old friend of Jaky Solomon is here" (ST, 21). As a passer, Hollins must have no past; Sonya represents a part of his past that must be repressed for his economic success and social cachet. The German-Jewish Americans who made up his previous clientele, despite their wealth, display no desire to move into Anglo-American society; as "the richest of the rich American Jews," they constitute a self-contained, self-consciously endogamous culture (ST, 9). In contrast, Hollins's and Sonya's effort to reconstitute themselves as part of an Americanized middle-class require the apparatus of passing — to preserve his new name, Hollins agrees to design Sonya the suit of her dreams.

Significantly, the suit Hollins designs for Sonya is colorless, sexless, and anti-exotic, done in a "nun-like grey" that the designer insists will mute her "color and verve" (ST, 47). Sonya's couture suit, then, literalizes the act of successful Americanization, which for Yezierska implies the erasure of the signifiers of Sonya's immigrant Jewish identity — the dress has no trimmings, but only "simple lines" — but of her femininity as well. "Nun-like," its chastity veils her sexuality. Sonya immediately recognizes the repression that the dress has the power to impose: "You made me look like Fifth Avenue-born. Only — I don't want to have the tied-up manners of a lady." Hollins replies, "You don't have to be a second-hand pattern of a person — when you can be your own free, individual self" (ST, 47). Here, the sexual discretion and "hidden quietness" apparently conveyed by the dress offer her the opportunity to reconstruct herself as she desires Manning to see her, as "a woman of culture and refinement" (ST, 73).

As Hollins passes by cultivating an aesthetic ideal that transforms him from tailor into artist, Sonya's newly developed aesthetic sense also helps her to redefine herself as an American. Her new suit enables her to pass not only with Manning, but with other Jews. Having realized that she must redecorate her apartment to match her new suit, she unsuccessfully begs her landlord, Rosenblat, to repaint her room. Dressed in the Hollins suit, she finds the landlord once again; failing to recognize her, the "Essex Street plutocrat" is overwhelmed by her elegance and beauty. The conjunction of Sonya's elegant

suit and her provocative behavior leads him to characterize her as a "chorus-girl," or a woman commonly assumed to be readily sexually available.[4] When he arrives at her flat for their assignation, Sonya demands that he paint her room for free or risk exposure for his bad treatment of tenants. "Fooled by a skirt and a pair of silk stockings," Rosenblat succumbs (ST, 54).

Reviewers of all of Yezierska's novels, but particularly Salome of the Tenements, criticized her reliance on stereotypes; the primitivized Jewish landlord, "ravenously" devouring Eastern European food "swimming with chicken fat," reaching toward Sonya with a "thick hairy paw," supports the reviewers' point.[5] Endowing the landlord with these characteristics places him in invidious comparison with Sonya. Sonya disidentifies herself from the components of Russian Jewishness with which Yezierska characterizes Rosenblat — she delicately eats an omelette while he wolfs down greasy immigrant food. The reader thus supports Sonya's Americanization, and believes it possible that she can extricate herself from this world. In rejecting Rosenblat's characterization of Sonya as an elegant prostitute, however, the reader must endorse what is implied in Sonya's grey suit — that desexualization, the masking of the "color and verve" of the immigrant female body, is a necessary component of the female narrative of Americanization.

If the grey suit symbolically restrains Sonya's sexuality, her redecoration of her rooms increases her self-distancing from her immigrant origins. Sonya refuses to buy furniture on the installment plan, for the "ready-made shoddiness" of the "installment thieves" offer only "red plush over wood shavings, faked mahogany varnished with glue" (ST, 57). Instead, she indebts herself to a corrupt pawnbroker, ironically named "Honest Abe," for one hundred dollars. With the money, she purchases the "vivid simplicity she had longed for all her life" (ST, 65). Yezierska locates Veblen's "mark of honorific costliness" in the absence of adornment of the things she purchases:

> The white dimity curtains that looked so inconspicuously attractive cost ten times as much as the former gaudy prints. The simple couch-cover looked like cheap burlap but for its delicate color and soft weave she had paid more than a week's salary (ST, 65).

Yezierska ironizes here what social workers of the era called "The Gospel of Simplicity." Progressive reformers advocated ridding the immigrant home of trimmings and knick-knacks and encouraging immigrant women to practice the principles of scientific household management in order to speed their Americanization. Lillian Wald, founder of the Henry Street Settlement, opened a "model apartment," where immigrant women could receive instruction in cooking and housekeeping; successful graduates could use the apartment for parties and club meetings. The aesthetic of the model apartments, historian Jenna Weissman Joselit explains, "placed a premium on order and neatness. . .advocating 'good, honest, straight lines'" (137).[6] Practicing the "Gospel of Simplicity," social workers argued, "elevated" household work by simplifying it, transforming it into a "science" and liberating women from the "stigma of drudgery".[7] Through identifying themselves as middle-class women, freed from the tedium of domestic work, immigrant women could become agents in their own Americanization. While social workers encour-

aged immigrant women to identify Americanness as simplicity, the absence of immigrant artifice, here Yezierska demonstrates just how much artifice is necessary to appear natural.

The signifiers of whiteness and simplicity Sonya collects around herself make an effective ploy: convincing Manning that she is a woman of culture, Sonya takes a job at the settlement house Manning operates and marries her prince shortly after. Sonya's efforts to transform herself through her clothes are immediately foiled at the wedding reception: "Astonishingly well-dressed," one of the guests notes, but "her gesticulating hands show her origin" (ST, 121). The Anglo-American woman identifies a disjuncture between Sonya's elegant suit and her gesticulating body; Sonya's repressed ethnic past begins to emerge.

This scene does more than demonstrate, however, the failure of Sonya's emulation of the elite classes. The subtlety of *Salome*, I would argue, emerges as Yezierska reveals the deeply entrenched pattern of emulation that locks together immigrant working-class and elite Anglo-American women. Sonya overhears Manning's female friends gossiping about her at the party. Decoding the elegant clothing she has used to attract Manning, they characterize her as a "mere creature of sex" "with neither breeding, culture, or tradition" (ST, 128). The emulative relationship that binds these women together, one of the women suggests, inheres in the sexual repression of elite Anglo-American women:

> "Why do our debutantes always go to theaters and cafes? To imitate, my dear. . . Let us recognize, my dear, that our smartest clothes are but imitations of the creations of the demi-monde. . . We may imitate their clothes, my dear, but —"
>
> "But the East Side girl hasn't the clothes," broke in the innocent voice of the debutante.
>
> "She needs none, my dear. . . She gets the man she wants. . . without them." There was a laugh at the ambiguous phrase. (ST, 128)

Middle-class social workers encouraged working-class immigrant women to emulate the bourgeois and elite through adapting new patterns of consumption and refashioning their bodies according to an Anglo-American ideal, yet resented their success.[8] Here Yezierska satirizes both Sonya's and the elite women's dependence on class emulation. The elite women attempt to recapture their own sexuality through an appropriation of the trappings of immigrant sexuality, imitating the clothes and behavior of chorus-girls and *demi-mondaines*. In contrast, Sonya's efforts to cast herself as a "woman of culture and refinement," instead of allowing her to instantiate herself as such, plunge her into a cycle of repression of the immigrant past.

The text emphasizes the incomplete repression of Sonya's immigrant past by returning her to the world of the settlement house after her marriage to Manning. Sonya marks her liminality by telling her husband, "I don't look yet like a dignified Mrs. Manning. So I can get around unobserved, and tell you what I see" (ST, 134). If before, Sonya has passed as a "chorus-girl" for

Rosenblat, here she masquerades in a similarly ambiguous role. Successfully unnoticed, identified as neither an elite wife enjoying her leisure nor a working-class Salome, Sonya moves through the ranks of unassimilated, "Carmen-type factory girls" (ST, 136) who people the settlement house. The ambivalence surrounding Sonya's Americanization is suggested in her critical gaze at the dress and make-up of an immigrant girl, whose "tight-fitting princess dress" was the height of "Grand Street fashion" (ST, 136) and the "better-dressed," yet unappealing social workers, who mark their exclusion from conventional femininity by the "stiff-tailored, graceless severity of their clothes" (ST, 135). Yezierska differentiates the female Americanizer repression and assertion of female sexuality; Sonya's rejection of both positions underscores her liminal status. Having acceded to the role of Americanizer through her marriage, she is not yet fully Americanized.

Manning's settlement house depends upon his Deweyan belief in the "democracy of the spirit," in which all class, ethnic, and racial differences may be transcended. Sonya, realizing the idealism of such a theory, preaches a "democracy of beauty" in which ethnic women may freely refashion themselves over in the model of elite American women. As she tells Jacques Hollins early in the novel:

> "All I want is to be able to wear silk stockings and a Paris hat the same as Mrs. Astorbilt, and then it wouldn't bother me if we had Bolshevism or Capitalism, or if the democrats or republicans win. Give me only the democracy of beauty and I'll leave the fight for government democracy to politicians and educated old maids." (ST, 27)

The "democracy of beauty" Sonya envisions by the conclusion of the novel attempts to fuse Sonya's "vamp" sexuality and consumerist energies with the elegance of the upper-class women of Manning's milieu. In the final pages of the novel, Sonya recuperates both Hollins's design work and his heterosexual identification. When Sonya first arrived at his salon, he had wished for her beauty to better "show off his creations" (ST, 25); by the end of the novel, the "man in him" is "hungry for the passion she lavished on mere gowns" (ST, 175). In their mutual belief that "beauty. . . belongs to no one class," they agree to open a shop on the Lower East Side for the working-girl, offering "beauty for those who love it, beauty that is not for profit" (ST, 178).

Sonya's reinscription in the Lower East Side community appears to offer a gesture of reconciliation, an integration of the present with the past. In affording immigrant women access to beauty, Sonya gives them a form of agency, of realizing female desires. In this scene, however, Yezierska also demonstrates Sonya's internalization of the subtlest, and most insidious, principles of Americanization. Inculcating immigrant women into Anglo-American ideals of beauty, she unwittingly conscripts the "Carmen-type factory girls" of the settlement house into the same repressive ideology of her grey suit. Sonya's narrative of female Americanization requires repressing the ostensibly transgressive immigrant sexuality coded by tacky trimmings and "cheap ready-mades"; in opening her store, she passes on the heritage of her own Americanization by inscribing her customers within a version of American femininity that cannot reconcile itself with immigrant sexuality. In

making "the democracy of beauty" available to the masses, Sonya puts a simulacrum of agency up for sale.

It is tempting to read the ambiguity around the "shop for the beautiful" as evidence of Yezierska's subliminal awareness of the repressive aspects of Americanization through consumption. If such an awareness is present, however, it exists in tandem with Yezierska's deeply held belief that her expensive but plain clothing signified her own successful embourgeoisement. As Yezierska's daughter and biographer Louise Levitas Henriksen explains, even during her passion for "beautiful clothes in brilliant colors,[9] instead of spending her money on severely tailored suits and shirtwaist dresses.[10] Yezierska herself may have sought to transcend the immigrant sexuality supposedly embodied in the "cheap ready-mades." In Bread Givers (1925), however, Yezierska demonstrates the intimate link of the repression of immigrant female sexuality to consumerist Americanization.

Bread Givers subtitle, "A struggle between a father of the Old World and a daughter of the New," summarizes its feminist narrative: in the novel, Yezierska charts the efforts of Sara Smolinsky, a child of the Lower East Side, to become an American, escape her tyrannical father, and achieve love and meaningful work. Yezierska literalizes the process of "the traffic in women," the exchange of women to reinforce male homosocial bonds, devoting the first third of the novel to the efforts of Reb Smolinsky, a Lower East Side patriarch and paternal tyrant, to marry off his four daughters to rich husbands. The explicit reification of women — always implied, yet not fully explored, in the resonances of Sonya's character with the figures of the chorus-girl, the immigrant prostitute, or the man-destroying "vamp" — complicates Yezierska's ambivalence around the Americanizing potential of consumption in Bread Givers. The Smolinsky daughters' desire for "things" parallels their efforts to escape the marital marketplace; while Reb Smolinsky fashions his own American identity as a salesman of daughters, the Smolinsky women must refashion themselves as American consumers.

From the first pages of the novel, consumerist yearnings divide the Smolinsky family: sister Mashah is too busy looking for trimmings for her hat to look for work, even though the family cannot pay their rent. Adding paper roses to her hat brim, she tells the other sisters: "Like a lady from Fifth Avenue I look, and for only ten cents, from a pushcart on Hester Street" (BG, 2).[11] Aspiring to resemble "a picture on a magazine cover" (BG, 3), an ideal of white American beauty, Mashah acknowledges her complicity in a pattern of emulation. The other Smolinsky sisters decry, yet envy, Mashah's happy self-transformation through the collection and display of commodities: Bessie, the eldest, rushes at Mashah's new hat "as if to tear it to pieces" (BG, 3). The narrator simply notes that Mashah, who insists on purchasing the sanitizing, Americanizing commodities of toothbrush, towel, and soap, "had no heart" and "that millionaire things willed themselves in her empty head" (BG, 6).[12]

Mashah — identified in the early sections of the novel as a "doll lady from the show window of the grandest department store" (BG, 4, 18), an imitator of a Fifth Avenue lady or the belle of a "magazine cover" — embodies an Americanized aesthetic, which the other women of the family go on to appropriate through copying her habits of consumption. Her slender body, blonde hair, blue eyes signify the American ideal of chaste, yet desirable sexuality ("a

million eyes" follow her on the street [BG, 19], yet she is never accused of vampish behavior) that the other women must struggle to attain.

Yezierska goes on to demonstrate, however, that the aesthetic Mashah embodies contributes to the Smolinsky family's "progress out of poverty into varying forms of . . . petit-bourgeois security"[13] begins as the women of the household imitate Mashah, each purchasing their own toothbrushes. "More and more we wanted more things," Sara tells us of the cycle of consumption initiated here, and "and really needed more things the more we got them" (BG, 29). However, the girls' desire to Americanize through participating in this Veblenesque pattern lies in direct contradiction to Reb Smolinsky's desire to market the girls. Their identity as consumers rivals their father's efforts to figure them as objects of consumption.

When Bessie, the oldest and plainest of the daughters, finds a lover, she remakes the apartment along "model apartment" lines, buying " a new oilcloth for the table, a remnant from a lace curtain to tack around the sink, to hide away the rusty pipes, and a ten-cent roll of gold paper for the chandelier to cover up the fly dirt that was so thick you couldn't scrub it away" (BG, 37). In preparation for her beau's arrival, Bessie forces her body into one of Mashah's dresses:

> The dress that slipped so easy on Mashah's thin shape stuck on Bessie in the middle . . . "It'll choke you to wear it," I said, worn out from the pulling. "Can't you see it ain't big enough?"
>
> "It's got to be big enough." And Bessie stood up on her toes and blew out all her breath, and she squeezed herself with her hands till I could pull together the hooks one at a time. But it was so tight, where every hook was came a wrinkle. It made her shape stick out so funny that I begged her: "Better put back on your old skirt and waist that you wear to the shop, because in this tight dress it sticks out so your fatness." (BG, 41)

Yezierska's use of the vocal metaphor, "choking," to describe the constricting quality of Mashah's dress suggests the restriction of speech and breathing, indeed the possible extinction of all identity. The failure of the dress to contain Bessie's body — with predictable Yezierskan humiliation, its seams split a few moments later — suggest the difficulty of reconciling an Eastern European Jewish femininity, literalized in Bessie's maternal body, to the Americanized physical ideal suggested by Mashah's slender body and constricting dress.[14] The narrative gives us a first glimpse of the inevitable incompleteness of Americanization: the failure of the body to fit into the "ready-made" self America offers points to the impossibility of successfully repressing the past.

Bessie's efforts to offer herself for marriage fail miserably in light of Reb Smolinsky's more successful efforts to market his daughters: the matchmaker himself adopts the position of the courted in his rejection of Bessie's suitor, Berel Bernstein. When Bernstein offers to take Bessie without a dowry, Smolinsky replies, "With Bessie I can be independent. I don't have to grab the first man that wants her. I can wait yet a few years" (BG, 45). Smolinsky

realizes the exchange value of his eldest daughter, the hardest worker and best wage-earner in the household. Shortly after Bernstein breaks the engagement, Reb Smolinsky marries Bessie off successfully to Zalmon the fishmonger. Smolinsky's success as a marketer of daughters encourages him to advertise his skills in the Ghetto News:

> Reb Smolinsky, the old, reliable matchmaker. Girls and widows, with five hundred to five thousand dollars dowry. All kinds of men, doctors, lawyers, wealthy widowers. Put your future in my hands and I'll settle you with good luck for life (BG, 91).

The transformation of women into consumable objects thus becomes an intrinsic part of Reb Smolinsky's upward mobility. He has turned his home into a "show window," the aesthetic embodied in Mashah's emulation of magazine covers and Fifth Avenue ladies, and successfully suppressed the failed Americanization suggested by Bessie's split seams. Significantly, before marrying Bessie off to Zalmon the fishmonger, he buys her a "new velvet dress, richer than anything she had ever seen" (BG, 104). However, as the Smolinsky family's trajectory toward middle-class American Jewish life continues, Yezierska demonstrates the destructive capacity of the aesthetic of the "show window."

The seductiveness of this aesthetic drives the Smolinskys to Elizabeth, New Jersey, where Reb Smolinsky has spent all the family's money in the purchase of a grocery store. When the Smolinskys arrive at the store, it is "lighted in great style," with the "outside of the windows full of sales signs" and "the place hum[ming] with business" (BG, 113). A tantalizing note of abundance characterizes the wares themselves: "Mother kept gazing around the store, drinking in the full-packed shelves of cereals, canned goods, soap and washing powder. The place seemed full to overflowing with goods" (BG, 114).

The "overflow" of goods prompts a fantasy of consumerism, in which the commodities the Smolinsky family must sell conflate with those they want to buy. As Ferraro suggests, the family's "anticipation of consumption" merges "the work that affords middle-class consumption and consumption itself".[15] Yet the family's narrative of consumerist Americanization is ruptured when Sara reveals the store to be a stage for the betrayal of the promise of middle-class commodities: accidentally knocking over a pile of oatmeal boxes, she reveals them to be empty. The store's barrels and boxes, we learn, are similarly empty. The removal of the promise of consumption makes the women of the family erupt into violence: as Sara and her mother rage through the store, "stabbing" open barrels with a "hatchet" and a "knife," they find no sugar, salt, grain, or butter in the barrels. Food, a central metaphor in Yezierska's fiction for human warmth and emotional sustenance, is replaced with theatrical imitations — sand and a thin veneer of paste. No nourishment will be found, Yezierska suggests, in the consumer ethos of Americanization the Smolinsky family aims for in its new identity as shopkeepers.[16]

The aesthetic of the show window, which seduces its readers through the appearance of abundance yet ultimately affirms the unattainability of the products within, instructs Sara in a new way of reading. Now, like Sonya, she too longs for the "sensuous quietness" of a middle-class America that is less

vulgar than the entry into American identity embodied in the shop ownership. This shift reflects Sara's, and perhaps Yezierska's, internalization of the aesthetic propagated by the social workers, as it rejects a middle-class vulgarity that Bread Givers casts as Jewish *nouveau riche*. Sara's renewed exposure to her sister, Fania, emphasizes the identification of vulgar display with assimilated Jews. Yezierska characterizes Fania's sad marriage to the *allrightnik* Abe Shmukler in terms similar to those Veblen uses to describe the trophy-wife: "These diamonds that you see on me," Fania cries, "that's his savings bank. He buys me jewellery to show me off to his friends that he's so rich" (BG, 175). As a trophy-wife, Veblen would argue, Fania primarily serves to signify her husband's wealth, not only in her unfitness for productive labor, but in her adoption of unnecessarily ornate garments. Sara responds with disgust to his self-commodification; "I don't got time for the outside show," she proclaims. For Fania, significantly, "What else is there but the outside show?" Sara's own efforts at self-determination necessitate her rejection of a wealthy suitor, Max Goldstein, who would demand that she serve as a signifier of her husband's wealth.

While Sara successfully refuses the commodification demanded by the marriage to Goldstein, who would make a "wife into just another piece of property" (BG, 199), and thus resists the cycle of emulation instigated by invidious comparison with an Anglo-American middle-class. As Sara arrives at the rural college where she is to spend four years, Yezierska offers a more detailed rendering of the students' "plain beautifulness," the lack of "show-off" in their clothing, their "spick-and-span cleanliness" (BG, 212), than she does of the students' behavior or interaction with her heroine. In fact, Yezierska condenses four years of college into one chapter, beginning with Sara's invidious comparison with her fellow students, and ending as they cheer, "All hail Sara Smolinsky." Although access to her colleagues' "plain beautifulness" necessitates putting work as a laundress over her studies, Sara believes that "a plain felt hat like those college girls wore" (BG, 221) will ensure her acceptance into the "real America." The college milieu reinforces to Sara that an acceptance of Anglo-American deportment, symbolized in the "graceful quietness" (BG, 237) of middle-class dress, typifies an Americanization more genuine than that acquired through education.

Sara's triumphant return to New York, and her beginning of her career as a *teacherin*, reinforces the suggestion that her consumer-driven Americanization is more effective than that which she has achieved through four years of college. Shopping for a new suit appropriate for her new job, she enters the "Sport Shop, where the college girls get their clothes," reminding herself that despite the money in her wallet, "I must be plain as I am without ornaments" (BG, 238). When she chooses a suit, it is of "plain serge only," but with "more style in its plainness than the richest velvet" (BG, 239). Made from a traditional working-class fabric, the suit, like Sonya's "shop for the beautiful," initially serves as a metaphor of the reconciliation of her immigrant past with her Americanized present.

But as the final pages of the novel reemphasize, this reconciliation is by no means secure. The suit that seemingly heralds a triumphant entry into American culture simultaneously makes painfully ambivalent what is arguably the most crucial aspect of Sara's psychological adjustment to the

New World. When Mrs. Smolinsky dies shortly after her daughter's return to New York, consumerism again divides the family, as it does in the first pages of the novel:

> . . . The undertaker, with a knife in his hand, cut into father's coat and he rent his garments according to the Biblical law and ages of tradition. Then he slit my sisters' waists, and they, too, did as Father had done. Then the man turned to me with the knife in his hand. "No," I cried. "I feel terrible enough without tearing my clothes."
>
> "It has to be done."
>
> "I don't believe in this. It's my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn't bring Mother back to life again." (BG, 255)

Yezierska demonstrates that Sara, not Mashah, has internalized the aesthetic of the show-window: she has outpaced her sisters in the struggle for Americanization. Rending her suit would destroy her identity as an Americanized middle-class professional woman and thus her self-image: like Masha in the beginning of the novel, she has successfully misrecognized herself, but in the windows of the College Shop, not in the covers of women's magazines. I also find here a resonance of the failure and incompleteness, of Sara Smolinsky's Americanization. If Sara cannot allow her dress to be rended, she cannot mourn her mother, which would allow her to achieve closure on the past. Sara's refusal to mourn arguably awakens a dormant melancholia that she has attempted to repress in her successful achievement of American selfhood. This melancholia lives until the novel's final lines, where "the weight" of "the generations that made my father" burdens the heroine's shoulders.

If in *Salome* and initially in Bread Givers, clothing signals a Cinderella-like transformation into American selfhood, it also serves as a compelling reminder of Americanization's costs. Sara's inability to rend her suit leaves her painfully liminal at the moment of her mother's death; in Sonya's mediation between the elite community for whom she designs and the working-class women whom she inculcates into American ideals of beauty, she carves out an agonizingly tenuous position in the Americanized middle-class. Social worker Sophonisba Breckinridge, calling on Veblen's work, offers an analysis of what the calls "the inexorable dilemma" of clothing for immigrant women that, to my mind, aptly reflects the predicament of Yezierska's heroines. While Breckinridge encouraged newly arrived women to practice "the neglected art of spending," to Americanize themselves by shopping in department stores rather than in the ghetto, she realized consumerism's destabilizing potential: immigrant women, faced a particular dilemma with regard to dress, for "they often come from places where dress served to show where one came from, and who one was. In the United States, dress serves to *conceal one's origin and one's relationships*".[17] While Breckinridge incorrectly assumes the stability of sartorial signs in the Old World, she identifies dress as an agent in repressing the past. By enabling class passing or performative self-revision, fashion mediates the transition from immigrant to American. However, the cycle that it sets in motion, that of repressing and remembering the immi-

grant past, shakes at its foundations the Americanized identity Yezierska's heroines have taken such pains to build.

END NOTES

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4 On chorus-girls, see Lewis Erenberg, Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and The Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 206-230.

5 See Gay Wilentz's introduction to the 1996 edition of Salome of the Tenements for examples. Kathy Stubbs's introduction to Yezierska's Arrogant Beggar (1927; rept. 1996) locates Yezierska's reliance on stereotype within the American feminine sentimentalist tradition.

6 Jenna Weissman Joselit, The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950. New York: Hill and Wang, 1994.

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8 Jane Addams, Democracy and Social Ethics (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1907), p. 31.

9 Louise Levitas Henriksen, Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988), p. 210.

10 See Yezierska's autobiography, Red Ribbon on a White Horse (New York: Persea Books, 1950) for several accounts of the author's shame over her failure to dress the part during her tenure as a Hollywood writer.

11 Bread Givers (New York: Doubleday, 1925; rept. New York: Persea Books, 1975). References will appear hereafter in the text as BG.

12 Yezierska's Yiddish locution — the "things willed themselves in her empty head" — allows the commodities to become subjects, in fact active participants, in the Smolinsky household. See Sallie Drucker's "Yiddish, Yidgin, and Yezierska: "Dialect in Jewish-American Writing" (*Yiddish* 6.4 [1987]: 99-113) for an analysis of Yezierska's use of Yiddishisms.

13 Thomas Ferraro, Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 63.

14 Schreier's Becoming American Women shows that immigrant women adopted the corset with similar beliefs in mind (64-65).

15 Ferraro, Ethnic Passages, p. 64.

16 For more on food and hunger imagery in Yezierska, see Ellen Golub, "Eat Your Heart Out: The Fiction of Anzia Yezierska," Studies in American Jewish Literature, 3: (1983): 51-61.

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What Maisie Knew and the Impossible Representation of Childhood

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As a result of the post-structuralist tendency to scrutinize the social layers that construct identity, much interest has turned towards the subject position of childhood. This interest is not new: the factors of difference suggested by age have long been recognized by realists attempting to depict children. In this essay I will discuss how Henry James saw children as inaccessible subjects, and how this inaccessibility provided the perfect challenge for him as a realist who constantly tried to expose and work through the limitations of language and subjectivity. In James, children are ever elusive, both representationally and narratively. His unique combination of externalized focalization, visual objectivity, and dramatic irony anticipates post-structuralist approaches to the social subject and draws attention to the one-sided and unchecked power of adults constructing children.

To represent creatively requires models as common frames of reference for author and reader. Models, always generalizing (thus, essentializing), appeal to the adult thinker's rationalist tendency to categorize, explain, pin truths. For the novelist, whose task depends upon language entirely, whose narrative mode, no matter how experimental in terms of chronology, depends upon linearity, whose genre, no matter how "objective" in point of view, springs from and inspires interpretive thought, these rationalist tendencies are central. However, the impulse to conveniently essentialize identity can be frustrated by the need to realistically represent others. Dorrit Cohn has pointed out that "Narrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed" (*Transparent Minds* 7). When the novelist tries to bridge subjectivities to convincingly "get into the mind" of and create a character, s/he must convincingly speculate. Yet, as Cohn states, "the special life-likeness of narrative fiction—as compared to dramatic and cinematic fictions—depends on what

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writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels" (5–6). It is the rationalist prerogative to define, but we are limited by our own socialization in our abilities to understand, let alone represent, others.[1]

In representing the position of childhood, even the illusion of an intersubjective link between adult writer and child is impossible. As James Kincaid explains, the essentializing notion of "the child" evolved as "everything the sophisticated adult was not, everything the rational man of the Enlightenment was not" (15). Thus, the concept of childhood has been defined by adult discourse as that which lies outside of and cannot engage that discourse. There is a language gap, an inherent inaccessibility, between the concept of a child and the adult mind that creates it. Childhood is viewed as prelapsarian, relatively preverbal, outside empowered discourse, unknowing, irrational—the very opposite (though constantly shifting without center) of "adulthood." Childhood is whatever adults have lost and maybe never had. How can any adult writer convincingly represent a position that has been constructed as such?

At the turn of the century, in the middle of what Neil Postman calls the "high watermark of childhood," much interest turned toward defining "the child," as "the certainty of opinion about the nature of childhood began to be questioned" (61, 67). Realist and psychological novels reflect this trend. According to Muriel Shine,

> The evolution of the child in English and American fiction closely parallels the development of the novel itself. [. . .] An outstanding characteristic differentiating the modern novel from that of the nineteenth century is the shift in emphasis from concern with external phenomena to preoccupation with inner experience. [. . .] The simplistic view of the child yielded to the probing analytical impulse of the writer and the child became a vessel of consciousness to be explored in depth. (18)

With the modern "inward turn" towards investigating psychological process, novelists began to shift towards narrative techniques that provide an illusion of phenomenological immediacy. Popular modes, such as the omniscient narrator, gave way to figural narration (fixed or limited third-person). But as Wallace Martin points out, "figural narration has certain limitations. When representing actions, the narrator can substitute present-tense dialogue for past-tense summary easily enough; but how can the same shift be effected when conveying thoughts and feelings?" (134). With this representational dilemma Martin explains the modernist preference for self-narration (first-person), yet he seems to be overlooking a concurrent movement away from "conveying thoughts and feelings" in increasingly experimental figural narration—a trend that has continued and still thrives in post-modernist fiction.

Though first-person narratives can offer a convincing illusion of translating subjectivities, "Infancy and death point up the most obvious limitation imposed on self-narration by the figural identity of hero and historian" because they are inaccessible positions (Cohn, *Transparent Minds* 144). Even so, more authors

have approached the former than the latter in the figuration of children (granted, they appear more convincingly accessible than infants). For Henry James, to whom authentic characterization was key, children posed a further challenge to realistic representation, as he was intent on avoiding trespasses into unknowable subjectivities. He would not presume to represent a child through self-narration, a method toward which he was already disinclined—to take the child's role would be unconvincing. He may have recognized a greater barrier between adult and child minds than that between adults.

In his "Art of Fiction," James criticized Edmond de Goncourt's *Chérie*, "which strikes me as having failed deplorably in what it attempts—that is in tracing the development of the moral consciousness of a child" (*AC* 180). Though he gives no explanation, his choice of this novel as an example in his discussion of verisimilitude seems significant. It reveals that he was already associating children with the various imaginative leaps or, as he calls them, "impressions," upon which even the realist must depend. He even compares representing a child to describing an unseen land.

Shine's *The Fictional Children of Henry James* traces James's career in terms of an increasingly realistic portrayal of children. Her argument is that his work gradually eschews the convention of sentimental figuration for more probing and believable portraits, and she credits James with the introduction of child figures into the psychological novel: "Twentieth-century novelists owe a debt of gratitude to Henry James for his active role in the movement to sweep away outmoded convention and prejudice and to establish the child in literature as a worthy object of complete and honest investigation" (174–75).

The results of James's investigation, however, were not simply mimetic successes. As James states in "The Art of Fiction," "The characters [. . .] which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is difficult to fix" (*AC* 171). Aware of the relativity inherent in the act of representation, his attempts to delineate children realistically led him to recognize the impossibility of the task and to capitalize on it. The inaccessible child provided him with an ironic center for his trademark ambiguity. In this respect, Maisie is his crowning achievement.

In his preface to *What Maisie Knew* (1897), James wrote, "Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary" (27). Locating the obstacle to representation in the language gap between adults (writers) and children, James exploits the inaccessibility of childhood to create an ironic center. Though she is the central figure of the novel's development, James never lets the reader forget that Maisie is mentally inscrutable because there is no common language through which to gain access to her mind. Maisie, we are told, "had ever of course in her mind fewer names than conceptions" (163). But James constructs her as not wanting words: "there were a sense and a sound in everything to which words had nothing to add" (180). He gingerly avoids putting words into her mind. When she has a thought, the narrator reports it only through a veil of distancing qualifications: "it then fell into its place in her general, her habitual view of the particular

phenomenon that, had she felt the need of words for it, she might have called her personal relation to her knowledge" (204).

Mary Galbraith points out that indirect discourse keeps the reader at a further remove than free indirect discourse:

> [A] character's experience is represented propositionally in sentences containing a verb characterizing this experience ("she thought she was crazy"; "she felt sad"). [. . .] This narrative technique does not purport to be faithful to the words a character might use. (205)

James gives an impression of Maisie's situation "without implying her verbal participation in their expression" to avoid, literally, putting words in her mouth (207). For most of the novel, Maisie is a preverbal child-figure who exists mentally outside of the discourse surrounding her.

James does not presume to give a close representation of Maisie's inexpressible thought. In fact, his frequent use of indirect discourse insures that the reader remains aware of Maisie's inaccessibility. Seymour Chatman writes,

> only direct forms cite the speaker's exact words; indirect forms give no such guarantee. [. . .] The indirect form in narratives implies a shade more intervention by a narrator, since we cannot be sure that the words in the report clause are precisely those spoken by the quoted speaker. (200)

James's verisimilitude here depends upon his impressions rather than perceivable facts, and he avoids imposing on the child-figure by foregrounding his narrator's mediation.

Despite her apparent lack of concern for language, all Maisie seems to do is listen to the adults around her. In doing so, she is bombarded with language used opaquely and manipulatively. Forced to "read the unspoken into the spoken" (205) words of her parents and caretakers, she often appears to misunderstand their intent. Using dramatic irony and a common technique of children's writers, hyperliteralism, James draws attention to the exclusive, yet arbitrary, nature of sophisticated language—that is, of adult discourse. Rather than understanding that Sir Claude is an idle womanizer, "Maisie wept on Mrs. Wix's bosom after hearing that [he] was a butterfly" (89). "'He leans on me,'" Mrs. Wix dramatically boasts of being in Sir Claude's confidence, "and she was more surprised than amused when, later on, she accidentally found she had given her pupil the impression of a support literally supplied by her person" (95). James highlights Maisie's incomplete socialization and resulting isolation through this device.

The text even technographically reproduces Maisie's linguistic estrangement by relating only a fragment of dramatic dialogue. Maisie hears Sir Claude's outburst at her mother as "'You damned old b—!'" and later reports the missing word as "brute," yet the reader is left aware that the original utterance was a more shocking term (126). Though her apparent ignorance of the unpleasant sides of adult behavior constructs Maisie in a mode congenial to the Romantic innocent,

the process of her education reveals much about the social adult self and does so in such a way as to heighten the reader's anxiety about just what she can understand.

Maisie becomes the eyes and ears through which the reader perceives her fictive reality, yet writer and reader alike are barred from access to her conscious thought. We see what Maisie sees, but we cannot know what Maisie knows. Galbraith has said, "The absence of Maisie's epistemology [. . .] suggests that her subjectivity is not perceptible or describable within the [. . .] socially constructed webs of meaning which comprise the worlds of 'high society,' public opinion, or the courts" (201–02). James brings attention not to Maisie's innocence (despite many critics' insistence), but to her exclusion from adult society and discourse. Without complete linguistic and social indoctrination, her mind can only be represented as a void that reflects not merely the fictive adults' desires, but James's and the reader's as well.

While her parents, governess, and step-father interact in a complex and ever-shifting love-hate quartet, Maisie stands as the lens through which the reader discerns subtle courtships and deception. Nonetheless, Maisie is left, after all of the blatant flirtation and sexual innuendo, simply with the reflection "that something beyond her knowledge had taken place in the house" (90). Her governess has become her father's lover, but this fact never seems to penetrate Maisie's consciousness. James remains especially ambiguous about her ability to understand matters of sexuality, accentuating that Maisie is actively excluded from knowing those things that seem to make up the bulk of any plot that intrigues the reader. Maisie's parents and their lovers use her as a pawn for their own espionage and wrath, only to heighten our awareness of the girl's lack of involvement. As everyone speaks over and around her, she is excluded from adult culture and seems to know it: "Maisie had a greater sense than ever in her life before of not being personally noticed" (124).

When Miss Overmore marries Beale and quickly becomes disillusioned, she freely conveys to Maisie that her parents are "vile" and "wretched," yet presumes to protect her at the same time:

> Well, if no one had been squared it was because everyone had been vile. No one and everyone were of course Beale and Ida, the extent of whose power to be nasty was a thing that, to a little girl, Mrs. Beale simply couldn't give chapter and verse for. Therefore it was that to keep going at all, as she said, [she] had to make, as she also said, another arrangement—the arrangement in which Maisie was included only to the point of knowing that it existed and wondering wistfully what it was. (136)

Not only is Maisie excluded from certain knowledge, but the reader here is reminded of her discursive isolation, lack of voice, lack of power. The repeated phrase, "she also said," draws our attention to the one-sidedness of adult-child communication.

Similarly, the only time Ida speaks "lucid words" and "almost converses," with her daughter is when she is trying to relinquish all parental duty by pawning her off on her step-father (169, 172). Though her mother has never sheltered Maisie from her affairs and arguments, she, too, pretends to play a protective role: "'There have been things between us—Sir Claude and me—which I needn't go into, you little nuisance, because you wouldn't understand them'" (173). Here, she actively excludes Maisie from knowing what she has never cared to shelter her from, conveniently falling back on the conventional model of the innocent child. And as the narrator cannot report Maisie's understanding, the reader is left guessing what she might think of the situation.

To justifiably and convincingly keep the unknowable Maisie as the center of the novel without representing her consciousness, James limited its focalization to a relatively dramatic point of view, often shifting into indirect discourse to foreground the narrator's mediation, and only offering critical interjections through the safe distance of irony. Genette classed the novel's focalization as fixed—limited to Maisie's view (*Narrative Discourse*). But James further restricts our view by externalizing the focalization, which Genette described as "abstaining from *any* intrusion into the character's subjectivity, reporting only their acts and gestures as seen from the outside with no attempt at explanation" (*Fiction and Diction* 66). Except for rare intrusions by the narrator, what Maisie knows is both fixed and external. We only see what Maisie sees, not through her eyes, but "from the outside."

Chatman's approach explicitly brings in the factor of cognition that Genette glossed over: "Genette has always seemed to mean more by *focalisation* than the mere power of sight. He obviously refers to the whole spectrum of perception: hearing, tasting, smelling, and so on. What is not so clear is the extent to which he means it to reflect other mental activity, like cognition" (192). James's technique is to obscure Maisie's cognition, and this is of such significance to his overall method that (as is a common effect of James's narratological complexity) it is important to recognize focalization as more than a matter of angle, but also opacity.

Chatman provides a new rubric for discriminating degrees of cognitive disclosure. Using Oliver Twist as an example of a center whose misfortunes the reader knows as observed by an omniscient narrator, he writes,

> We immediately infer that for the new-born babe, from his "point of view" (for it makes perfect sense to speak of it as such), it is a matter of concern that he was born in a certain workhouse [. . .]. Since he is too small to see or understand or to have an attitude about such matters, this concern cannot be a matter of filter or slant. We need another name to describe this narrative effect, and I propose "interest-focus." (197)

Whereas "filter" and "slant" imply that a character's consciousness shades our view, "interest-focus" refers to the character on which our interest is focused, thus highlighting that our inference, more so than a narrator's, imposes interpretations

of the character's thoughts and feelings. Chatman's terms are effective here because they take opacity into account and suggest the influence narrative method has on interpretation.

Recognizing these discrepancies is crucial to understanding a work of fiction in which we are reminded of our inability to access another's consciousness: "'Interest' is of particular importance in narrative-media like film, where a strong sense of identification with one character is built up in the audience, though we have no more access to the character's mind than what we can deduce from what he or she says" (190). James, whose technique has often been seen as exemplifying a dramatic point of view, shares qualities with filmic and dramatic representation in lacking the very thing that Cohn identified as unique to fiction—direct reports of the character's thoughts and feelings.

James strove for illustration in lieu of exposition, which could be one reason for his frequent comparisons of fiction to painting. In his notebooks, his plans for depicting Maisie and the events around her reflect his quest for the image, for visual objectivity. Limiting the novel's focalization to what Maisie sees "facilitates my making the child witness the phenomenon in question—prepares the mirror, the plate, on which it is represented as reflected" (150). Maisie is described in the preface as a "register of impressions." Her mind is depicted as a canvas throughout the novel: "she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play" (24, 41). Even as she seemingly grows in her awareness, Maisie is piecing together a picture: "Her vocation was to see the world and to thrill in the enjoyment of the picture; she had grown older in five minutes [. . .]. The place and the people were all a picture together" (182–83).

Maisie pieces a picture for herself and the reader, who then forms a picture of her. Chatman's visually concrete concept of "interest-focus" is sharpest in such images, where James makes us aware of the visual aspects of reading narrative. Cohn points out in *The Distinction of Fiction* that realists have been fond of highlighting visual mediums as part of the convention of transparency:

> The assumption of transparency [. . .] has a highly respectable ancestry in the paratextual discourse of novelists with a realist orientation, where it inspires such images as house of glass (Zola), windows (James), and a glass pane (Sartre). Conversely, for modernists and postmodernists "transparency" figures as a crucially denigrating term in their critique of realist fiction, signifying the benighted ignorance of the impact of presentational conventions on presented content (discourse on story), the illusion that the linguistic sign immediately and invisibly gives access to the world as it is. (173–74)

The assumption or illusion of transparency, however, is not operating so simply in James. Cohn is overlooking a continuum in which foregrounding the pane or frame through which we see a constructed fictional world makes us aware of the fact that it is constructed—that transparency is a conventional illusion that is part

of fiction. This reflective use of media images can create opacity, and, where the social subject is concerned, James aspires to opacity. When we view identity as socially constructed, it becomes layered and opaque. Likewise, recognizing transparency as a convention at work in fiction heightens the reader's awareness of the medium, creating a more opaque glass through which to view fictive reality. To elaborate on Chatman's filmic analogies, a lens can vary in degrees of transparency—the more opaque, the more we are aware of its presence. The mere mention of the glass in James is enough to draw the reader's attention to the convention rather than ignoring that the link to a fictive reality is also a barrier.

John Bender points out that "modern novelistic realism in general is marked by its self-representation as a transparent medium, a mode of writing that one sees through rather than a form one looks at" (67). However, realists and modernists have varied in the extent to which they recognize transparency as a convention. Some rely on a "paradoxical modern conception of a self at once isolated and transparent to view" (201); others highlight this paradox. James was such a transitional exemplar—realist in his quest for accurate representation, modernist in his use of transparency, but like post-modernists as well in exposing transparency as a conventional illusion. For example, as her two governesses quarrel over Maisie and the impropriety of Miss Overmore's affair with Maisie's father, she has a "sharpened sense of spectatorship [. . .]. It gave her often an odd air of being present at her history in as separate a manner as if she could only get at experience by flattening her nose against a pane of glass" (101). James could be describing the reader's experience here.

In *World-Games*, Christopher Nash calls such images "frame-objects" and identifies them as characteristic in "anti-realist" fiction (perhaps James's example alone proves this a misnomer—Nash uses it to replace "post-modernist"): "the mirror now becomes its own counter-reflection—the sign of the inadequacy of mimesis itself" (183). Surely the misty pane that obstinately remains between the reader and Maisie also reflects a barrier that James experienced as her creator—the limitations of psychological mining and representation.

Knowing that his tendencies toward psychological investigation would only lead to futile impositions, James honed his dramatic representational skills to present Maisie as the lens though which to stage his narrative. Later he would articulate this technique theoretically for his preface to *The Awkward Age*, which he "constructed as a play" (*AC* 311). He writes,

> The divine distinction of the act of a play—and a greater than any other it easily succeeds in arriving at—was, I reasoned, in its special, its guarded objectivity. This objectivity, in turn, when achieving its ideal, came from the imposed absence of that "going behind," to compass explanations and amplifications. (309)

Drama served as a model for representing the character through external expressions and situations rather than "going behind" the social persona to an inaccessible self.

Child characters especially necessitate this "guarded objectivity." Reinhard Kuhn describes the language barrier at work:

> The writer dares not dwell too long on the child himself, because at best he can recapture only the disappearing echo of his faint voice. [. . .] Faced with this elusive language, the writer is forced to focus his attention not directly on the child but on the reaction to him, and that is why we must resign ourselves to being satisfied with the adult perception of the child without giving up the hope of some day gaining insight into his reality, or an approximation thereof. (61)

By dramatizing social situations rather than developing a speculative inner-narrative for Maisie, James keeps the reader aware that an "approximation" of understanding is the closest we can get to the subject position we call childhood. In this way, he anticipates the breakdown of the totalized subject. Frederic Jameson included James in his description of late nineteenth-century relativists in whose works "each consciousness is a closed world, so that a representation of a social totality now must take the (impossible) form of a coexistence of those sealed subjective worlds and their peculiar interaction" (350). James's externalized focalization respects the "sealed subjectivity" of his characters, and his dramatic "objectivity" attempts to represent a social totality in which inter-subjective realities are impossible. Jameson wrote that "the literary value that emerges from this new formal practice is called 'irony': and its philosophical ideology often takes the form of a vulgar appropriation of Einstein's theory of relativity."

Certainly James tries to get around the impossible communications implicit in relativism through irony. Dramatic irony, especially, is prevalent with his use of children as the interest-focus (it is the pivotal device for creating ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw*). For example, in *What Maisie Knew*, he uses dramatic irony to convey the barrier between adult discourse and the child listener. When discussing one of her father's mistresses, "the Countess," Mrs. Wix reveals that Beale has become a kept-man of sorts: "'She pays him!'" But Maisie's ironic response accentuates the rift in communication between them: "'Oh *does* she?' At this the child's countenance fell: it seemed to give a reason for papa's behaviour and place it in a more favourable light" (208). To Maisie, who simply disliked "the Countess" based on her own or others' racist bias, this is evidence of the woman's generosity, if not her father's prudence. To Mrs. Wix and the reader, the money exchanged scandalizes the affair even more, but Maisie's response is equally logical, accenting her exclusion from the complex cultural codes that not only revolve around sex, but exist through language. Through dramatic irony James can represent adult culture without "amplifying" Maisie's reasoning.

Early in the events of the novel, Mrs. Wix shows Maisie a photo of her new step-father, Sir Claude. Maisie, not recognizing the significance of the photo to her governess, asks to keep it. Mrs. Wix replies: "'Keep the pretty picture, by all means, precious [. . .]: Sir Claude will be happy himself, I daresay, to give me one with a kind inscription.'" Again dramatic irony is employed to suggest Maisie's

exclusion from the significance of the exchange: "The pathetic quaver of this brave boast was not lost on Maisie, who threw herself [. . .] gratefully on the speaker's neck" (65). In fact, the pathos that Maisie takes as an outpouring of generous reassurance is a revelation of Mrs. Wix's infatuation with Sir Claude. The point seems to be that the point *is* lost on Maisie.

James uses dramatic irony to reveal the construction of "the child" through adult desire. He sets the stage for his adult players to cast Maisie in whatever role suits them at the moment, while she absorbs and responds to their expectations in whatever manner she can make sense of them. Mrs. Wix, who early on reveals her tragic secret of a lost child, constructs Maisie as her own surrogate: "'She's your little dead sister'" (49). Ida (Maisie's mother) sees Maisie as a horrible burden that she must bear, serving her self-image of martyr. Miss Beale finds Maisie a useful tool in her courtship with Sir Claude, as Maisie provides a pretext for their meetings, keeping them "perfectly proper" (58). The arbitrary and self-serving nature of such adult constructions is exposed by the rapidity with which they shift.

In the climactic scene where the abandoned Maisie must decide whether to live with Sir Claude and Miss Beale or Mrs. Wix, Miss Beale calls her an "angel" when she thinks she's been chosen, but an "abominable little horror" when she hasn't (261, 264). Only Sir Claude is consistent in his construction of Maisie as an honest girl: "'I know when people lie—and that's what I've loved in you, that *you* never do'" (108). Yet he has made her his (unwitting?) accomplice in his own lies, just as all the other adults do. James shows the concept of childhood as ever-shifting and elusive, then dramatizes the folly of adult reliance upon it. As Kincaid points out "the child is always running away from us, forcing us into a chase at least as alluring as the stasis offered by the [concept of] the perfectly adorable child. But they are the same child. The monster is the logical continuation of the cherub" (141). The less the adults around Maisie feel they can understand and/or control her, the more they rely upon the simplicity of essentialist notions. Rather than worry that Maisie comprehends all that surrounds her, they comfort themselves by constructing her as innocently out of harm's way.

Fiona Björling writes,

> The Romantic and realist writers approached the child from without, as an object, the redeemer or the victim of a corrupt social order. [. . .] From the end of the eighteenth and through the nineteenth centuries, children represented a measuring rod by which to establish patterns of right and wrong. (6)

Following a tradition of literary child-figuration which held "the child" up as an innocent reflector of social ills, James constructs Maisie as a satiric mirror. But she is an empty mirror, and James generally takes care not to revert to traditional constructions of purity and sweetness on which to base his representation. If Maisie is a "figure," she represents merely the "imposed absence" of psychological exploration. She is a model for his method. Maisie doesn't simply reflect social ills; she mirrors the process of adults' constructing children, and in doing so,

James's own struggle with representation. After all, what is representation but self-conscious social construction?

In this sense, James has far more in common with modernists, who are especially concerned with investigating subjectivity. Björling writes, "With the turn of the century and the advent of modernism, a new attitude towards the child can be discerned. The modernist artist feels himself to be in an existential vacuum, bereft of aesthetic, moral and even perceptive and cognitive norms" (6). Without essentializing cognitive models, the fictional representation of children is limited. As a result, Björling argues, "The modernist artist is interested in the transition from ignorance to knowledge, from the pre-verbal to the verbal state of mind. A paradox consists in the fact that the artist can only feign access to the child's pre-verbal state of mind to which he would give expression." James was aware of the relativity inherent in social subjectivity, and, even more so, of the adult-child language barrier that prevents articulation of resulting differences.

The central theme of *Maisie* is the transition from "ignorance to knowledge," and James continually foregrounds the social constructedness of knowledge through Maisie's development. Her impressions of others are described in terms of how Maisie observes their social reception. Maisie's initial reactions to the Countess are based on the racist responses of her elders, yet she is primarily troubled with socially redefining her father by association: "all in a moment she had had to accept her father as liking someone whom she was sure neither her mother, nor Mrs. Beale, nor Mrs. Wix, nor Sir Claude, nor the Captain, nor even Mr. Perriam and Lord Eric could have possibly liked" (158–59). Likewise, her impressions of Mrs. Wix are based on how she sees others seeing her: "At first she had looked cross and almost cruel; but this impression passed away with the child's increased perception of her being in the eyes of the world a figure mainly to laugh at" (49–50). At a surprisingly brutal moment, Maisie seems to have accepted this socialization when she tells Mrs. Wix, "'Oh you're nobody!'" (231).

Perhaps a more poignant example of James's foregrounding social constructedness comes when Maisie considers the concepts of youth and age. Reflecting the various contextual meanings of "youth," a term that she clearly recognizes as socially applied to herself, she wades through the apparent inconsistencies of adult discourse:

> The only mystification [. . .] was the imposing time of life that her elders spoke of as youth. For Sir Claude then Mrs. Beale was "young," just as for Mrs. Wix Sir Claude was [. . .]. What therefore was Maisie herself, and, in another relation to the matter, what therefore was mamma? It took her some time to puzzle out with the aid of an experiment or two that it wouldn't do to talk about mamma's youth. [. . .] Yet if she wasn't young then she was old and this threw an odd light on her having a husband of a different generation. [. . .] these persons, it appeared, were not of the age they ought to be. (84–85)

In one of the rare indulgences into Maisie's thought, James reveals that "youth" and "age" are relative and constantly shifting concepts, which brings into question

Maisie's own status as "a child." Clearly youth is not simply, as Maisie considers, a definable "time of life" but a socially constructed idea that serves and changes with adult perspectives. In this passage James not only reminds the reader that "youth" is a construct, but he foregrounds his (and our) own act of constructing.

By creating an opaque interest-focus, James draws his reader's attention to his method and theory as much as to his character. As Sonja Bâsíc has said, "Point of view for James served both these ends: a passionate recreating of the sense of life and a detached awareness of the process of constituting it in literary form" (205). Every time he denies access to Maisie's thought, he reminds us of his own diplomatic realist process. *Maisie* is a case study in the inaccessibility of childhood and impossibility of representation. James wrote in his preface, "The effort really to see and really to represent is no idle business in the face of the *constant* force that makes for muddlement" (30). In embracing the challenge, he reveals his own struggles as a psychological realist who tried to avoid the "muddlement" of illusory inter-subjective leaps.

"Recreating the sense of life" in *Maisie* is difficult to achieve without some interruptions on the part of the narrator, who even admits to the difficulty: "I so despair of courting her noiseless mental footsteps here that I must crudely give you my word [. . .]" (212). But for the most part, James turns the impossibility of representation into an opportunity for self-conscious and self-reflective irony: "What she knew, what she *could* know is by this time no secret to us" (184). In fact, the reader knows what Maisie is exposed to and might comprehend, but the very secret that is dangled in front of our noses is the unanswerable question of what she does know. By foregrounding his own struggle in representing a child, James draws our attention to the impossibility of knowing the child, heightens our awareness of the adult construction of children, and our awareness of the relativistic speculation inherent in psychological realism.

Though James was frustrated by the challenge his "interminable little *Maisie*" posed, the inaccessible child allowed him to investigate the process of acquiring language and the effects of gaining cultural knowledge. It also gave him the opportunity to demonstrate his narrative control and sensitivity to social subjectivity. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette wrote of James's shift from first-person narrative to third-person and even dramatic point of view that the reasons for "James's conversions for *Maisie* and *The Ambassadors* are vouched for only by the later testimony of the prefaces. The difficulty James evoked for Maisie is clear enough (the little girl's limited vocabulary) but not very convincing (Maisie could have told the story many years later)" (111). In fact, James's explanation is convincing, because the very difficulty of representing a child seems to have interested him. His choice to focus on the younger Maisie reflects his interest in the inter-subjective void created by her "limited vocabulary." Genette's point, however, draws one's attention to the possibility that the limits of representation, even more than narrative technique, were James's primary consideration.

By respecting the inaccessibility of childhood and perfecting a narrative method sensitive to it James made possible a more theoretical recognition of the unrestrained nature of adult power in discourse. Whereas earlier nineteenth-

century writers like Dickens, Twain, Stowe, and Hawthorne may have recognized the power of child figures to represent stock attributes like vulnerability, naturalness, purity, original sin, James's work represents a shift in thinking about the unsocialized subject—from knowable agent to inaccessible outsider. As a result, his fictive worlds seem to keep children on the periphery, yet, theoretically, they remain the interest-focus. Through James we are more removed yet more sensitive to the subject position carved out through discourse as "childhood."

Referring to James's indirect treatment of children, Fiedler asks, "why have our writers welcomed so indirect an evocation of the child's passage from innocence to experience? In a way, it seems the last genteel reticence; a refusal to portray the child as an actual sinner, though it is no longer possible to postulate his innocence as absolute" (500–01). I would argue that James resisted this "genteel" impulse and that his awareness of the deception in holding up absolutes like innocence played only a small part in his characterizations. More importantly, he capitalized on the unique challenge child characters present to the conscientious realist, further exploring the limitations of language in creating inter-subjectivity. Kuhn, who classifies inaccessible literary children such as James's as "enigmatic," writes that the enigmatic child figure "is the forever undecodable signifier" whose "universe represents a self-enclosed non-referential system. [. . .] communication between the child and adult is virtually impossible" (20, 60). Recognizing the limitations that language and socialization place on bridging subjectivities, James found in the figure of a child a representation of the void between them. As "self-enclosed" language users, his child figures evade the rationalist grasp of the psychological novelist. Björling asks,

> Does language communicate something which exists independently, or is that which is communicated actually created in language? Central to modernist literature concerned with the child is a preoccupation with the question of the child and language. The poet draws an implicit analogy between his own creativity and the child on the lines that the poet searching for the word which will bring reality to life is like the child who comprehends reality in learning to name it. (6)

James anticipates contemporary approaches to discourse which would answer Björling's question with the latter premise. "Reality," subjectivity, and "childhood," for the purpose of literature and discourse, are all "created in language." If only in "learning to name" does reality become real, the child cannot enter a social reality without entering discourse. And the reverse follows: if the child cannot enter into discourse for lack of vocabulary and adult listeners, that child is inaccessible to adults trapped in their own social reality. James and many others who focus on the inaccessibility of children are not so fatalistic about children's exclusion from discourse as Kuhn would suggest. After all, Maisie wields some power in her "social reality" without directly engaging the discourse of adults around her. But in James the inaccessibility is established, and from this we can further understand the impetus to find experimental methods of representing that "sealed subjective world" we call childhood.

NOTES

[1] In a sense, our recognition of subjectivity is an extension of the realist investigation. Narrative technique (attempting to represent others) is frustrated at its apex (the closer one gets to representing truthfully, the more one recognizes the impossibility of the task), and the ramifications of such investigations can be seen in social theory (the social subject becomes defined as isolated and opaque).

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What Maisie Knew: Nineteenth-Century Selfhood in the Mind of the Child

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Just one month before the first issue of Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1897) appeared in the *New Review*, American psychologists G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis co-authored an innovative work on a seemingly esoteric subject: "A Study of Dolls" (1896) presents scrupulously detailed statistical data on childhood doll-play, based on responses to a questionnaire distributed to over eight hundred parents and teachers.[1] Fellow psychologist James Sully shared Hall and Ellis's interest in dolls: in 1898, he contributed an essay called "Dollatry" to the *Contemporary Review* and thereby publicized, to a wider audience than Hall and Ellis had reached, the unconventional methodology sometimes deployed in the name of psychological research.

Sully's objective in publishing his research was to justify this methodology and thus to confer credibility on the newly emerging discipline of Child Study, which he and Hall were pioneering in Britain and in America respectively.[2] When Sully argues that "if dolls could tell us what they are supposed, as confidants and confessors, to hear from the lips of their small devotees, they might throw more light on the nature of 'the child's mind' than all the psychologists," he validates the study of doll-play as one method through which psychologists might access the mind of the child ("Dollatry" 58).

The very title of *What Maisie Knew* seems, as Adrian Poole observes, "to make a promise" that it will provide similar access to the child's mind (vii). However, in its preface, James observes that "[s]mall children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible vocabulary" and thus isolates what becomes the central representational and thematic problem of the text, and of the project it shares with contemporary Child Study (*WMK* 294).

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For Glenn Clifton, this prefatory remark anticipates the novel's thematic and stylistic preoccupation with language and with the disjunction between language and experience that is so central to *What Maisie Knew*. However, Clifton's analysis is inattentive to the significance of the "small children" to whom James refers. James's own study of childhood mental experience follows explorations of the same subject by many major nineteenth-century authors and coincides both with the earliest years of the first Golden Age of children's literature and with the emergence of Child Study in work by Hall, Sully, and many others.[3] By specifying that "small children" are his subject, James plainly situates *What Maisie Knew* within a discourse about childhood that had become increasingly prominent in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

In the context of this burgeoning interest in the mind of the child, James's statement is not only about language in itself; it must be about language for the child. It is particularly the child's vision that language cannot "translate." It is specifically what Maisie knows that is beyond what she has the terms to express. *What Maisie Knew* explores the disjunction between language and experience, as Clifton suggests, but it does so because it is a literary study of the child.

Such studies of childhood as James's *What Maisie Knew* and Sully's or Hall's psychological Child Study proliferated in response to a specific cultural and intellectual crisis. Deborah J. Coon has argued that "[t]he soul had provided the dominant explanation for human thought and behaviour since before the Christian era," but that in the aftermath of Charles Darwin's revolutionary contribution to natural sciences "[t]here was considerable pressure to abandon the soul as an explanatory mechanism" (85, 86). Selfhood became a necessary alternative to the soul and, as Carolyn Steedman claims, the clearest expression of "[this] interiorised self" was embodied in the idea of childhood in the period (5). The child, therefore, became what James Kincaid has described as a "repository" for selfhood as a newly emergent adult need in the late nineteenth century (78).

Childhood is a particularly apt forum for the exploration of selfhood because of the innocence it is supposed to embody. If selfhood as a substitute for the soul is represented by what Jacques Lacan calls the "Ideal-I," it is always "more constituent than constituted," because "the dialectical syntheses by which [the subject] must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality" is only ever partially successful: selfhood is a constituent part of a never-quite constituted self (2). By identifying language—"*I*"—as that which inhibits this constituted self Lacan suggests that the child might experience such an "Ideal" self because she is outside language. As Kevin Ohi argues, however, it is not the child herself, but the idea of innocence she represents, that "serves to contain difference internal to language and subjectivity" (7). That disjunction between language and experience described by Clifton is, in the late nineteenth century, often a more specific disjunction between language and selfhood, and one that the innocent child was imagined to resolve.

This is implicit in the findings of much psychological Child Study: "A Study of Dolls," for example, finds a child-mind that is innocent in a specific and contextually significant way. Many responses to Hall and Ellis's survey describe "[d]iscussions with sceptical brothers, who assert that the doll is nothing but wood, rubber, wax, etc." (Hall and Ellis 136). These assertions "are often met with a resentment as keen as that vented . . . upon those who assert cerebral, automatic or necessitarian theories of the soul" (136). The "cerebral" "theories of the soul" referred to are those theories

that, substantiated most influentially by Darwin, in fact questioned the very existence of the soul. That word, "dollatry," which Sully coined in his study, is a more succinct articulation of the observations made by Hall and Ellis: the now-idolatrous belief in the soul is resurrected, in newly validated form, in the mind of the child.

This association of the child's belief with religious belief suggests that Hall, Ellis, and Sully, among many others, conducted their research in response to the loss of the soul in the post-Darwin period. The breadth and intensity of interest in childhood in the final decades of the nineteenth century suggests that children represented an increasingly necessary complement to the purely scientific approach that had brought about this loss. Through the child-mind (as expressed in, for example, her dollatry), the self might be a sufficient substitute for the outdated Christian soul.

As Lynn Wardley has argued, *What Maisie Knew* is therefore "typical of its moment" in identifying childhood as a particularly significant period for a form of "self-understanding" that was consistent with nineteenth-century theories of evolution (250–51).[4] Situating James's novel in the context of contemporaneous Child Study indicates that what Maisie knows is in fact this innocent knowledge of self, which it was the project of Child Study—and of countless studies of childhood in literature and in science—to access. Like the child in Lacan's "Mirror-Stage," Maisie's knowledge is "richer" than language and therefore serves the function of innocence Ohi describes: it transcends the difference internal to language and *therefore* contains the difference otherwise internal to selfhood. As far as Maisie's knowledge is beyond her language, that knowledge can, paradoxically, be synonymous with her innocence. In its late nineteenth-century context, Maisie's innocent knowledge is essentially a knowledge of self that is outside language.

This is not to suggest that the question of Maisie's innocence is not, also, the question of the extent of her knowledge of sex. Indeed, Kerry Robinson has suggested that the very idea of innocence seems to contain "a denial of children's sexuality" (49). However, while innocence might contain such a denial, it is not necessarily limited to or even defined by this: indeed, one of the earliest *assertions* of children's sexuality is predicated on an idea of innocence and one that is, moreover, consistent with the particular form of innocence attributed to Maisie and to her counter-part subjects in scientific Child Study. Sigmund Freud's "Infantile Sexuality" (1905) attributes adult forgetfulness of childhood sexuality to the child's innocence, not of that sexuality but of language.

Freud claims that "there is no period at which the capacity for receiving and reproducing impressions is greater than precisely during the years of childhood" (41). The observation that "of all this we, when we are grown up, have no knowledge of our own" is a reference to the phenomenon of childhood amnesia. Although Freud focuses specifically on the forgetfulness of sexual "impressions," childhood amnesia operates on all experiences up to a certain age, and as Charles Fernyhough has noted, "it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the end of childhood amnesia corresponds to the period in which small children become thoroughly verbal beings" (75). The centrality of infantile amnesia to Freud's analysis of infantile sexuality therefore associates the loss of the child's particularly vivid capacity for vision—the loss of innocence—not with the onset of sexuality but with the onset of language.

Therefore, James's claim that Maisie "would have to be saved" is secondary to his subsequent remark that she might also save others by "sowing on barren strands,

through the mere fact of presence, the seed of the moral life" (*WMK* 292). Insofar as it is innocent of language, Maisie's vision represents a form of selfhood that might "save" the adults around her. The "barren strands" James refers to denote both what Peter Coveney calls the "squalid, vulgar, negative" adult society represented in the text and the soulless world in which the child's innocence—Maisie's vision—might represent the salvation of selfhood (199).

Of course, the squalor that surrounds Maisie and the question of whether she is, ultimately, saved from it point to the risk, if not the impossibility, of accessing the child's innocent knowledge. The promise to reveal what Maisie knew is the promise to provide insight into the knowledge of self for which Maisie is the repository. However, surrounded by moral and linguistic squalor, that innocent knowledge is always potentially, if not already, corrupted. *What Maisie Knew* therefore problematizes the project of Child Study, the culture of studying childhood, and the promise of its own title by interrogating the attempt to access the child's innocent, inarticulable, knowledge of self.

Because it is paradoxically innocent, Maisie's knowledge is resistant, if not antithetical, to the means by which the author—and the psychologist—might access and represent it. To need the child is to risk contaminating the very knowledge for which she is needed. The attempt to access selfhood in the child's mind therefore presents a major difficulty in *What Maisie Knew*: an idea of innocence and the effect of adult need on that innocence are the central thematic concerns of the novel, which thus thematizes the conflict underlying the broader culture of child-study in the late nineteenth century.[5]

This conflict is represented from the opening pages in the dispute between Maisie's parents and, eventually, step-parents. As John McCloskey observes, Maisie's divorced parents argue over her because her "physical presence is a symbol of external propriety" (490). Adults need Maisie, initially, as a pretext for their otherwise prohibited relationships. Accordingly, Maisie's first governess, Miss Overmore, insists that "a lady couldn't stay with a gentleman . . . without some awfully proper reason" (*WMK* 25). When Maisie asks "what reason is proper?," Beale's response, "a long-legged stick of a tomboy: there's none so good as that," indicates that Maisie is in her father's house because her presence makes Miss Overmore's residence there "proper." Likewise, later, it is only "in connection with herself" that "the pleasant possibility . . . of a relation . . . between [the second] Mrs Beale and Sir Claude" can arise and, again, only her presence that lends the arrangement proposed by this couple, of a "little household we three should make," its (superficial) propriety (46, 244).

As the scandalized gossips ventriloquized in the opening chapter suggest, this is all "very shocking." Adult need consistently exposes Maisie to morally problematic knowledge.[6] The possible consequences of this exposure have generated some remarkably polarized analyses of the novel.[7] Whatever the extent of Maisie's adult knowledge at the end of the novel, her exposure to such knowledge accounts for many uncomfortable, even disturbing, moments throughout. The unsettling passage that describes Maisie's game with her doll, Lisette, is one of the first of such moments. Maisie gradually "understood more" about the laughter of her mother's friends, but her imitative shrieks of laughter are uncomfortably incongruous with the childish doll-play through which she comes to this understanding (26). Her demonstrably "producible" knowledge at this point is essentially, if at this moment only imitatively,

adult: Maisie is "convulsed" by the innocence she is supposed to represent (*WMK* 294, 26).

The concern James here represents, that the adult's need might corrupt that which is needed, is equally evident in Child Study. The possibility that the child is performing for, rather than being illuminated by, the adult observer, is raised when Sully takes issue with one of Hall's claims: the claim cannot be "conclusive," because the data on which it is based suggest, to Sully, not the true feelings of the child in question but a "priggish 'contrariness,' by no means uncommon among children" ("Dollatry" 60). Hall himself had already published an extensive study, the title of which indicates his similar concerns: in "Children's Lies" (1890), he observes that "[t]he loves of showing off and of seeming big, to attract attention or to win admiration, sometimes leads children to assume false characters" (67). In his claim that "[a] few children, especially girls, are honeycombed with morbid self-consciousness . . . and seem to have no natural character of their own," Hall raises the possibility that, by making the child self-conscious, adult questions might obscure what they are intended to illuminate. His exasperation at this possibility is, like Sully's, palpable.

Maeve Pearson suggests that Maisie dramatized the "inherent split . . . between a performed ideal and a more complex and inaccessible interior selfhood" (113). In doing so, Maisie dramatizes one major difficulty of Child Study. The performed and dissonantly adult knowledge that Maisie displays in her game with Lisette, and that the children Sully and Hall display in their "priggish contrariness" and "morbid self-consciousness," indicates a corruption of innocence by adult need. This performed knowledge is irreconcilable with the inaccessible, unproducible knowledge—the knowledge of self—that, as children, they are imagined to represent. When Maisie offers a "performed ideal," she embodies the effect of scrutiny on the idea of childhood in the period: performing in response to this scrutiny, children not only obscure but actually threaten the innocent knowledge that is the true objective of literary and scientific studies of children and childhood.

If its thematic concern with the effect of adult need on Maisie's innocence engages with the difficulty of its potential corruption encountered by practitioners of Child Study, the stylistic challenge of *What Maisie Knew* engages with the more fundamental difficulty of its representation. James presents Maisie's knowledge as by definition inarticulable and thus points to the corollary of that same idea of innocent childhood knowledge that is promulgated in Child Study: specifically, James represents the stalemate such a concept presents for attempts, literary or scientific, to access the child's knowledge.

According to James Gargano, James's use of "a central intelligence not altogether capable . . . of assessing and conceptualising the value of her experiences" necessitates "the wealth of authorial explanation" that characterizes *What Maisie Knew* (35). However, the moment when Maisie meets her mother's new partner, the Captain (or "the Count," as Sir Claude misleadingly refers to him), for the first time indicates that authorial explanations of Maisie's knowledge are insufficient at best.[8] The narrator describes what Maisie observes as her mother approaches her and Sir Claude:

> leaving the Count apparently to come round more circuitously—an outflanking movement, if Maisie had but known—[Ida] resumed the onset. . . . "What are you doing with my daughter?" she demanded of her husband;

> in spite of the indignant tone of which Maisie had a greater sense than ever in her life before of not being personally noticed. (106–07)

The reader cannot fail to recognize that Maisie is here used as a pretext for a confrontation between Ida and Sir Claude. However, the narrator's wish that "Maisie had but known" emphasizes that the reader's understanding of the scene is facilitated not by Maisie's assessment of it but by the narrator's. More particularly, it is the narrator's metaphorical description of the scene in terms of a battle—that is, his language—that enables the reader's understanding of the scene.

For many critics the articulate, authoritative narrative voice exemplified in this passage offers a reliable transmission of Maisie's experience.[9] Indeed, James insists that his "own commentary," which "constantly attends and *amplifies*" Maisie's more limited "terms," is "*required* whenever those aspects about her and those parts of her experience that she understands darken off into others that she rather tormentedly misses" (*WMK* 294–95, emphasis mine). According to this, Maisie's presence necessitates and thus validates the capacity of the narrator to articulate, and even augment, the child's mind. In this analysis, the narrator functions as what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "an extra-artistic medium" and his "discourse" as "an artistically neutral means of communication": language is a neutral means through which an impartial narrator can articulate what Maisie knows (206). If language is this "extra-artistic medium," *What Maisie Knew* can fulfill the promise of its title, because its author has resolved the extraordinary technical challenge of representing the mind of a child by exhibiting, in language, knowledge that exists outside language.

Of course, *What Maisie Knew* does not do this. The conflict between Maisie's experience and the narrator's language is repeatedly and explicitly expressed by the narrator throughout. Far from being resolved, the problem of representing the meaning of Maisie's experience exemplifies that more fundamental conflict identified by Clifton between experience and language in general. Indeed, immediately after Ida's "onset," and the seeming clarity that that metaphor constructs for the scene, Maisie and the Captain have an exchange, the subject of which is the inadequacy of language to encompass either's experience. The Captain attempts to explain his feelings for Ida to Maisie; the explanation culminates in "a small sigh that mourned the limits of the speakable"; Maisie "found herself, in the intensity of her response, throbbing with a joy still less utterable than the essence of the Captain's admiration" (*WMK* 112–13). This is, of course, not unusual for Maisie. As the narrator observes, she "*had ever* . . . in her mind fewer names than conceptions" (150, emphasis mine). The Captain's momentary encounter with the limits of the speakable therefore replicates the defining condition of Maisie's mind.

The primary effect of this passage is to suggest experience that, in "intensity," is *beyond* language. This must undermine Gargano's claim that Maisie cannot conceptualize her experience because she cannot articulate it and must therefore also question the view that the narrator is a neutral medium for the communication of Maisie's mind (35). The narrator, in fact, makes it insistently clear that Maisie's perceptions exceed not only her own language but *his* language, as, for example, when he remarks that "the fullest expression we may give to Sir Claude's conduct is a poor and pale copy of the picture it presented to his young friend" (149). The narrator's "poor and pale" copy of her knowledge here indicates that what Maisie knows is beyond what

any vocabulary might communicate. Whatever knowledge the child's mind contains is by definition unproducible, not only by Maisie herself but also by the narrator.

In thus presenting the child's mind as beyond language, *What Maisie Knew* engages with the idea of childhood expressed in contemporaneous Child Study. Though nineteenth-century child psychologists like Sully and Hall do not focus particularly on child sexuality, their work anticipates Freud's suggestion that "determining" visions and impressions are received in childhood and forgotten in adulthood (41). Language, moreover, is intrinsic both to childhood vision and to adult forgetfulness of it: the child's knowledge is innocent only because, and as long as, it is inarticulable. These works not only reiterate the idea in *What Maisie Knew* of the child's unproducible knowledge, but they also point to the contextual significance of this idea. Because it is both knowledgeable and unproducible, the child-mind actually resolves an adult disjunction between language and selfhood.

In, for example, "Children's Lies," Hall claims that "[t]he fancy of some children is almost visualisation" (66). This promptly escalates into the suggestion that, for children, "[r]every . . . materialises all wishes." According to this, language and reality unify in the child's mind. To suggest that "Mr Gradgrind would war upon [this] as inimical to scientific veracity" is to suggest that science—and therefore Hall himself by association—is limited by its inability to share the child's unscientific perception (66–67).[10]

Sully's *Studies of Childhood* (1895) likewise represents the disjunction between language and reality as an adult experience that is particularly exposed by efforts to access the child mind and represents the child as the embodied resolution of that disjunction. Sully suggests that in childhood "spoken words as sounds for the ear have in themselves something of the immediate objective reality of all sense-impressions" (55). For children, language not only refers to a universally recognized, "objective reality" but, consequently, "to name a thing is in a sense to make it present."

Both Hall and Sully moreover make it clear that it is specifically the child who has a vision of "immediate objective reality" through language. When Hall suggests that "[w]e might almost say *of children at least* . . . that all their life is imagination," he claims that what children imagine to be true actually *is* true, if only to children themselves (67, emphasis mine). Similarly, Sully claims that the adult's explanations of language "rudely breaks the spell of the illusion, calling off the attention from the vision [the child] sees in the word-crystal . . . to the cold lifeless crystal itself" (*Studies of Childhood* 56). Here, what William Wordsworth calls the "meddling intellect" is embodied in the psychologist, who "mis-shapes the beauteous forms" (61) of things as they appear, by what Sully calls "a secret-child art," in the child's innocent vision (56). According to Sully and Hall, children in general not only insist on the unity of language and reality; they actually have the capacity to make present that reality in language.

Maisie epitomizes the possible unity of language and experience—of language and self—that is implicit in such studies of the child mind. For Sheila Teahan, the narrator's repeated intrusions in the first person in the second half of *What Maisie Knew* demonstrate that, "though the narrator claims merely to report what Maisie knows, he is deeply implicated in the construction of that knowledge" (220). These moments make the reader aware of the narrator's active role in the construction, in language, of Maisie's mind, and this puts under particular strain the illusion of unity

between the narrator's language and that mind.[11] I suggest that by thus so openly failing to sustain the illusion that he articulates Maisie's mind the narrator insists that Maisie herself has the capacity for a vision that makes present the reality of selfhood misshapen by his language.

The narrator's first intrusion in the first person coincides with a comic moment of miscommunication between Mrs. Wix and Maisie: Mrs. Wix's claim that Sir Claude "leans on me" gives Maisie "the impression of a support literally supplied by her person" (73). This "glimpse of a misconception led [Mrs. Wix] to be explicit": "the life she wanted him to take right hold of was the public: 'she,' *I* hasten to add, was, in this connection, not the mistress of his fate, but only Mrs. Wix herself" (73, emphasis mine). By intruding as "I" at this point, and several times afterwards, the narrator draws attention to himself and therefore to Maisie's mind as a construction in his language. Moreover, of course, he intrudes to explain. His own words, like Mrs. Wix's, obscure rather than clarify the relationship between Mrs. Wix and Sir Claude that they try to describe.

The obscurity *within* the text of Mrs. Wix's words leads to Maisie's misinterpretation. As Kenny Marotta has suggested, this misinterpretation demonstrates that Maisie "seeks, to the consternation of her elders, to connect their words to literal realities" (497). The obscurity *of* the text, which the narrator interrupts in an attempt to clarify, therefore coincides with Maisie's insistence, at this moment, on the unity of language with "literal realit[y]." The text thus questions the validity of the belief that it simultaneously suggests Maisie embodies. Maisie's belief in the unity of language and reality is, itself, what exposes Mrs. Wix's failure to validate that belief and, seemingly, what triggers the narrator's admission of his own, equivalent, failure. Maisie's belief becomes the very obstacle inhibiting Mrs. Wix's, the narrator's, and the reader's access to that belief.

Those readers who accept the narrator's words as what Bakhtin calls the "artistically neutral" means to communicate Maisie's mind therefore replicate Maisie's erroneous assumption about the relationship between Mrs. Wix's words and the reality to which they supposedly refer. That Maisie's misconception coincides with the first intrusion of the narrator in the first-person seems, therefore, to insist that the narrator's words are *not* to be viewed as the authoritative articulation of the child's mind and therefore that the text should *not* be read in the way that Maisie reads Mrs. Wix's words. Mrs. Wix's obscurity and the narrator's intrusion are not the accidental self-defeat of a writer who has attempted to advocate Maisie's—mistaken—approach to language. They are, rather, consistent with a broader cultural understanding, evident in Child Study as in *What Maisie Knew,* of language and selfhood as unified *only* in the mind of the child. Maisie's mind both represents the potential unity of language with reality and exposes their disunity in the adult. The novel insists that only through the child's mind is language what Bakhtin calls an "extra-artistic medium," one that connects transparently with, rather than modifying or corrupting, the literal realities to which it refers.

It is therefore telling that, immediately subsequent to that first intrusion, the narrator remarks that "these days brought on a high quickening of Maisie's direct perceptions, of her gratified sense of arriving by herself at conclusions" (*WMK* 75). Maisie's hope that there is an objective reality beyond language both coincides with the narrator's inability to share her hope and precedes his admission that Maisie's

perception of that reality is becoming more conclusive. Teahan suggests that the illusion that we are reading a narrative of Maisie's consciousness breaks down toward the end of the novel and with it "the representational strategy of the central consciousness" (225). What Maisie is coming "by herself" to know is the objective reality that, according to Sully, children can make present through language: it is, of course, only by being inarticulable that Maisie's perceptions can be thus imagined. If Sully and Hall exemplify the prevalence of Maisie's hope in the unity of language and reality, they also indicate that, at the turn of the twentieth century, it was the child whose imagined vision validated this hope. The breakdown of James's representational strategy is therefore the necessary corollary to the image of the child as the embodiment of knowledge in which language and reality are unified.[12]

Maisie's knowledge of the unity of language and reality speaks to the contemporary need for selfhood to which this fascination with childhood responded. Toward the end of the novel, Mrs. Wix asks Maisie, "Haven't you really and truly *any* moral sense?" (205). As many critics have noted, the answer to this question has implications beyond the narrow conventionality that is Mrs. Wix's morality. Maisie's answer, which the narrator suggests "was vague even to imbecility," is omitted from the narrative itself. Maisie's moral sense is seemingly characterized by a deficiency and vagueness that are necessarily replicated by the narrator.

However, Maisie only "*began* . . . with scarcely knowing what [a moral sense] was" (emphasis mine). It quickly "proved something that, with scarce an outward sign . . . she could . . . strike up a sort of acquaintance with." The implication that this "sort of acquaintance" is insignificant is belied by the narrator's subsequent observation that "[n]othing more remarkable had taken place . . . no phenomenon of perception more inscrutable by our rough method, than her vision, the rest of that Boulogne day, of the manner in which she figured" (206). While the reader attempts, through this difficult and vague sentence, to solve the riddle of Maisie's moral sense, Maisie herself attains "remarkable" vision of that moral sense. Because it is inarticulable by the narrator, it is inaccessible to the reader.

The debate over how much sexual knowledge Maisie has at the end of the novel is, therefore, surely, irresolvable, but it is also misguided. Mrs. Wix's question is less about Maisie's sexual innocence and more about that innocent sense of self that might, to return to Ohi, "contain difference internal to language and subjectivity" (7). Lacan's analysis of the pre-lingual child's interaction with his image in the mirror suggests that, as an instance of non-lingual self-perception, the *I* here is consistent with the child-self because it evades the asymptotic "coming-into-being of the subject" that emerges from that discordance between "*I*" and "his own reality," between language and the adult subject (2). If, in her remarkable vision of "the manner in which she figured," Maisie similarly demonstrates a non-lingual "coming-into-being," she likewise evades the asymptotic tension between the *I* of language and the self of her own reality.

Maisie's innocent knowledge is, therefore, of the "objective reality" of the self. The conclusion toward which the text moves is therefore the moment in which she comes to see herself clearly. The narrator states that "[s]omehow, now that it was there, the great moment was not so bad. What helped the child was that she knew what she wanted. . . . Bewilderment had simply gone or at any rate was going fast" (*WMK* 260). Maisie seemingly discovers at this point that Sir Claude is "what she wanted." However, the declaration "I love Sir Claude" is made, firstly, "with a sense slightly

rueful and embarrassed that she appeared to offer it as something that would do as well" as claiming to love Mrs. Beale and, secondly, as "an answer to [Sir Claude's] pats" (262). The statement "I love Sir Claude" is a response to the demands of the adults around her, not an articulation of her vision at this "great moment." If knowing what she wants has "helped the child," it has helped her toward a clearer vision of herself, but that vision is concealed, not expressed, by her words about Sir Claude.

This "great moment" is thus anticipated by the "moral revolution" she experiences much earlier in the text: knowing, finally, what she wants is the culmination of an idea that first occurs to her in chapter 2, when "the idea of an inner self, or, in other words, of concealment" first occurs to her (13). Just as the moral revolution that reveals to Maisie the idea of an inner self coincides and is equated with the idea and practice of concealment, so the great moment of Maisie's self-knowledge coincides with its concealment from the reader. Maisie's bewilderment may have "simply gone or at any rate be going fast" (260). The reader's bewilderment remains precisely because what, if anything, Maisie has come to know is her inner self, which is, "in other words," concealment. The culmination of Maisie's knowledge is the culmination of her concealment: Maisie's vision is most complete when it is least articulated.

Carren Kaston suggests that "what we finally see in the novel is Maisie's escape from alien 'fictions' or versions of her experience, from the prologue's neutralisation of her predicament, from the custodial hands and structures of various parents . . . and from the abstract version of her experience pressed upon us at times in the preface when James invokes some of those same voices and techniques" (30). What we actually see is Maisie's vision of herself not only separated from any of the "voices" that have thus far attempted to access that self but independent of language itself. The narrator suggests that Maisie's vision "of the manner in which she figured" is "a phenomenon of perception . . . inscrutable by our rough method" (206). The narrator's rough method—language—is in fact antithetical to the self-knowledge Maisie here attains.

The narrator's admission of his incapacity to communicate Maisie's non-lingual knowledge of her own objective reality is therefore inevitable, but it also propagates the collapse of his capacity to communicate at all. The narrator admits that:

> I so despair of tracing her steps that I must crudely give you my word for its being from this time on a picture literally present to her. Mrs Wix saw her as a little person knowing so extraordinarily much that . . . what she still didn't know would be ridiculous if it hadn't been embarrassing.

The unexpected introduction of Mrs. Wix as the subject, in a passage that had seemingly referred to Maisie, marks the collapse of linguistic clarity that was anticipated in the narrator's very first intrusion. His earlier attempt to be explicit gives way, at this stage, to despair.

However, the mention of Mrs. Wix does more than suggest "the difficulties of the narrator" in his attempt to "follow and understand" Maisie (Phillips 106). It also introduces the crucial question of Maisie's knowledge not only of her own self but of adult selfhood. The obscurity demands that the reader ask whether the "her" in the first of these sentences is Maisie or Mrs. Wix and, by extension, whether Maisie's remarkable vision is of the manner in which "she" (Maisie) figures to herself or of the manner in which "she" (Mrs. Wix) figures to Maisie. It is precisely the impos-

sibility of establishing which that enables Maisie's vision to be potentially either and potentially both.

Steedman argues that the nineteenth century belief in "a wholeness in interiority, that will figure itself forth, from inside to outside" finds its "location in the child": the child is the expression of "the impulse to personify ideas of the [adult] self" and enables personification of the "wholeness" of that self (15, 1). The obscurity of the narrator's language here allows for the possibility that Maisie's remarkable vision is of the "wholeness" of Mrs. Wix. As with her vision of herself, however, her vision of Mrs. Wix is most complete when most concealed. Mrs. Wix's interiority therefore only figures forth on her presence in Maisie's inarticulable vision. It is only by being inarticulable—and therefore concealed from Mrs. Wix and from the reader—that Maisie's inner world can redeem the adult self from the asymptotic disjunction between that self and the language—the "I"—through which it can be known.

It is, moreover, only as a child that Maisie's knowledge can be outside language. What Maisie knew therefore represents that repository described by Kincaid. The mind of the child is to be filled with the narrator's—and, if such explorations as "Dollatry," "A Study of Dolls," "Children's Lies," and *Studies of Childhood* are indicative, the psychologist's—imagined self-image, in which language and the self are unified, giving that self, consequently, objective reality. The "wholeness" of the interior self is figured forth on the mere presence of the child, because that presence embodies her imagined, inarticulable, and therefore innocent knowledge.

However, when Maisie actually speaks she suggests the transitory nature of the "Ideal-I." Maisie's words anticipate her entry into language and adulthood and the consequences of this entry for the imagined wholeness of the self, which, as a child, she represents. Indeed, her first words in the novel demonstrate this:

> she found the words spoken by her beastly papa to be, after all, in her bewildered little ears, from which, at her mother's appeal, they passed, in her clear, shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips. "He said I was to tell you, from him," she faithfully reported, "that you're a nasty, horrid pig!" (11)

The moment is, primarily, funny (at least to the reader) because of the disjunction between Maisie's innocent, "faithful" use of language and the language itself.

This disjunction enacts Bakhtin's insistence that, rather than function as an artistically neutral means of communication, "no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme" (276). Maisie's language here points to the failure of the speaking subject to control the meaning of language in the elastic environment of her audience. Between the word "pig" and its object (Ida) and between the word "pig" and its speaking subject (Maisie) there exists the elastic environment, of which Beale's words about the same object are a part, that undermines the neutral communication of Maisie's intention when obeying her mother. Beale's words, repeated by Maisie and heard by Ida, become meaningless in themselves even as their meaning is comically apparent in the environment in which they are spoken.

For J. M. Barrie, "[n]o-one ever gets over the first unfairness . . . except Peter [Pan]" (150). If this is "the real difference" between Peter Pan and other children, then Maisie, like "all the rest," "will never afterwards be quite the same." Rather than conjure up an image of "objective reality," Maisie's language is illustrative of the social and linguistic environment in which she exists. What Barrie calls the unfairness of the disjunction between the intention behind and the effect of Maisie's words is the first of many experiences that indicate that, unlike Peter Pan, Maisie will never quite be the same. Such moments point to the inevitability that, in Barrie's words, "[a]ll children, except one, grow up": Maisie has always imminently, if not already, lost her innocence (69).

Indeed, such moments indicate that, outside Neverland, the idea of the child's innocence is necessary because it defers the certain corruption it nevertheless represents. The moment when the promise of the novel's title is to be fulfilled expresses this contradiction. When, finally, "[t]hey stood confronted, the step-parents, still under Maisie's observation," the "bewilderment" that formerly characterized Maisie's observations has implicitly "gone" or is going, and she, seemingly, sees her step-parents with perfect "deep" clarity (*WMK* 264). Maisie's repeated insistence, "I know," is, potentially, a statement of this innocent knowledge. Equally, however, that "I know" may be an instance, in language, of the same imitative behavior Maisie displayed when she "shrieked" at the innocence of her doll. Her "I know" may be as knowledgeable, as duplicitous, as the language of the adults around her. The clarity and wholeness of Maisie's imagined vision is asserted through her repeated declaration that "I know," but its very articulation inhibits the reader's ability to attain similar clarity.

The reader cannot attain the same clarity of vision that Maisie seemingly attains in this scene because the only medium through which we might be able to access Maisie's knowledge is the very medium, language, that that knowledge has transcended. Whatever Maisie knows, the reader cannot know. What, ultimately, it means for Maisie to "know" therefore remains ambivalent: Maisie's innocence is sustained as a possibility within the very words that simultaneously suggest its corruption.

Maisie's knowledge is therefore in doubt at the end of the novel, but it is only thus that it can remain imaginatively possible. Poole suggests that "[a] sad way of understanding the [past tense of the] title is that Maisie's knowledge is bound to belong to the past. She knew something as a child that she will forget as a grown up" (xxii). Although Freud's discussion of infantile amnesia refers particularly to the forgetfulness, in adulthood, of childhood sexual impressions, contemporary psychologists shared James's wider conception of the child's innocent knowledge. That knowledge is not specifically of sex but, more essentially, of self. Childhood innocence thus becomes the site for selfhood, the loss of which, after Darwin, was attributed to the state of adulthood.

As Poole's use of the future tense to refer to what Maisie "will" forget in adulthood suggests, however, *her* adulthood is never quite reached. Instead of attaining an articulate adulthood, Maisie retains the innocence she embodies as a child. Instead of the certain failure of language to articulate the objective reality of the self, *What Maisie Knew* concludes with the sustained potential that the child has innocent knowledge of that self, to be forgotten in an adulthood that is indefinitely deferred.

NOTES

I would like to thank Simon James for his comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

[1]Hall is most famous for his 1904 study, *Adolescence,* which "every psychologist studying adolescents today knows," according to Arnett (186). He was a friend of Henry James's brother, William James. See Rosenzweig (esp. 80–117) for a detailed account of their relationship. Hall's co-author, Ellis, was a recent Ph.D. graduate and adjunct professor of pedagogy at the University of Texas. See "Ellis."

[2]See Shuttleworth for a detailed account of the development of Child Study from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century and Gurjeva for an overview of Sully's role in the professionalization of Child Study in Britain.

[3]Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) are two of the earliest literary studies of childhood mental experience. Hunt provides an outline of the principle authors and texts of the first Golden Age of children's literature, within a useful overview of children's literature from the eighteenth century to the present. See Shine and Pearson on children in other fiction by James throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Blackford discusses the correlations between and the emergence of Child Study and of experimental literary technique in the same period.

[4]Wardley's article, which was published after my own had gone into production, discusses Maisie's growth in the context of feminist responses to Lamarkian evolution. Its analysis suggests that questions of gender and development have a complicating significance for my analysis of the child-mind of nineteenth-century discourse.

[5]The question of how to find out what children know, without imparting that knowledge to them, is also the central dilemma of the governess in James's "The Turn of the Screw."

[6]In fact, Maisie is often the pretext for behavior that constitutes that problematic knowledge. When, for example, Maisie's presence among her father's friends invites their thinly veiled lewdness, she generates the very knowledge that threatens her innocence.

[7]Compare, for example, Wilson's claim that Maisie ultimately offers her virginity to Sir Claude (281) with Leavis's view that Maisie remains "to the end uninterested in, and incognizant of, sex" (130). Such commentary is unified in one respect however: Maisie's innocence has evidently invited adults to think and talk about sex not only within the novel but also in criticism about it, performing what Ohi describes as a "discourse of child endangerment" in which the "compensations of eroticism" are perhaps acknowledged more by the adults within the text than by some of those writing about it (6).

[8]Banta identifies this as one of the most important scenes in the text, a view that is supported by the quantity of critical attention the passage has received.

[9]See, for example, Galbraith and, more recently, Sussman.

[10]Mr. Gradgrind is that infamous advocate, in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), of the principle that children should be educated in "nothing but Facts" (1).

[11]Many critics similarly consider the narrator's relationship with Maisie to be highly problematic; see, for example, Klein and Honeyman.

[12]As Teahan suggests, moreover, this breakdown seems to be propagated by Maisie's impending adulthood. The closer Maisie comes to a capacity for articulating her knowledge, the further that knowledge seems to recede from the possibility of articulation.

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NO GROWTH FOR HAPPY KIDS: THE CIRCUIT OF REPRESENTATION AND IDENTIFICATION IN *WHAT MAISIE KNEW*, THE NOVEL AND THE MOVIE

The year 2019 will see the release of *The Turning*, a new movie based on Henry James' 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*. The live-action horror drama, directed by Floria Sigismondi and produced by Steven Spielberg, will be added to the already extensive list of film adaptations from Henry James' works, which includes about twenty entries. A very prolific author during his lifetime, Henry James continues today to reach a large audience as a source of screenplays at a quite high frequency. The latest is the 2013 screen adaptation of the 1897 novel *What Maisie Knew*, written by Carroll Cartwright and Nancy Doyne and directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel. It is an independent, relatively low-budget movie starring Julianne Moore, Steve Coogan, Alexander Skarsgård, Joanna Vanderham, and the 6 year-old Onata Aprile as Maisie.

The adaptation moves the story and the setting from Victorian England to present-day New York City, becoming a contemporary retelling of Maisie's story of division between her parents, following their divorce battle over her custody, and then her stepparents. On the diegetic level the movie tells a very similar story to the novel's chiasmic adulterous plot, in which Maisie *brings together* first her father and governess, then the spouses of her divorced parents and supplies them

with a "jolly good pretext" for an erotic relationship.[1] The characters, however, are "updated" into their contemporary version: Ida is named Susanna and is a rock singer, Beale becomes an art dealer, Miss Overmore/Mrs. Beale is called Margo, and Sir Claude is Lincoln, a bartender.

The movie was critically well received and for good reasons, as I will discuss in the first part of this article. Considering film adaptation as a form of intertextuality which, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, is "a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing,"[2] this article will discuss the circuit of representations put into play through intertextuality. I will then focus on the main significant transfigurations that the movie produces, namely the suppression of both the narrator's voice and mediation, and the character of Mrs. Wix, Maisie's final choice among all the adults around her. The variations generate a very different ending.

In a typical, recurrent, and well recognized narrative strategy, many of Henry James' narrators are introduced as privileged observers and connoisseurs of someone else's story, only to be decentered from their authoritative position through a refocusing of their point of view and mediation as unreliable, lacking, and frequently involved in the plot. In *What Maisie Knew* the narrator is also a humorous, sometimes sarcastic filter whose adult articulations, interpretations, and language create a narratively and culturally dissymmetrical polarity to young Maisie and her perceptions. In the second part of this article, I will examine the film's transcoding of the fundamental narrative dynamics of the novel, which, focusing entirely on Maisie's vision and insight, does away with the double vision

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[1] Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000), p. 117. Page references will henceforth be cited parenthetically in the text.

[2] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 9.

that in James guides the narration and its understanding. By discussing the effects of the unmediated and thus *unironic* representation and vision in the movie's adaptation, I intend to show the productivity of the irony of the Jamesian narrator as an important way of undermining the mimetic neutrality of representation. I argue that James' irony is functional to the audience's perception of the power practices and apparatuses that regulate the world the subjects inhabit, and its mechanisms of oppression.

Representation, as W.J.T. Mitchell describes it, "is an extremely elastic notion," which, being structured on relations of *standing for* something "real," creates circuital relationships: "representation is always *of* something or someone, *by* something or someone, *to* someone."[3] Operating through all processes of signification, *in primis* art and aesthetic acts and symbols as *re*-presentation of reality, representation establishes a network of signs that generates both meanings and the "codes"—i.e., the sets of socially shared knowledge—necessary for *com-*

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[3] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Representation," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 2nd edn, 1995) *Credo Reference*, https://login.ezproxy.bowdoin.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/uchicagols/representation/0?institutionId=518. Working on a definition of the "slippery" term of "representation," Mitchell comments on its systemic structure: "the representational sign never seems to occur in isolation from a whole network of other signs: the dab of paint that stands for a stone will probably do so only in the context of a whole field of dabs of paint that represent other things adjacent to the stone—grass, earth, trees, sky, other stones. Take the dab of paint out of that context, and it ceases to represent, becomes merely a dab of paint. In a similar way, the word 'tree' represents a certain class of objects only in the context of a language, just as a note or a musical phrase has meaning only in relation to a larger piece and familiar systems of tonality. These 'systems' (tonality, language, representational schemes in painting) may be called 'codes,' by which I simply mean a body of rules for combining and deciphering representational signs. When something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement—'let us agree that this will stand for that'—which, once understood, need not be restated on every occasion."

bining and *deciphering* meanings. Clearly, representations are never separate from political and ideological questions; on the contrary, circuits of representations, constituted in specific material practices, are the means through which individuals not only internalize a "picture" of their social world and the subjective place they occupy in it, but also perceive their specific place within a historically peculiar social formation as natural, inevitable, an essential function of the "real" itself.[4] My concern here is with the textual apparatuses that summon the reader or spectator into a determinate social world and form of subjectivity through a complex network of aesthetic and narratorial factors, which, framing discourses and practices, help to establish inside the text a socio-historical project that diverse individuals are expected to share. Additionally, with the phrase "circuit of representations" I also mean to underline the interactions between the systems of representations—as both the process of representing the "real" and the specific outcomes of this process—of each text, novel and film, in relation to the other text's systems of representations.

Finally, in the third part of this article, I will suggest an interpretation of James' Mrs. Wix as a catalyst for Maisie's resolution of the Oedipal complex, which brings the girl to grow into an adult endowed with her own agency. This reading intends to cast new light on the supposed *happiness* of the movie's ending as well as on the more ambiguous, but much more empowering Jamesian finale. As a result, I am going to argue that the narrator's and Mrs. Wix's absence turns the movie into a much less ironic, somehow less cruel, drama which well represents the deceptive imperative to enjoy and be happy pervading contemporary society, as described by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek.

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[4] Ideology constitutes what Luis Althusser calls the social subject's "'lived' relation to the real." See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review P., 1971), pp. 121–76.

Part I - *Intertextual echoing at play*

Following for much of her discussion Robert Stam's work on literature and film, Linda Hutcheon coins the tautological definition of adaptations *as adaptation*, by which she means a text that is able to carry echoes and references to other texts and yet is an aesthetic object in its own right. Hutcheon considers the double nature of adaptation as *a formal entity or product* that "can involve a shift from a medium or a genre or a change of frame and therefore context," and as *a process of creation* which "always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation."[5] As both Stam and Hutcheon frequently repeat in their works, being shown a story is not the same as being told the same story, since "to tell a story […] is to describe, explain, summarize, expand; […] To show a story […] involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time."[6] Each medium deploys specific traits, registers, and sets of conventions in its transposition from one sign system to another, bringing gains and losses with each actualization.

Here, I do not intend to contribute to the discussion about adaptations *per se*, or add to the many fine studies on the subject. More important, by reading together some crucial sequences of *What Maisie Knew*, the novel and the movie, I do not want to express an evaluation over old issues of derivativeness or high *vs* low culture,[7] nor do I mean to establish a hie-

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[5] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., pp. 7-8.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

[7] Robert Stam lists eight sources of hostility or prejudice against the film adaptation: anteriority, dichotomous thinking, iconophobia, logophilia, anti-corporeality, the myth of facility, a class prejudice, the charge of parasitism. He also points out that many different theories have challenged the derivative, and therefore negative view of adaptation as secondary and inferior to the original literary work. See Robert Stam, "Introduction: the Theory and Practice of Adaptation," *Literature and Film. A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, eds. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1-52.

rarchy between the two texts based on "the notion of a semantic core, a nucleus of meaning, ascribable to novels, which adaptations are presumed to capture or betray. "[8] My aim in this article is to focus on the respective modes of representation in *What Maisie Knew*, novel and film, as made manifest through their intertextual relationships, and on the ways today's cultural practices engage in a negotiation with each text and with the subjective positionings it produces in the act of reading, as well as rewriting and interpreting. In other words, investigating the circuit of representations of each text and of each text in relation to the other, I intend to perform an act of *comparative narratology* which, according to Stam, "asks such questions as the following. What events from the novel's story have been eliminated, added, or changed in the adaptation, and, more important, why?"[9]

What Maisie Knew, the movie, received generally enthusiastic reviews and comments, also thanks to the extraordinary interpretation of its actors and actresses, especially the young Onata Aprile, who was nominated for a number of awards for her performance. The majority of the reviews stresses with admiration the "fidelity" of the movie to its original literary source, despite the few changes mainly in the setting and in the plot. If, on the one hand, this reception shows how widespread the conventional language of the essentialist critique of adaptation still is, with its assumption of the superiority of literature,[10] on the other it acknowledges the remarkable outcome of the directors' and screenwriters' creative interpretation. The

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 34.

[10] Robert Stam criticizes the moralistic discourse of "fidelity," which relies on essentialist arguments in relation to both media and ignores the wider question of fidelity to what (plot, characters, author's intentions, different intertextual sources): fidelity theory "sometimes takes the disguised form of respect for the spirit but not the letter of the text." See his "Introduction," cit., especially p. 18.

movie is, in fact, considered, as Betsy Sharkey, the film critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, describes it:

> a beautifully rendered film. The many provocations of James' observations are handled without slipping into melodrama as we watch the precocious 6-year-old witness and weather the breakup of her family. The child is the center and the outsider in this collapsing universe. Indeed the film's strength is in its understatement.[11]

The movie is largely considered a successful re-envisioning of the novel's theme and atmosphere, in which the central message of the story is kept unchanged. I do not intend to discuss the reviewers' various identifications of the message with the death of childhood, the negative effects of selfish parenting on young, innocent children, the dysfunctionality of families in the past as in the present, or similar "designs." Although I share director Scott McGehee's appreciative, yet surprised, comment "But what we found kind of remarkable is how the characters and the kind of situation he [James] created was still kind of relevant to a story being told today,"[12] I mean to focus, instead, on the strategies the film adopts to transfer the novel's frame into the cinematic medium.

The film translates very well on the screen some important elements of James' narratological and formal decisions, as well as giving visual expression to some of the textual and ideological investigations into James' novel that the critics have been offering over the decades. Over time, almost every critic has commented on the presence in the novel of a narratorial

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[11] Betsy Sharkey, "Movie review: What Maisie Knew gives a child's eye view of divorce," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2013/may/16/entertainment/la-et-mn-what-maisie-knew-20130517 (last access October 19, 2018).

[12] Euan Kerr, " What Maisie Knew finds modern truths in Victorian satire," *MPR News*, May 23, 2013, https://www.mprnews.org/story/2013/05/23/arts/what-maisie-knew (last access October 19, 2018).

double—the narrator and the focalizer—and ascribed to this duality a cluster of different meanings and effects, whose variety signals the complexity and multiplicity of functions that may be referred to Jamesian narratorial figures and that the film directors are facing.

The novel juxtaposes an ironic, modern narrator and a Victorian story which turns out to be still very relevant to the movie's contemporary setting and scenario. In *What Maisie Knew*, the novel, there is no identity between the narrator and the point of focalization: an external narrator is entrusted with a narration filtered through Maisie's eyes. The novel establishes a double perception, the adults' and the child's, in which the former have the monopoly over language and (apparently) understanding. Maisie is the reflector or focalizer of her own story, namely the mirroring surface which directs the light over *some* subjects and *some* objects and not others, as well as the point through which the elements in the story are seen, heard, and savored by the reader. According to influential narratologist Mieke Bal:

> In Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* the focalization lies almost entirely with Maisie, a little girl who does not understand much about the problematic relations going on around her. Consequently, the reader is shown the events through the limited vision of the girl, and only gradually realizes what is actually going on. But the reader is not a little girl. S/he does more with the information s/he receives than Maisie does, s/he interprets it differently. Where Maisie sees only a strange gesture, the reader knows that s/he is dealing with an erotic one. The difference between the childish vision of the events and the interpretation that the adult reader gives to them determines the novel's special effect.[13]

[13] Mieke Bal, *Narratology* (Toronto: Toronto U.P., 1985), p. 105.

The perception of the story as filtered through Maisie's eyes, therefore, seeps through the child's subjectivity, a dynamics that allows the reader to witness the dialectics between consciousness and disorientation. The whole novel is distilled through the vision and thoughts of the child, whose awareness (or lack of awareness) becomes the filter for the perception of the events, albeit in manifest contrast with the adult knowledge.

As the filmic rendering of the topicality of children's growth in an environment where adults are still struggling with issues related to growing up, *What Maisie Knew*, the movie, keeps the self-reflexive mode. It is certainly true that "in the process of dramatization," the move from a telling to a showing mode, "there is inevitably a certain amount of re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot."[14] But the hermeneutic mechanisms of textual ambiguity and readerly decipherment found in the novel are reproduced in the movie on a clearly distinct, although still effective, cinematic register. The directors make a good use of cinematic techniques to alert and direct the audience's perception in ways that are similar to the Jamesian modes of representation. If the space of the mind, a character's psychology and interiority, is not usually easy to represent on screen, *What Maisie Knew*, the movie, seems to be very successful in portraying this dimension. McGehee and Siegel make manifest Maisie's inner space in the material realm by deploying an uncommon cinematic code. The movie attempts to use the camera as in a first-person narration, an infrequent artifice to let the spectator see only what the protagonist sees. Consequently, the novel's double perception is rendered in the film through such techniques as foregrounded presence in the shot, point-of-view editing, subjective framing, shot/reverse shot, and especially eye-line

[14] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit., p. 40.

match. The camera lens acts as both the narrator's voice and Maisie's gaze.

In one of the first scenes, while the opening credits are still rolling and the movie's title has not appeared yet, the viewer hears the doorbell while the camera frames the house and then Maisie from above. The frame shows the house's architecture, first the structural beams in the ceiling—as the camera was placed above them—and then the stairs and Maisie running down the stairs to get to the door. In the very next scene, the camera shows the closed door and a corner of the pizza box, as it is placed outside the house and viewed from behind the pizza deliveryman, but at Maisie's eye-level, as is evident when she opens the door all by herself. Maisie, who appears in almost every single scene, is both framed by the camera and the point from which the camera shoots. The young girl is constantly watched over by the spectator, if not by other characters, and, at the same time, the audience can feel that her eyes are watching back, as she looks everywhere.

All the action in the movie is filtered through the frame of the child's perspective: the camera frames Maisie while she listens, eavesdrops, learns new things, is seduced and manipulated by all the adults. As the spectator hears their raised voices, s/he also sees Maisie's unvoiced reactions. In the same way that the novel does not reveal much about the young girl's perception of herself and her own situation, despite the narrator's capacity for fine articulation, so does the movie not provide much in the way of Maisie's own articulation about her subjectivity or the world around her. Rather, it approaches its young protagonist's experience mostly by observing her: it offers images of her face and gestures, her reactions to adults, or even intercuts the action of the film with melancholic shots of Maisie's room and toys, which underline the child's silent tragedy. But, precisely as in James, Maisie herself is relentlessly and silently observant, surrounded as she is by adults who are often cut off just above Maisie's head or seen from below, while they behave in ways that are thus made all the more dis-

concerting and upsetting.

In a sense, even the novel's metaphoric writing style is paraphrased in the recurring visual imagery derived from Maisie's gaze. The novel's prologue frames and introduces Maisie's story, by reporting through the narrator's words the context of the "litigation" in court between Maisie's parents. As I will show in part II, the narrator ironically and metaphorically plays with an incredibly restricted nucleus of sense, dilating and deferring meanings that remain rather ambiguous, and yet this process provides the reader with some metatextual information as well as with interpretative tools. In a similar, although less powerful way, the very opening of the movie consists of a combination of sounds heard over a black screen: in the dark, footsteps intermingle with the sound of police sirens from the outside world and an opening door from the inside, before the spectator hears the voice of Maisie's mother, Susanna, and sees that she is carrying in her arms a sleepy Maisie in order to put her to bed. Just as the "litigation" is supposedly only about the child's wellbeing, while "what was clear to any spectator was that the only link binding her to either parent was the lamentable fact of her being a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed" (12), so the tucking-in-to-bed opening sequence is only apparently loving and playful. In actual fact, it is clearly late at night when Susanna returns home with Maisie and finally puts her to bed fully dressed. Even her singing of a lullaby is disturbed by the sounds of the police sirens outside, which ominously foretell the future proceedings in Maisie's life in the same way as the words of the "good lady" in the novel had been "an epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's childhood" (12).

Although James' subtly observant prose—the eloquence and nuance that inhere in the texture of the novel's prose and guide the reader in articulating the child's perspective—is rather impossible to reproduce in a visual medium, the presence and function of the novel's narrator are translated into a sort

of cinematic mirroring. As I have tried to show, the actors are introduced by some specific sounds (sirens, quarreling voices, television, laughing, bells and clocks, door sounds, mobile phones, music) before being framed by a camera placed at Maisie's eye level. The camera portrays the adults, sometimes tilting up to suggest Maisie's perspective, but keeps the viewer's attention on her face, remaining steadily placed at a child's level. Meanwhile, sound is used to connect inner and outer aspects of her life, enhancing and directing the spectators' response to characters and action. More than being just visual/aural analogues to narrative subjective elements, these cinematic strategies transpose into the visual the "authorial control of intimacy and distance, the calibration of access to characters' knowledge and consciousness,"[15] which are so crucial to Jamesian writing.

An adaptation consists of an interested reading of another text. As Hutcheon explains, the access to the interplay between works—finding the mixture of repetition and difference, recognizing the familiar in the new—drives the intertextual pleasure. It is in this sense of a repetition which opens up a fuller understanding of both the hypotext and the hypertext that I have tried to discuss the successful adaptation of *What Maisie Knew*, the movie, with regard to the circuit of representations produced by both texts. Now it is time to explore the ideological nature of each system of representation, going back to the questions posed by comparative narratology: *What events from the novel's story have been eliminated, added, or changed in the adaptation, and, more important, why?* Or, even more important, *with what effects?*

[15] Stam, "Introduction," cit., p. 35.

Part II - *Critical distancing or the narrator's ironic effect*

A first answer to the above question is that, as I have already mentioned, the movie adaptation of *What Maisie Knew* eliminates the voice of the narrator. I have just discussed the ways in which a sense of the double vision inherent in the novel is conveyed in the movie through visual and aural "equivalents." However, what I find truly missing in the film is the continuous ironic distancing and disjunction between Maisie and the narrator. In the novel's *Preface*, James describes Maisie as his center of interest, his register of impressions, but, recognizing that "small children have many more perceptions that they have terms to translate them" (7), he also juxtaposes a narrator whose commentary "attends and amplifies" (7) her thoughts and perceptions. Mostly followed by the adult narrator, Maisie is viewed sympathetically and sometimes comically; the narrator, additionally, views the external world with an ironic, cynical eye, giving the reader an insight into the adult world that Maisie cannot comprehend. The narrator reads Maisie's perceptions and thoughts, sometimes commenting from his own perspective, sometimes addressing the reader, and sometimes stating the limits of his own knowledge. The combination of these narrative perspectives gives rise not only to the famous Jamesian ambiguity, but also to a third point of view—that of the reader, who is left with the task of reconstructing the text's verbal, structural, and metaphorical relations.

Here I am arguing the importance of the narrator's irony as a way to lay bare the logic of Victorian society and its social structures, whose power relations depend on variable hierarchies based on gender, status, wealth, and class. By magnifying the underlying mechanisms inscribed both in the cultural codes and in the characters' subjectivity, the novel's irony makes manifest the historically specific oppression that these mechanisms produce. The novel produces, in fact, an unsentimental and paradoxical effect through the narrator's irony,

which, establishing a distance between perception and analysis, vision and understanding, eyes and words, prevents straightforward identifications that would otherwise be authorized and sustained by socio-historical ideological codes, and denaturalizes their apparent obviousness. At the same time, by involving the reader in the process of distancing the ideological mechanisms at a metatextual level, the narrator's irony is instrumental to the relativization and denaturalization of social relations, whose basic historical terms are still relevant today. McGehee and Siegel's film successfully renders the double narrative through an external framing/sound alternative to Maisie's point of view. However, in eliding the narrator, the movie renounces the irony behind the double vision that guides the circuit of representation in James.

Although many psychoanalytic film theorists have argued that movies are more effective than literature in enhancing the audience's identification because of the medium's capacity of generating a deeper involvement, I am arguing that James' employment of irony reveals otherwise.[16] In fact, it is not a matter of medium in the case of an author so well-versed in creating characters that are strongly mimetic of reality, circumstances that are totally immersed in ideological apparatuses, and whose syntax encloses the reader into sentences which compel him/her to analyze and balance alternative speculations while waiting for continuously deferred meanings. If every medium can be "immersive," though to different degrees and with different outcomes, my consideration of the narra-

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[16] Linda Hutcheon maintains that "each mode, each medium, has its own specificity and its own way to affect the audience's consciousness" (p. 130). Similarly, each medium has its own mode of engagement: "The showing mode entails embodying and enacting, and thereby often ends up spelling out important ambiguities that are central to the told version" (p. 28). See, Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, cit. However, as I have discussed, *What Maisie Knew*, the movie, finds its own strategies to avoid a resolute breaking of the spell of ambiguity.

tor's irony has little to do with the medium in itself, and much more with the capacity of mediation that is characteristic of irony. By exposing and destabilizing the textual world, Jamesian irony authorizes an effect of suspension and critical distancing at a metatextual level.

In *What Maisie Knew*, the novel, the narrator is not readily identifiable: he is not a character or a participant in the plot, he has no face, no form, even though he explicitly refers to himself as "I." He only has a voice that speaks *around* Maisie, describing or commenting on some aspects of the adult environment incomprehensible to her. His tone is ironic, sometimes cynical, sometimes judgmental, when he is directly voicing his point of view; it is often comic as the narrator's words are blended with Maisie's thoughts, perceptions, and terms. This interfusion of the narrator's adult language and views with Maisie's consciousness is maintained throughout the novel.

The narrator's irony starts from the very beginning, in the incipit, where he takes the position of an external observer of the litigation between Maisie's parents. From this position, he outlines the opening situation, describes the disputants and their goals. The narrative of Maisie's childhood history is given through the sophisticated, urbane discourse of the narrator. He explains that "in the interest of Maisie's maintenance," the child's mother, Ida, had provided a sum of money to her father, Beale, in order that "he would take no proceedings" (11), an agreement that Beale is not honoring since he is unable to account for the money. The context is a legal, institutional one, and yet it produces an "odd justice": Maisie is "divided in two and the portions tossed impartially to the disputants" (11). The astute decision that the narrator defines "worthy of the judgment-seat of Solomon," immediately emphasizes Maisie as an object that can be disposed of, as might be done in a property settlement. The language in the first paragraphs largely recalls the signing of a business agreement: "the litigation," "the obligation," "a compromise proposed by his legal advi-

sers," "his debt" finally "remitted to him." These terms all speak of a "fair" distribution of property in a patriarchal system, in which Beale would have been entitled to the right over Maisie's custody as the father, had he been able to account for the money. The structural mode of operation of this society is represented from the beginning as one that functions according to a double standard operating along axes of gender and economic capital.

On the other hand, if Beale is "bespattered from head to foot," the narrator makes explicit that Ida's moral stance is equally compromised: "the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots" (11). Interestingly enough, the distorted ethics of both parents are conveyed by turning the narrator's irony to their physical appearance. The description of the Faranges as "awfully good-looking" (13) is here filtered through the eyes of society's "vociferous public" (12):

> They made up together, for instance, some twelve feet three of stature, and nothing was more discussed than the apportionment of this quantity. The sole flaw in Ida's beauty was a length and reach of arm conducive perhaps to her having so often beaten her ex-husband at billiards, a game in which she showed a superiority largely accountable, as she maintained, for the resentment finding expression in his physical violence. Billiards was her great accomplishment and the distinction her name always first produced the mention of. Notwithstanding some very long lines everything about her that might have been large and that in many women profited by the licence was, with a single exception, admired and cited for its smallness. The exception was her eyes, which might have been of mere regulation size, but which overstepped the modesty of nature; her mouth, on the other hand, was barely perceptible, and odds were freely taken as to the measurement of her waist [...]. Beale Farange had natural decorations, a kind of costume in his vast fair beard, burnished like a gold breast-plate, and in the eternal glitter of the

> teeth that his long moustache had been trained not to hide and that gave him, in every possible situation, the look of the joy of life. (13-14)

The absurdity inherent in the parents' combined stature, Ida's magnificent reach of arm, and Beale's trained mustache, constitute their social capital. It sounds comically exaggerated in a way that mirrors the multiplication of the eyes and the intensification of the social comments: after all, "this was a society in which for the most part people were occupied only with chatter" (13) and Ida and Beale "after being perfectly insignificant together […] would be decidedly striking apart" (12).

It is also established from the opening of the novel that this society has its own instituted norms of behavior and codes governing the attribution of meanings and roles in social practices, meanings and roles which are understood only inside a specific socially shared framework. Therefore, Ida

> was a person who, when she was out—and she was always out—produced everywhere a sense of having been seen often, the sense indeed of a kind of abuse of visibility, so that it would have been, in the usual places, rather vulgar to wonder at her. Strangers only did that; but they, to the amusement of the familiar, did it very much. (14)

Look and appearances are the pivot and the common language of all participants in this social formation. Differentiating between *stranger* and *familiar*, and showing how the behavior of the former is unshared and therefore mocked by the latter, the narrator produces an awareness of the decisive role played by social norms in the life of individuals, and of the strong normative overtones of class and gender. The narrator's irony, manifest in the numerous asides, undermines the false universality of the social norms by suggesting the existence of alternatives, albeit classified as *stranger*.

The narrator is not only the interpreter of Maisie's thoughts and perceptions but also an observer of the world around her. As such, his cynical, ironic humor targets the entire situation: directed toward society, it shows the mechanisms of its ideology, its social and historical determination. Starting from the "vociferous public" that follows the divorce case and participates in it, James represents a crowd of spectators who, hailed sometimes through the pronoun "they" or "everyone," sometimes by recalling the social norms they claim ("she was to understand that a lady couldn't stay with a gentleman that way without some awfully proper reason," 28), intervene in individuals' lives and influence them. In the world described, the one sphere of life subjected to severe control and censorship is the sexual one.

This, in the end, is the reason why all the adults, and especially the women, need Maisie to *keep them proper*. The scene in chapter 5 in which Beale and Miss Overmore pick Maisie up at her mother's house for her "periodical uprooting" is a good example. Here, the child's naive point of view underscores the illegitimacy of their relationship:

> she put to Miss Overmore, after another immense and talkative squeeze, a question of which the motive was a desire for information as to the continuity of a certain sentiment. "Did papa like you just the same while I was gone?" she enquired—full of the sense of how markedly his favour had been established in her presence. She had bethought herself that this favour might, like her presence and as if depending on it, be only intermittent and for the season. Papa, on whose knee she sat, burst into one of those loud laughs of his that, however prepared she was, seemed always, like some trick in a frightening game, to leap forth and make her jump. Before Miss Overmore could speak he replied: "Why, you little donkey, when you're away what have I left to do but just to love her?" Miss Overmore hereupon immediately took her from him, and they had a merry little scrimmage over her of which Maisie caught the surprised perception in the *white*

> *stare* of an old lady who passed in a victoria. Then her beautiful friend remarked to her very gravely: "I shall make him understand that if he ever again says anything as horrid as that to you I shall carry you straight off and we'll go and live somewhere together and be good quiet little girls." The child couldn't quite make out why her father's speech had been horrid, since it only expressed that appreciation which their companion herself had of old described as "immense." (27, emphasis added)

Maisie does not understand the impropriety of the position in which her just divorced father and her governess are, and she does not understand their language, since she lacks the contextual social codes. The narrator, on the other hand, signals the presence of a vigilant eye that sees, unseen, and clearly does not approve. The half sentence "Maisie caught the surprised perception in the white stare of an old lady who passed in a victoria" conveys a multilayered set of meanings. The narrator is rendering Maisie's reception of the old lady's judgement, a reception that is confused since the child is the only character who notices the lady's look, but also the only one who does not possess the codes to interpret it. Moreover, the chosen term to address the lady's look is *stare*, which denotes a fixed, inquiring eye that, in addition, is *white*, conjuring the image of the lady rolling her eyes up to the point of revealing their white part in an act of condemnation of the scene she witnesses. Finally, the eyes belong to *an old lady in a victoria*, where each of these terms helps to stress the witness' authority: she is an *old lady*, an epithet that denotes respectability and a high status, who is traveling in a *victoria*, the carriage used by affluent families. This last information is particularly interesting in a paragraph that employs carriages as a symbol of power and wealth: Beale, who usually travels in a *hansom*, a popular and cheap two-wheeled cab, this time arrives in a *brougham*, a private carriage that so far had been the vehicle associated with Maisie's mother. What Maisie reads as a sign of harmony and ease ("The brougham was a token of harmony, of the fine con-

ditions papa would this time offer," 27), is actually an attempt to hide from the outside world the content of the carriage—the relationship with Miss Overmore: "Papa's carriage was, now that he had one, still more private, somehow, than mamma's" (27). An attempt that has clearly failed.

The interiorization of society as the moral standard is very explicit in this scene. The coupling of the two perspectives—Maisie's and the narrator's—again creates the ironic distancing effect, which reveals that what is at stake here is not an absolute ethical system nor a universal principle, but the necessity to conform to the contingent behavioral norms about (erotic) relationships. The proliferation of discourses about sexuality, as Michel Foucault has shown, constitutes it as *knowledge*: a sum of regulatory definitions to establish and enumerate accepted or repressed practices. The narrator's irony further illuminates the fact that in this domain, paradigms of class and gender always intersect: the old lady casts her disapproval on the couple based on their purely exterior conduct that contradicts Victorian codes of behavior, codes that Miss Overmore is always proclaiming, while always breaking them, reminding Maisie and the reader of their existence and function. While still forcing sexuality into a vocabulary of euphemisms and allusions, the insisted proclamation of definitions and norms reflects the need to bring sex into discourse, as described by Foucault. The authority of talking about sexuality and regulate it, once it has been constituted as knowledge, shifts to figures of institutional power—the experts—who embody the *dispositif* of knowledge-power itself. The parting between ethics and judgements, underlined in this scene by the double nature of the vision, signals the arbitrary and performative character of the codes that regulate the sexual sphere, particularly women's sexuality.

The narrator sometimes directs his irony also at Maisie and her childlike reactions to the behavior of the adults around her and the events in their lives. In creating the double focus that unveils a double truth, James builds the dialectics

between perception and comprehension which generates and supports the novel's narrative and hermeneutic movement. The operation that activates and circulates the hermeneutic process among the readers, together with the establishment of the superindividual discourse of ideology, is so successful that, as Sheila Teahan has noticed, "critics have tended to repeat the antinomies of James' own ambivalence towards the novel, replaying both the preface's and the text's own internal debate as to whether Maisie is corrupt or innocent, disingenuous or precociously wise—the ambiguity, in short, about how much Maisie knows."[17] It is telling that much of the critical reaction to the novel tends to be polarized around one of these two extremes, reproducing the same inquiring dynamics at play inside the text as if the critics were part of the vociferous public: does Maisie understand or not, is she corrupt or innocent, is she 7 or 13 by the end of the novel, does she represent a celebration of life or a retreat into an inner self.[18]

As a matter of fact, Maisie is never presented from her own point of view: her perceptions are always brought into focus by the narrator, but seldom directly expressed by herself. Her knowledge and sometimes her behavior are unintelligible to everyone else, but provoke everybody's speculations and definitions, including the narrator's and the reader's. From the title of the novel, her "knowledge," inscribed as it is in her subjectivity, is made the center of narrative attention. Constituted as a permanent question albeit formulated in an assertive form, the novel's interrogation about Maisie's know-

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[17] Sheila Teahan, "*What Maisie Knew* and the Improper Third Person," *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 21, N. 2 (Autumn 1993): 127-40, 127.

[18] A critical debate common to other Jamesian works, see for example the discussions about *Daisy Miller*, a sign of James's ability to stage the work of ideology and drag the reader in. For a reading of *Daisy Miller* as a displaying of the Althusserian notion of ideology see Donatella Izzo, "'Daisy Miller' e il discorso dell'ideologia," *RSAJournal*, N. 1 (1990): 45–68.

ledge and subjectivity fails to produce any stabilized meaning about the girl. Similarly, the insistence on the numerous epithets attributed to Maisie throughout the story accentuates one more time the ideological procedure of defining, interpreting, coding, and categorizing as a process totally unrelated to the subject. By combining Maisie's reticence about herself and the novel's reserve about its own question, James is both displaying and imploding the apparent naturalness of the ideological premises that inform both Victorian society and the writing-reading circuit of representation.

The end of the novel cycles back to the question of the title: everybody is left wondering at what Maisie knew. After her parents have both successively signed Maisie over to Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale as they might have handed over a piece of property, and the couple has tried to convince Maisie to be their pretext, the one *thing* that keeps them proper, it is Maisie's turn to propose the terms for a contract to Sir Claude: she will give up Mrs. Wix, if Sir Claude gives up Mrs. Beale. In the course of the novel, Maisie progresses from being "a ready vessel for bitterness" in the "court of Solomon" to proposing her own contract. The action represents considerable growth on her part, and is sustained by the narrator's irony, as the return to the language of the business world shows. Maisie has mastered the ability to approach the adults on their own ground and in their own terms, the same ones that had attracted the narrator's irony. In this way, James creates distance between the narrator and Maisie, and between the reader and Maisie.

Combining the adversities of Maisie's situation with the irony of expression—possible only through the mixing of the two perspectives, distorted as they *must* be—James prevents over-sentimentalization. Conversely, this is precisely what happens in the movie adaptation of *What Maisie Knew*, despite all the distancing through camera framings and sound effects. Once the immorality of her parents has been established, the viewer is left only with Maisie's point of view, her emotions,

and her fantasies. The audience clearly distances itself from *these* parents and their parental behavior, but the disapproval makes the spectator sympathize even more with the alternative, much more caring and loving couple of Maisie's stepparents, which is the way she sees them.

The absence of the narrator and his irony makes the process of critical distancing much harder in the movie. The spectator tends to attribute all the flaws to Maisie's parents—the two bad characters—placing the responsibility of the child's unfortunate life entirely on their reprehensible behavior. As a matter of fact, the focus on the individual characters at the textual level not only inhibits the possibility of critically distancing, at a metatextual level, the ideology and power structures inside the text, and thus of linking their functioning in the artistic representation to their functioning in today's sociocultural practices, but also dilutes Maisie's tragic situation by reducing it to an aesthetic and sentimental idealization. On her final departure, even the usually terrifying Susanna appears frankly heartbroken as a mother when Maisie refuses to leave with her, preferring instead to live with her stepparents. Even the "bad character," here, seems to deserve the viewer's compassion, if not forgiveness. The movie rejects distance for intimacy, and ultimately, it answers the final question. Kneeling to a position that for once visually brings her at a lower level than Maisie, Maisie's mother formulates the question which, precisely as in James, grammatically is not so much an interrogative as an assertive sentence: "You want...to stay with them for a while?" As Maisie resolutely assents, while the camera closes in on her face and then looks down to register the disappointment on her mother's face, it is clear that what Maisie wants is to finally actualize her childhood fantasy of a stable, *normal*, and happy family. Here is the happy ending that we all wish for Maisie. But is the movie's ending really a *happy* one?

Part III - *Growing up and the happy ending: what about Mrs Wix?*

The movie ends when Maisie is on the point of fulfilling her childhood dreams by actualizing the fantasies she has produced to compensate for a disappointing reality. In the final scene, we see Maisie running ahead in slow motion followed by her stepparents; she smiles cautiously, while she is moving toward her object of desire—a day ride in a boat. Despite all its apparent "infidelity," the ending of McGehee and Siegel's movie enhances Maisie's final empowerment. Contrary to the sequence of her father's departure, when Maisie asks to go with him to England and is rejected, the symmetrical final goodbye scene with her mother shows Maisie's choice and willpower, which the movement of the camera reveals and underlines. Even though it preserves Maisie's conclusive act, the movie does not present the child with a real choice. Dressed in full party clothes, Susanna is offering her child the option to follow her on a tour bus across the country, which for Maisie does not represent a desirable alternative to her newly acquired normal, happy life.

If the movie's finale is congruent with one of the crucial ideas conveyed by the end of the Jamesian novel, I argue that James' novel offers different implications and inferences as regards both Maisie's representation and the reader's interpretation. In the closing chapters of *What Maisie Knew*, Maisie is also facing the "fake" alternative of spending her life with the couple Mrs. Beale-Sir Claude or with her governess, Mrs. Wix. Whereas Maisie in the end returns to England with Mrs. Wix, this is not what Maisie wants: seemingly Mrs. Wix does not represent her happy ending nor the fulfillment of any childhood dream.

The discrepancy in the endings of the two texts has been received by the movie's reviewers exclusively in terms of the plot. The critics have registered the absence of Mrs. Wix as the most important change in the movie adaptation, for it leads to

a drastically different outcome at the end of the story: the movie reaches a happy ending, the novel does not. In some cases, the reviewers have concluded that the character of Mrs. Wix merges into Margo/Miss Overmore/Mrs. Beale and their plot line is combined. To my mind, it would do more justice to the Jamesian intertext to say that part of Mrs. Wix conflates in Maisie, or better is developing in her, as is hinted by the novel. What I want to suggest here is that, in James, Mrs. Wix functions as a mirror of Maisie, one that places the governess in a position that is comparable to Maisie's and reflects the way in which Maisie perceives herself in relation to the adults. At the same time, Mrs. Wix represents a catalyst that sets the child on the path to overcoming her Oedipal phase and consequently growing up.

Contrary to Moodle, who is "her nurse" (16) when she is a little kid, Mrs. Wix (as Miss Overmore before she becomes Mrs. Beale) is Maisie's governess as an older child. She arrives in Maisie's life at a moment in which Maisie is on the verge of growing up and immediately establishes a solid communion with her, as the narrator comments: "Mrs. Wix took her and, Maisie felt the next day, would never let her go" (23). As a matter of fact, the two of them share many features and functions. Like Maisie, Mrs. Wix is hired by Ida in response to Beale's behavior and used against him; she is heartbroken and lonely after her little daughter's death: "she had had absolutely nothing else in the world, and her affliction had broken her heart" (23); she has a "sad and strange appearance" (24) that qualifies her not only as *ugly*, *queer*, and *poor*, but also "in the eyes of the world a figure mainly to laugh at. She was as droll as a charade or an animal […] a person whom people, to make talk lively, described to each other and imitated" (24-5). The other character that is a constant object of derision throughout the novel is, in fact, Maisie herself, the object of everyone's laughter, from her family to the "shrieking ladies" at her mother's (29), to the rather inappropriate gentlemen at her father's (31). Similarly, when she starts to be aware of her "features" and

confronts them with those of other children, Maisie perceives herself as "deficient in something that would meet the general desire" (16). In the course of the novel, both Maisie and Mrs. Wix show signs of interest in the sphere of sexuality, as demonstrated by their fight over Sir Claude's picture first and his attentions later. However, Maisie and Mrs. Wix are the only characters in the novel who do not actively participate in sexuality, unwanted for being either *un*desirable or *not yet* desirable. Finally, both Maisie and Mrs. Wix share a characterization as child-*like*, and they both retreat into a fantasy world of romance and stories, for Mrs. Wix prefers to take "refuge on the firm ground of fiction" telling stories that deal with "love and beauty and countesses and wickedness" rather than perform routine instruction in the "many subjects she was afraid of" (25-6).

Many critics have noted that, as the novel progresses, the roles of Mrs. Wix and Maisie merge to the point of being, in many respects, reversed: as Maisie becomes intellectually superior to her governess and acquires a deeper knowledge, as well as the capacity to listen and give advice usually attributed to governesses, so, on the other hand, Mrs. Wix learns to question, as Maisie does throughout the novel, instead of just assuming. In the final part of the novel, Mrs. Wix is so equated with Maisie that in the child's eyes the governess mirrors Maisie herself in relation to the adults, to the point that Maisie goes so far as to say: "Oh you're nobody!" (185). Maisie's own feelings of being visible and chosen only insofar as she is a useful tool for the adults around her, being otherwise "a nobody," are verbalized and projected onto Mrs. Wix when the child's turn to choose finally arrives. Both Lee Ann Johnson and Sheila Teahan, quoting from James' *Notebooks*, describe Mrs. Wix as an ironic figure (as Maisie also is) and her textual function as a parodic mirroring of Maisie's point of view:

> Mrs. Wix generates a continuous parody of the novel's narrative strategy. As "a dim, crooked little reflector"

> (Notebooks, p. 162), she embodies a comic version of Maisie's role as reflective center. Her "straighteners" concretize a running joke about point of view: intended to correct a "divergent obliquity of vision," they instead correct the vision of her interlocutors. […] But it is finally difficult to distinguish Mrs. Wix's flawed perspective from Maisie's own reflective consciousness, "the last little triangle of cracked glass to which so many fractures had reduced the polished plate of filial superstition."[19]

Mrs. Wix mirrors Maisie in both her characterization and her narrative instrumentality and productivity. This is another Jamesian doubling, a textual strategy that by multiplying the reflective centers to the point that they unsettle one another, contributes to the denaturalization of culturally and historically significant elements.

Interestingly enough, Mrs. Wix is also Maisie's moral instructress, although her idea of "moral sense" is never explicitly communicated. Narrated from Maisie's perspective, chapter 26 begins crediting Mrs. Wix with a newly acquired *dignity* and therefore *authority*, before the governess asks whether Maisie "really and truly" has any moral sense. A series of sentences, not without irony, follow one another: "a certain greatness had now come to Mrs. Wix," "this friend had been converted in short from feebleness to force; and it was the light of her new authority that showed from how far she had come," "Mrs Wix's breaking out with a dignity," "her friend has risen to a level which might […] pass almost for sublime" (167-69). From her just acquired dignified position of authority, Mrs.

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[19] Teahan, "*What Maisie Knew* and the Improper Third Person," cit., p. 131; also Lee Ann Johnson, "James's Mrs. Wix: The Dim, Crooked Reflector, " *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (September 1974): 164-72. On Mrs. Wix's role as a double of Maisie see also Juliet Mitchell, "*What Maisie Knew*: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl," *The Air of Reality: New Essays on Henry James,* ed. John Goode (London: Methuen and Co., 1972), p. 169.

Wix encourages Maisie to *find* an undefined "moral sense" which, more than having a specific content, seems to hint at a sort of limit. Her stance contrasts with that of the adults around them, who abdicate responsibility for Maisie or try to exploit her in order to pursue pleasures of their own.

> "I never knew anything about them and I never wanted to know! Now I know too much, too much!" the poor woman lamented and groaned. "I know so much that with hearing such talk I ask myself where I am; and with uttering it too, which is worse, say to myself that I'm far, too far, from where I started! I ask myself what I should have thought with my lost one if I had heard myself cross the line. There are lines I've crossed with *you* where I should have fancied I had come to a pretty pass – !"She gasped at the mere supposition. (170)

If the limit, that is, the prohibitions which regulate social life and guarantee a minimum of decency—what Lacan would call the Big Other—must always come from outside the subject, the limit is not an entity existing independently of individuals, but as Slavoj Žižek formulates, "it exists only in so far as subjects *act as if it exists.*"[20] Pointing at the lines that can or cannot (and should or should not) be crossed and their consequences, Mrs. Wix encourages Maisie to face her childhood fantasies, the child's wish of ending up with his or her (heterosexual) Oedipal object of desire, and eventually to resolve the complex. As Deanna K. Kreisel comments in her article entirely devoted to the Oedipal structure in the Jamesian novel:

> *What Maisie Knew* traces its protagonist's entire family romance, from Maisie's pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother, to her homoerotic affection for Mrs. Beale, to her

[20] Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co, 2006), p. 10.

> "final" Oedipal configuration of heteronormative love for Sir Claude, to her ultimate renunciation to him at the end of the novel.[21]

Clearly Mrs. Wix does not feature in the family romance. She, in fact, represents the part of Maisie's consciousness which is in-between the internal and the external: she signifies a "psychical agency" or "component"[22] of a child, which is obviously internal and decidedly unpleasant, undesired, and undesirable, but also an external voice that catalyzes Maisie's moral sense, by showing her the sense of the limit.

What Maisie Knew, the movie, ends with Maisie being still a child in terms of both age and developmental status. The film crystallizes Maisie in the Oedipal phase when she chooses the merry couple and the fulfillment of her childhood fantasies and dreams over a disappointing reality. What is missing in the adaptation is the sense of the limit, both internal and external, as provided through the character of Mrs. Wix, who is in fact absent. The resulting happy ending enabled by this adaptation decision is perfectly congruent with the deceptive imperative to always enjoy and be happy that Žižek describes as the crucial feature of contemporary society. He maintains that there is no symbolic order or "Big Other" to guide the contemporary subject's behavior. All the impulses, from sexual orientation to ethnic belonging, are more and more often experienced as matters of choice, but this decline of authority generates new guilt and anxieties, instead of opening up a new world of enjoyment. He argues that the disintegration of the Big Other undermines the possibility of subversive liberating acts of

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[21] Deanna K. Kreisel, "What Maisie Knew: The Gift and Oedipus in 'What Maisie Knew' and 'Rushmore'," *An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol. 38, N. 2 (June 2005): 1-17, 7.

[22] Sigmund Freud describes the nature and systemic functioning of our psyche for the first time in his *The Ego and the Id*, trans. by Joan Riviere (London: the Hogarth P., 1926).

transgression, while it is counterbalanced by an even stronger subjection to the superego, which comes from the individual's necessity to find a limit from within himself/herself. In his words:

> Lacan's fundamental thesis is that superego in its most fundamental dimension is an *injunction to enjoyment:* the various forms of superego commands are nothing but variations on the same motif: 'Enjoy!' Therein consists the opposition between Law and superego: Law is the agency of prohibition which regulates the distribution of enjoyment on the basis of a common, shared renunciation (the 'symbolic castration'), whereas superego makes a point at which *permitted* enjoyment, freedom-to-enjoy, is reversed into *obligation* to enjoy – which, one must add, is the most effective way to block access to enjoyment.[23]

To my mind, *What Maisie Knew*, both the novel and the movie, stage and interpret a society where the pursuit of personal enjoyment prevails at the command of the superego. However, there is a significant difference in regard to the protagonist and her final choice. The movie ends portraying Maisie as still a child who has not internalized the sense of the external limit: consequently, she is subjected to the injunction to enjoyment of her own internal superego, which seems to offer the child a free choice when she is not being given any choice at all. The need to enjoy herself not as a free choice but as a duty, together with the consequent feeling of guilt for failing to be as happy as the superego demands, makes Maisie's happy ending only apparently a happy one.

In a semantic reversal, setting the limit through the character of Mrs. Wix and having Maisie understand and choose it, the novel registers Maisie's growth into a conscious subject.

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[23] Slavoj Zizek, *For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. 237.

By having Maisie choose not Mrs. Wix but *herself*, or Mrs. Wix *as herself*, as a way to *be just herself*, the textual strategy at work here brings out a consciousness-raising effect which authorizes the perception of Maisie as an autonomous subject. At the end of the novel, Maisie is endowed with agency and a new awareness, one that does not necessarily entail immediate happiness, but growth and a perception of her real possibilities for freedom. In the finale, Maisie is symbolically and textually on the threshold of a new path of life: she returns to England with Mrs. Wix, but the novel ends while she is still "in mid-Channel, surrounded by the quiet sea" (216). By exiting the stage to begin her personal journey, Maisie leaves all the characters and the reader wondering at what she knows. The unresolved question of James' novel operates as an instrument to give the authority over both the self and the narrative back to the protagonist. It seems to me, in conclusion, that the final act of James' novel is much more of a happy ending, in its being much more empowering for Maisie, than the end of the movie.[24]

[24] That this final, empowering act signals Maisie's turning into a *woman* is extremely significant for many gender-oriented reflections that have guided my discussion in this article, even though they have remained in the background. For clear reasons of space, this article cannot discuss such a vast and complex issue, but I do intend to signal the possibility of further exploring the ending of the Jamesian novel in a direction that will take into account the issue of woman subjectivity.