

2012

# Troping the Elderly: Cultural Tensions, Senescence, and Sentimentalism in Antebellum Literature

Melissa Kowalski  
*Lehigh University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>

---

## Recommended Citation

Kowalski, Melissa, "Troping the Elderly: Cultural Tensions, Senescence, and Sentimentalism in Antebellum Literature" (2012). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1057.

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact [preserve@lehigh.edu](mailto:preserve@lehigh.edu).

Troping the Elderly: Cultural Tensions, Senescence, and Sentimentalism in Antebellum  
Literature

by

Melissa R. Kowalski

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

Lehigh University

May 2012

© 2012 Copyright  
Melissa R. Kowalski

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Melissa R. Kowalski

Troping the Elderly: Cultural Tensions, Senescence, and Sentimentalism in Antebellum Literature

---

Approved Date

---

Dissertation Director  
Dr. Edward Whitley

Committee Members:

---

Dr. Elizabeth Dolan

---

Dr. Michael Kramp

---

Dr. Diane Hyland

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have completed this dissertation without the love and support of many people. To my husband, James, who encouraged me throughout the process and listened to my ideas even when he didn't want to. To my parents, Eileen and Gary, who always believed in my ability to complete this project and achieve my dream even when I was unsure of myself. To my brothers, David and Michael, who prompted many useful discussions on my topic.

I also would like to thank my committee, Dr. Beth Dolan, Dr. Michael Kramp, and Dr. Diane Hyland for their valuable feedback and thoughtful comments during this process. I would also like to extend an especially grateful thank-you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Edward Whitley for being a supportive mentor who helped me grow intellectually and realize the potential in my work. Also, I want to give thanks to my nineteenth-century group – Wes Anderson, Brian Crowe, and Liz Wiggins – for reading my drafts and providing new perspectives on my research and emotional support during some of the more difficult moments.

Lastly, I have to thank my cats – Mycroft, Rufkins, and Rudy – for always being willing to sit on my laptop to let me know I had been working too long and for giving me unconditional love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
Chapter I	25
Chapter II	89
Chapter III	146
Chapter IV	201
Works Cited	258
Vita	281

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation undertakes the study of the intergenerational social contract and the competing social models during the 1850s. Through the examination of six texts – Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*, Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House” essay in *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I explore the various forms that the social contract between the young and old assumed in the domestic and economic spheres as well as in the African-American community. These social contracts formed the foundation of the two social models that informed the conflict over societal organization during this antebellum era. The aristocratic social model was a hierarchical structure that privileged the elderly. These elderly were granted automatic respect from younger generations in return for their domestic capability, economic productivity, or moral and ethical leadership. If the aged had any difficulty in fulfilling one or more of these criteria, nostalgia could be employed as an ameliorating device whereby younger generations acknowledged the elderly’s previous achievements. The democratic social model was a non-hierarchical system of equity where all generations were evaluated on their current domestic abilities, economic output, or moral and ethical guidance. If the senescent failed to meet one or more of these objectives, then they were marginalized by younger generations in preference for the elderly who still contributed to society in their old age.

While Fern, Hawthorne, and Douglass all embraced the aristocratic social model, they promoted different social contract criteria based on their societal positions.

Fern and Melville also based their social contract principles on their personal experience, which resulted in different components, but both used their contracts to advocate for a democratic social model. Only Harriet Jacobs asserted that both the aristocratic and democratic models could coexist. She stressed that the form of the intergenerational social contract was not as important as its stability. Furthermore, she claimed that the problem with competing social models was the potential for individuals to misread the model in which they were operating. Jacobs underscored that absolute respect should not be the purpose of any social model, but that the elderly must be able to gain respect from some location within either social structure in order to achieve personal integrity.

## Introduction:

### Looking Backward, Looking Forward: A Brief Acquaintance with the Antebellum Elderly and the Social Model Conflict

“Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity.”

-- Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth* (145)

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment,” published in *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), the eponymous protagonist receives a sample of water from the Fountain of Youth.<sup>1</sup> Curious about its potency, the doctor invites four elderly friends to his home to test its effects. Although Dr. Heidegger does not drink the water, his four friends eagerly imbibe it and immediately become young again. The three men shortly being fighting for the affections of Widow Wycherly, who is restored to her former beauty, but the effects of the tonic soon wear off, leaving the foursome feeling devastated by the transience of their experience. However, undeterred by the brevity of the episode, the four determine to travel to Florida to seek the source of the Fountain of Youth.

Why are four of the characters dissatisfied with their advanced age while their colleague, Dr. Heidegger is content? Why does Hawthorne even choose to write about the elderly in the first place? Hawthorne’s story indeed raises questions about the position of the elderly in antebellum society. It is important to acknowledge the contribution of literature to the debate on the position of the elderly in antebellum society because, as social historians Carole Haber and Brian Gratton conclude, “Throughout the

---

<sup>1</sup> This story was first published anonymously by Hawthorne as “The Fountain of Yonder” in 1837 in *The Knickerbocker* (Miller, Perry 14).

course of American history, cultural beliefs, rather than urbanization or industrialization, shaped the social worth of all aged individuals” (357). The role of the aged during this era has been previously debated. Some social historians such as Andrew Achenbaum, author of *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience Since 1790*, have emphasized the generally positive attitude of society towards the elderly during the mid-nineteenth century. Others, such as David Hackett Fischer, author of *Growing Old in America* see a progressive development of gerontophobia during the antebellum era. While both schools of thought have their adherents, what is clear on both sides is that the nation’s domestic, socioeconomic, and political landscapes were undergoing a radical change at this time, which impacted the elderly’s position in society. Rather than attempting to describe the social role of the elderly in positive or negative terms as previous academics have done, this dissertation defines the elderly’s position in terms of their contractual relationships with younger generations. These intergenerational social contracts assumed a variety of forms depending on the criteria used to establish them. Furthermore, these contracts resolved into two types of social organization. The first, which I refer to as the aristocratic social model, is a hierarchical structure that unconditionally privileges all elderly because they have reached the oldest age cohort. The second, which I call the democratic social model, is an equitable organization that evaluates both the young and old on their contributions to society. This dissertation explores the way antebellum authors used their senescent characters to advocate for either an aristocratic or a democratic social structure that would create a benevolent society in a modernizing nation.

## **Wherefore the Elderly?**

The elderly of the antebellum era are significant figures for study because they perform two broad but essential functions: 1) they are transitional figures poised at a critical historical moment for the nation and, 2) they represent a dynamic social collectivity that assumed a variety of positions for antebellum authors. Despite the multiplicity of social locations that the elderly could occupy, the aged continually divided into one of two social organizations. The first, which I call the aristocratic social model, was a backwards-looking structure that created a hierarchical society where the senescent were automatically privileged based on their advanced age. The second, which I refer to as the democratic social model, generated a forward-looking, equalized society where all individuals, young and old, were evaluated on their current contributions to their communities. The elderly of the mid-nineteenth century were the second generation of seniors to identify themselves as American citizens, although their lineage in the New World could stretch back as far as a quarter of a millennium. With the death of Charles Carroll, the last living signer of the Declaration of Independence, in 1832 at the age of 95, the country's founding generation had passed away. The men and women who had defied England and forged their own nation despite the seemingly insurmountable odds were gone, leaving no first-hand witnesses to lead and advise younger generations. The aged of the 1850s were the children and grandchildren of these patriots who possessed, if not first-hand knowledge, at least the second-hand stories of their parents and grandparents who participated in the founding of the country. Thus the elderly could satisfy society's desire for nostalgia through their encapsulation of the nation's history.

Nostalgia was one of the characteristics that younger generations often praised in the senescent because they were the only demographic who had direct access to these memories. Furthermore, the aged, by virtue of their long lives, had generated accomplishments in their past that enhanced their social value; even if seniors could no longer contribute either domestically, economically, culturally, religiously, politically, or morally and ethically to their communities, their previous achievements could be considered significant enough to warrant younger generations' admiration of them.

Like Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the 'angel of history,' where an angel is looking toward the past, but is being relentlessly propelled into the future, the antebellum elderly were caught between the younger generation's veneration of the aged's previous accomplishments and their desire to embrace modernity, which required efficiency and sustained levels of production in the present.<sup>2</sup> The elderly were enmeshed in an admixture of competing social models, having lived through the last vestiges of the American aristocratic model, yet still extant as the nation groped its way toward a new social iteration in the form of the democratic social model. In other words, the elderly were the age cohort positioned between the competing social models of the past and the present. The antebellum elderly were born into an aristocratic social model, but many of them discovered themselves in a democratic model by their senescence. As America was establishing its identity through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, society relied on the aristocratic or pre-industrial model of organization.<sup>3</sup> Larzer Ziff claims that as late as "the generation of American writers born immediately after the [American]

---

<sup>2</sup> See Thesis IX in Benjamin's *Illuminations* for a full description of the 'angel of history' (257-58).

<sup>3</sup> See Larzer Ziff's thorough description of American social models from 1620-1861 in *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America*.

Revolution” (and this was the age cohort that would become the elderly of the antebellum era), society was attempting to “restrict the franchise and consolidate authority” (“Preface” xii). In the aristocratic model, the elderly were unquestioningly privileged by younger members of society simply because they had reached old age. Younger participants in the aristocratic model expected the senescent to become moral and ethical leaders in their communities based on their amassed knowledge. The elderly could be contributing to society in other ways as well – domestic, economic, political, religious, and cultural productions were often made by the aged. However, proponents of the aristocratic system did not require any current social contributions by the elderly. In order to indicate the value of the non-productive portion of elder society, supporters of the aristocratic model employed the use of nostalgia. In effect, these younger members joined the seniors on Benjamin’s angel’s trash-heap and faced backwards with them, using this rearward glance to acknowledge elderly’s previous accomplishments. By recognizing the former achievements of the senescent, younger generations could justify their praise of even the most inactive seniors because they discovered their personal merit in the past, making these elderly worthy of respect. Proponents of the aristocratic social model, including Susan Warner, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Frederick Douglass all base their praise of at least one of their senescent characters on nostalgia.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the aged existed in a country that was shifting from an American aristocratic model to a democratic one. In the decade prior to the Civil War, there was a general, but not universal, consensus that a democratic social model was necessary to accommodate the establishment of an economically efficient and

competitive nation in a modernizing world. Young supporters of the democratic model viewed senescence as “symboliz[ing] the eighteenth-century world of patriarchy and hierarchical authority” (Cole 61). Proponents of this individually-determined democratic model endorsed self-reliance as the essential component of society, or as Ziff concludes, “In America . . . individualism was the goal itself” (*Literary* 29). The elderly were expected to continue to contribute to their communities either in the domestic, economic, political, religious, cultural, or moral and ethical spheres. The aged would be assessed on their productivity alongside younger generations; this equal assessment was intended to create an equitable and productive society. Unlike the aristocratic model that automatically revered the elderly as a group because of their age, the democratic model only respected the individuals, young or old, who positively contributed to society in some manner. Furthermore, supporters of the democratic model did not employ nostalgia in their evaluations of the senescent. Authors who promoted the democratic social model, including Fanny Fern and Herman Melville argued that only by judging the elderly on their current level of output could society improve its productivity and its equality for both old and young generations. Furthermore, the democratic model ensured that the elderly could not abuse their authority, which was consolidated in the aristocratic model. Using Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ concept, the democratic proponents were the ones propelling the reluctant elderly into the future. Seniors who were productive would be able to withstand this societal shift and retain their social position, while those who were inefficient, ineffective, or simply lazy, regardless of the cause, would be marginalized, swept to the bottom of Benjamin’s trash-heap. This democratic model

engendered the images of the self-made man, the laissez-faire society, and the bootstraps mentality.

The aged were also uniquely positioned as a social collectivity in antebellum society. They were simultaneously a dominant, hegemonic force as well as a marginalized, at-risk group, depending on the vantage point of the author.<sup>4</sup> Because antebellum America was a modernizing society, the social roles of the elderly were in flux. According to psychologists Bernice Neugarten and Nancy Datan, “A modern complex society . . . is characterized by plural system of age status that becomes differentiated in relation to particular social institutions” (59). Younger members of society struggled to place the elderly into a social model because they occupied a number of social positions, but this multiplicity also meant that the aged could be employed in support of both aristocratic and democratic social systems. While Henry David Thoreau could dismiss the elderly, claiming “the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures” (10), his friend and business associate, Ralph Waldo Emerson could declare, “the essence of age is intellect” (267). Both of these locations excited strong emotional reactions in society. Because of this, the rhetoric used by society in describing the elderly who occupied either a powerful or fragile position was heightened. A study of the intensity of expression surrounding either categorization of the elderly exposes antebellum society’s own struggle with the aged’s role in both the aristocratic and democratic social models. And, in either position, the elderly were an expedient

---

<sup>4</sup> Yuval-Davis emphasizes that we need “to analyse culture as a dynamic contested resource which can be used differently in different projects and by people who are differentially positioned in the collectivity” (23).

collectivity to inscribe with an author's agenda. As a dominant group – possessors of political power and economic capital and authorities on social norms – the elderly could be easily attacked for their hegemony by promoters of the democratic social model. As a marginalized group – poverty-stricken and physically or mentally impaired – the aged presented an opportunity for an author to reclaim the image of a peripheral social group in the aristocratic social model. In either case, the senescent became a convenient space upon which issues of societal organization could be explored because their ability to assume multiple social positions meant they could be analyzed in a variety of ways.

Because the elderly held both a hegemonic and a marginalized social position, it allowed authors to map out their social anxieties onto this demographic with fewer risks or ramifications to the authors because they could distance themselves from the aged regardless of the elderly's location in society. As a result of their advanced age, the elderly could always be ascribed as a social 'Other' by authors in order to explore competing social models and shifting communal paradigms respective of the country's modernization.<sup>5</sup> However, the elderly were useful sites for social model assessment because they also possessed the duality of a similarity contained within a difference. While a thirty-seven year old Thoreau could say, "I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors," (10) Fanny Fern could humorously refer to herself as "horrid old – fifty-six – and ugly besides" in one of her newspaper

---

<sup>5</sup> The concept of "Other" or "Othering" can be traced back to the Hegelian dialectic, although it did not achieve a cultural interpretation until Edward Said employed the concept in *Orientalism* (1978) to define the difference created between Occidental and Oriental cultures through the western imperialist project. Other excellent sources for an explanation of "Othering" can be found in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin; *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990) by Robert J.C. Young; and *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) by Ania Loomba.

columns (Warren *Independent* 274-75). Although writers could set themselves apart from the aged by virtue of the disparity in age cohorts, authors also were compelled to recognize the inevitable similarities that arose from their own chronological arc – someday they too would be old. Thus, the representation of the elderly assumed an exigency for authors who sought to analyze social models from a distanced perspective, yet also one that was applicable to themselves as old age inescapably approached with the passing of the years.

The elderly thus provide a complex matrix for mapping out social models. Embodying both the pre-industrial, aristocratic and modern, democratic social models by virtue of their position as a transitional generation, the elderly provided a space upon which authors could argue for either social model. Moreover, the aged were a fluid demographic, capable of occupying both the center and periphery of antebellum society, not only by virtue of their individual achievements, but also based on the relative perspective of the authors who chose the senescent as their subject. Writers could also examine the elderly at a distance because they represented a disparate age cohort, but they also signified the destiny of younger generations. This adaptability of the aged provided a wealth of potential social positions that no other segment of antebellum society was capable of fulfilling, making the elderly a unique demographic that must be studied in order to develop a greater understanding of antebellum social models.

## **A Sociocultural Currency: Sentimental Literature and the Social Contract**

As communities sought to renegotiate the status of their elderly members, the conflict played out in numerous arenas. While the struggle has been documented by social historians, such as Achenbaum and Fischer (even though they disagree over the results), the role that antebellum literature played in this conflict has not. Sentimental literature was not only a hugely popular genre in the mid-nineteenth century, but it was also the foundation for the intergenerational social contract that produced both the aristocratic and democratic social models. Extending back to the mid-eighteenth century, Scottish Moralists David Hume and Adam Smith used the concept of sentiment as one of the components for the formation of the social contract between the generations. If society organizes itself according to both reason and sentiment, as Hume and Smith claim, it will lead to “the immediate feeling of benevolence and friendship, humanity and kindness” between the old and the young, which will generate a mutually beneficial society for both generations (Hume 192). Sentiment, according to Hume and Smith, is a necessary component for social contracts because it acknowledges the emotional connections that develop between people, which encourages people to treat each other more kindly and develop bonds that extend beyond a utilitarian society. Although a utilitarian society founded solely on reason is sustainable, Hume and Smith claim that it will not benefit all members of society in the way that one founded on reason and sentiment will. Sentiment adds the essential component of an emotional connection to the intergenerational social contract, which benefits the old, who gain the respect of the young either by virtue of their age in an aristocratic model, or by earning it through their

societal contributions in a democratic model. Sentiment profits the young, too by either providing them moral and ethical role models in an aristocratic model or by protecting them from the potential of the elderly's abuse of power in a democratic model.

In a century, the moral philosophy of sentiment developed into the popular antebellum genre of sentimental literature. Reaching its zenith in the 1850s, sentimental literature accessed a wide audience. If we consider Anthony Giddens's definition of culture as "the values the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow and the material goods they create," sentimental literature was one of the primary cultural currencies of the 1850s (qtd. in Yuval-Davis 40). Although twentieth-century critics incorrectly assumed that sentimental literature was only the province of female readers, an excerpt from an 1853 book review published in the *North American Review* roundly disputes that notion:

All this while nobody talked very loud about these simple stories. They were found on everybody's table, and lent from house to house, but they made no great figure in the newspapers or show-bills. By and by, the deliberate people who look at title-pages, noticed the magic words, 'Tenth Thousand,' 'Twelfth Thousand,' and so on; and as the publishing house was not one of those who think politic fibs profitable, inevitable conclusions began to be drawn as to the popularity of the books – conclusions to which the publisher had come long before, perhaps not without a certain surprise. ("Novels" 113)

The same reviewer also goes on to explain the process by which readers gained access to sentimental novels:

it was, for some time, bought to be presented to nice little girls, by parents and friends who desired to set a pleasant example of docility and self-command before those happy beginners. Elder sisters were soon found poring over the volumes, and it was very natural that mothers next should try the spell which could so enchain the more volatile spirits of the household. After this, papas were not very difficult to convert, for papas like to feel their eyes moisten, sometimes, with emotions more generous than those usually excited at the stock exchange or in the counting-room. Whether any elder brothers read, we must doubt, in the absence of direct testimony; for that class proverbially despises any thing so 'slow' as pictures of domestic life; but we are much mistaken if the *Wide, Wide World*, and *Queechy*, have not been found under the pillows of sober bachelors, -- pillows not unsprinkled with the sympathetic tears of those who, in broad day, manfully exult in 'freedom' from the effeminate fetters of wife and child. (113)

According to this anonymous review, sentimental literature was perhaps the most widely-read genre in the nation at this time. Even writers who disagreed with its construction and purpose – Herman Melville comes to mind – were aware of its impact as sales of texts like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Maria Cummin's *The Lamplighter* reached into the hundreds of thousands while *Moby-Dick* struggled to reach sales of a few

hundred copies. Like it or not, sentimental literature was embraced by the general reading populace of all ages and because of its blockbuster sales, the social contract philosophy of sentimental writers reached a wide audience under the guise of leisure and entertainment. Whether it was a little girl reading a book she received as a gift, or a father sneaking a peep into the books his wife and daughters were reading, the messages contained in these books filtered into the general population where they provided another avenue of reflection for society. And as sentimental writers vied for the hearts and minds of their audience, the stakes were perhaps never higher as the country's social organization transformed under the pressures of domestic, socioeconomic, and political changes in the antebellum era.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation focuses on several antebellum texts – Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Custom-House" essay from *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Frederick Douglass's autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. These texts represent either an avocation for an aristocratic social model, as in the case of Warner, Hawthorne, and Douglass, or an endorsement of a democratic social model, as seen in Fern and Melville. Jacobs's text, while not promoting a specific social model, attempts to resolve the debate by suggesting that social models are not mutually exclusive systems, but that they can coexist. Jacobs also

makes proposals about the formation of the intergenerational social contract that return to the original pact that Hume and Smith advocate, which indicates that Jacobs possesses the most thorough understanding of Hume and Smith's intentions for the establishment of a just and benevolent society that will benefit all generations.

Chapter One establishes definitions for two of the concepts necessary for the formation of the intergenerational social contract – the elderly and sentiment. When discussing any age cohort, it is necessary to delineate its context because the categories for identifying age groups are fluid. Furthermore, an age cohort can be defined in ways other than a simple chronological demarcation. In this chapter, I explore four approaches for establishing age groups – chronological, biological, cognitive, and socio-environmental assessments. Each of these four methods has been quantified in the twentieth-century, but they also appear in many of the nineteenth-century writings on old age, albeit under different terminology. This chapter presents both the twentieth-century foundations of these terms as well as a contextualized examination of nineteenth-century applications of these concepts in order to understand who was defined as old according to the standards of antebellum experts. I also explore popular definitions of old age culled from antebellum newspapers. It is important to understand how the general populace perceived old age because they were the participants in the social model conflict and the literary consumers for whom the authors that I examine in the subsequent chapters were writing. While these readers may have been aware of expert opinions on old age developed by physicians and psychologists, they were also influenced by the quotidian environment, and, given the high percentage of newspaper readership, it is likely that the

general population produced their own understanding of the elderly from their access to the dailies, weeklies, and monthlies flooding the nation rather than any professional text. I conclude with an aggregation of both the professional and lay descriptions to produce a working definition of old age that will be used as the standard by which all six authors' characters will be assessed.

The second part of Chapter One focuses on the definition of sentimentalism. Largely neglected through much of the twentieth century, the field of contemporary sentimental studies blossomed in the 1980s as a reaction to Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977). Before we can evaluate sentimentalism as a nineteenth-century literary genre, however, we must return to the original classification of sentiment and its role in the formation of the social contract established by David Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) and Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) because these texts are the first two to systematically define the terms and they provide the foundations for nineteenth-century aristocratic and democratic social models. I then move into an evaluation of the contemporary debate surrounding nineteenth-century sentimental literature, and its positive reclamation as a space for the exploration of antebellum social values as described in the work of Jane Tompkins, Mary Ryan, Elizabeth Barnes, and Janet Todd among others. I examine the relationship between authors who employed the language of sentiment and their audience, looking at how authors created an emotional effect through their texts in order to influence their readership's perspective on social models through moral suasion. Critics including Nina Baym and Lauren Berlant note the awareness that authors who

were working within the sentimental genre had of the literary market and how they assessed the reception of their work and accordingly adjusted their texts to further their social agenda. Furthermore, Baym and Berlant argue for the extensive impact that sentimental literature had on its audience by creating a readership with a shared sociocultural vision, which heightened the rhetoric surrounding the social model conflict.

Chapter Two focuses on the role of the elderly within the domestic sphere. I have chosen two texts – Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1851) and Fanny Fern’s (Sara Payson Willis Parton’s) *Ruth Hall* (1854) because both texts employ similar intergenerational social contract criteria yet they reached vastly different conclusions on the domestic position of the elderly and the type of social model that could best serve each community’s needs. The diversity that these two texts demonstrate reveals the nation’s anxieties over the changing family structure in the nineteenth century. Warner’s text stresses limitless respect for the elderly regardless of seniors’ behavior. Warner supports a hierarchical, aristocratic social model where younger generations are required to be collectively responsible for not just the elderly’s physical care, but also the maintenance of emotional bonds that contribute to the aged’s continued social relevance. In return, the young were to receive moral and ethical guidance from their elders. Warner’s aristocratic social model also uses nostalgia to demonstrate their social value of all aged individuals. Like Benjamin’s angel, Warner intends for the nation’s youth to stand united with the elderly through an appreciation of their previous achievements. Fern’s novel, however, argues for a conditional respect for the elderly based on their fulfillment of a sentimental social contract between the generations. As such, Fern’s

democratic domestic model is a conditional, individual one that must be maintained by both parties and can potentially be broken by either one. Even though Fern's social contract is founded on the same principles as Warner's, Fern does not employ nostalgia in her evaluation of the elderly's social contributions. Warner is forward-looking, assessing the danger that the aged's unlimited authority in the home, as advocated in the aristocratic social model, can have on younger occupants. Fern propels the senescent into the future, along with Benjamin's reluctant angel and redefines the family as a contractual unit rather than a biological one. This places the elderly in a much more tenuous position because it requires them to follow a code of conduct and provides only a restricted guarantee of reciprocation.

Chapter Three leaves the domestic circle to explore the position of the elderly in the economic sphere. Both Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Custom-House" essay from *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) examine fading New England industries. Despite their regional commonalities, Hawthorne supports an aristocratic social model within the workplace, while Melville endorses a democratic social system. Hawthorne moderates his condemnation of the elderly in industry and politics because Hawthorne, a descendent of the formerly influential Salem Hathornes,<sup>6</sup> felt an allegiance to the aristocratic model under which his family had thrived. He realizes that the aged are creations of the pre-industrial economic model that encouraged loyalty, routine, and time-honored customs. Lacking the ability to innovate, the elderly become both victims of a transforming economy that values productivity, profit, and

---

<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne added the "w" to his name sometime after graduation from Bowdoin College, but critics disagree over the precise date. Also, the "w" was not consistently used in references to Nathaniel until the late 1830s.

invention as well impediments to younger generations, such as Hawthorne's, who sought to modernize their professions. Hawthorne also acknowledges his own guilt over his inability to fully embrace the new democratic industrial model as he continued to employ elderly workers out of a nostalgic sense of responsibility to his senescent employees' previous achievements. Like Benjamin's angel, Hawthorne looks to the past where he locates much of his colleagues' social value. Hawthorne uses the criteria of economic productivity and personal integrity to assess his aged associates and he discovers, either through their current production or his nostalgic appreciation of their former accomplishments, that he develops respect for his colleagues within the limited sphere of the workplace.

Melville, a younger man who did not identify with the aristocratic social model, castigates the elderly as bastions of conservatism who have thwarted the aspirations of younger generations and have abused their positions out of a desire for self-preservation and enrichment. He champions the Young America movement, desiring to depose the elderly of their economic and political authority in order to create opportunities for younger generations in an effort to modernize American business and government and create a progressive national identity.<sup>7</sup> Melville also accuses any younger person who does not support the Young American philosophy through the interrogation of elderly authority in industry and politics of being accomplices of the pre-industrial, aristocratic model and deserving of condemnation. Melville is clearly a forward-looking writer who champions economic productivity and personal integrity in the social contract, just as

---

<sup>7</sup> See Chapters Two and Three in Edward L. Widmer's *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* for a full analysis of Melville's role in the movement.

Hawthorne did. However, Melville refuses to employ nostalgia in his evaluation of the elderly because, in his opinion, it leads to the potential for the elderly's abuse of power because they would gain unfettered authority if they were universally revered by younger generations based on their past accomplishments. Instead, Melville advocates a democratic system where the elderly must continue to be economically productive and maintain their personal integrity of character in order to earn younger generations' respect. In this democratic model, both the young and old would economically benefit from the focus on productivity, an essential component in America's modernizing society at the time.

Chapter Four focuses on two African-American responses. Unlike the previous authors, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs address the issue of race. Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882), and Harriet Jacobs's memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) use their maternal grandmothers to address the issue of cross-racial intergenerational social contracts. These interracial social contracts were proposed by Southern apologists under the guise of paternalism, which stated that elderly slaves would be respected and materially provided for by their younger white owners as a tribute for their previous labor. Both Douglass and Jacobs disagree with paternalism, but the authors reach different conclusions about the position of the black elderly in the antebellum South and how social models for Southern blacks should be structured. Contending that paternalism does not ensure the safety or physical well-being of elderly

blacks despite white proponents' claims, Douglass instead promotes a transference of the white aristocratic model to the black community. He believes that aged blacks should be respected because of their advanced age, but he declares that the only individuals capable of showing proper reverence are younger blacks because they do not believe in the inherent inequality between the races that slavery promotes. Douglass asserts that no white person is able to avoid prejudice in their cross-racial social contracts and therefore the younger black generations must be allowed to provide physical care and material support to their forebearers. By attacking all white slaveowners, however, Douglass creates a problem for himself because he cannot reconcile his relocation of the white aristocratic model to the black experience with the fact that he renounces the family unit in order to liberate himself from slavery and become a democratic model of a self-made man. Douglass attempts to distract his readers from his predicament by publicly and falsely attacking his grandmother's former owners for their neglect of her. Ultimately, Douglass has to admit his deception, but he maintains that his goal of a black aristocratic model is more valuable for the black community than the veracity of his grandmother's experience.

Unlike Douglass, Jacobs prefers to envision both the aristocratic and the democratic social models as complementary rather than competitive. She furthers Douglass's conceptualization of a strong grandmother, but instead of advocating for a single, black aristocratic model like Douglass, she constructs an elderly woman who is capable of negotiating both the coexisting aristocratic and democratic systems. Jacobs claims that both models can exist alongside one another, but she cautions that some

problems might arise in a society with multiple social models even though they are easily remedied. One difficulty that can occur is the misreading of the social model in which individuals are participating. Although this misinterpretation can cause embarrassment and anguish and prevent a person from achieving his/her objectives, as it does for Jacobs's grandmother Martha, this mistake can be resolved by the clear delineation of social models by the members. The second problem that may arise is a lack of respect for the elderly by the younger generation. Jacobs determines that this difficulty can be managed as long as the aged receive respect from at least a portion of society. If the senescent feel that they are esteemed by a segment of society, they can endure any marginalization they experience from other social sectors. Regardless of these two potential problems, neither social model is sustainable unless it is founded on a solid social contract. Jacobs presents two critical principles for the formation of intergenerational social contracts in either the aristocratic or democratic model. Although Jacobs says that the precise criteria of social contracts are relatively unimportant, she avers that all pacts must be stable and mutually agreed upon by the young and old participants. If these two standards are observed during the creation of social contracts, then both the younger and the older member will be able to trust the accord and will be able to act with the knowledge that his/her social relationships are secure.

Because Martha can negotiate both social spheres, she is perhaps the most comprehensive and complex illustration of the position of the elderly – black or white – in antebellum America. Jacobs provides a new way of thinking about the elderly as a multi-faceted segment of the population who can adapt to the transforming American

social environment and thrive in the formation of intergenerational social contracts that will ensure their respect. Furthermore, Jacobs situates her grandmother's achievements as a beacon of hope for other marginalized demographics. If Martha, a woman who could be considered triply marginalized for her age, her race, and her gender could successfully negotiate both social systems and feel secure enough in her intergenerational social relationships to remain in the antebellum South even though she was a free woman, then surely anyone else, regardless of his/her social position, could be as successful in either social model. Unlike Benjamin's angel who only chooses to look backwards, Martha is a Janus-like figure, able to straddle both the nostalgia of the past yet operate with the knowledge of the future as her social position and her relationships shifted in her old age. Martha, in effect, becomes the ultimate symbol of hope for all subjugated people and an efficacious representative of the potential for merging both social models into a cooperative rather than competitive reality.

## Chapter One:

### Definitions

Old: 1. Advanced far in years or life; having lived beyond the middle period, or rather toward the end of life, or toward the end of the ordinary term of living; applied to animals, or plants; as, an old man; an old age; an old camel or horse; an old tree. 2. Having been long made or used; decayed by time. 3. Being of long continuance, begun long ago. 4. Having been long made; not new or fresh. 5. Being of a former year's growth; not of the last crop. 6. Ancient, that existed in former ages. 7. Of any duration whatever. 8. Subsisting before something else. 9. Long practiced. 10. That has been long cultivated. 11. More than enough; great. 12. In vulgar language, crafty; cunning. . . . We apply old chiefly to things subject to decay. We never say, the old sun, or an old mountain.

-- Entry for "Old" in Noah Webster's *Dictionary* (1844)

This list of definitions from Noah Webster's dictionary suggests a variety of ways of approaching old age in the antebellum era. What this definition does *not* do is definitively indicate a point at which old age occurs. Instead, this entry indicates that in the nineteenth century, old age was a contested category that became the site upon which a variety of ideological battles were waged. One of these conflicts – the one with which this dissertation is concerned – was the establishment of a national social model. The country was struggling to choose between the old regime of the aristocratic social model and the more recent formation of the democratic social model, and the aged provided an ideal space on which to map out this conflict because their multiplicity of positions allowed them to be adapted to justify both models. In the aristocratic model, the elderly are privileged in a social hierarchy for three reasons: 1) their life experience can be used for the moral and ethical guidance of younger generations; 2) their accumulated

knowledge makes them the logical choice as political, economic, and religious leaders, and 3) their advanced age provides a nostalgic link to the past for the nation's youth. In the democratic model, all age groups are initially placed on the same social plane and then each individual is judged according to his/her productivity and contribution to the economic, domestic, or cultural output of the nation. Rather than favoring any single age cohort as the aristocratic model does, the democratic model evaluates every person independently. Consequently, the elderly, as a social group, loses their elevated status in a democratic system because not all senescent individuals are equally productive.

But how does a society decide who comprises their aged population? The answer is not a facile one. In fact, not only is old age historically and culturally contextualized, but it also can be determined according to four different characteristics: chronology, biology, cognition, and social interaction. In effect, the answer is one that demands an interdisciplinary approach because old age is a complex construction that is influenced by numerous factors. And, as no comprehensive classification of the antebellum elderly exists, I have to construct this definition from the fragmentary evidence that has survived the ravages of time (much like the aged themselves). In the following section of this chapter, I explore these four attributes for both their twentieth-century definitions as well as their nineteenth-century context. Although these four components have been codified in the twentieth century, they appear in the writings of nineteenth- and even eighteenth-century professionals even though they were presented in a much less systematic manner. Therefore, we must examine both contemporary texts as well as historical ones in order to develop a more complex and thorough definition of old age.

But these four characteristics alone still form an incomplete portrait of old age in the antebellum era because they have ignored the cultural component, which is why I also examine antebellum newspapers for their description of old age. Newspapers supply the impressions of the general populace since they were written to appeal to a broad audience at this time. What we discover is that the average citizen based his/her perception of the elderly on the unspoken social contract that existed between the generations. Both the young and the old had social roles to fulfill; but which roles and how they were to be performed depended on the social model that each person supported. Proponents of the aristocratic model stressed the elderly's moral and ethical character, their connection to the past, and prioritized their former economic, political, religious, domestic, and/or cultural achievements. The elderly's current level of activity was less important in the aristocratic model because they had already proved their value to the nation during their earlier adulthood and were privileged for surviving and attaining an advanced age. Supporters of the democratic model, too, believed in a social contract, but theirs was based primarily on the aged's current economic, political, domestic, religious, and/or cultural contributions to society. Instead of a nostalgic appreciation for the elderly's former accomplishments, champions of the democratic model expected seniors to continue their productivity so that they would not become an impediment to the nation's development and growth.

This unspoken social contract that informed both social models had its roots in sentimental theory in the eighteenth-century works of Scottish Moralists David Hume and Adam Smith. Both men believed that society functioned best when it was founded

on both reason and sentiment. These two factors – intellect and emotion – were the ideal basis of the social contract because they helped create a mutually beneficial society. Nearly a century later, American sentimental authors appropriated the concept of sentiment as emotion to create demonstrative reactions in their readers. Authors employed the elderly, who, because of their multiplicity of social positions as both hegemonic and marginalized, linkages to both the past and present, and representations of both similarities and differences to their readers, could be appropriated to create a variety of emotive response. Once writers generated an emotional reaction in their readers, they used these responses to promote their social models and encourage the audience to embrace the advocated model and agitate for its broader societal acceptance. Sentimental authors further developed this urge in their audience by assuring readers that their collective emotional reaction to elderly characters produced a social consonance among them and more closely united them in the shared cause of promoting a social model.

### **Chronological Old Age: Like Sands Through the Hourglass . . .**

Perhaps the most obvious method of assessing senescence is by the numbers. Old age is different from aging because age is a socially constructed identity whereas aging is a process that everyone continually undergoes. According to medical and social historian Carole Haber, who has examined the cultural influences and reactions to aging in America's history, "no scheme ever omitted old age as a separate and distinct segment of the life cycle" (49). The use of chronological age is prevalent in the Western world because it is a standardized measure, which gauges time via the Gregorian calendar.

According to social gerontologist Marvin Koller, calculating age through chronological grouping “has the decided advantages of apparent precision, the establishment of norms for each age category, and the possible anticipation of behavior of those about to enter a new age bracket” (41). In social historian Paul Johnson’s extensive overview of aging from antiquity to the present, he acknowledges that “Although the adoption of an age threshold of 60 or 65 in historical enquiry might appear to represent an uncritical use of twentieth-century definitions, we now know that formal age thresholds of this sort have remarkably deep historical roots” (3). Following Johnson’s conclusions, we should expect to find a similar delineation of old age in nineteenth century literature.

However, we must also be cautious of uncritically accepting chronological age as the sole indicator of senescence. After all, while old age has generally been defined chronologically, there has never been a consensus over which birthday marks the onset of senior life. Furthermore, given the vast differences in individuals’ lives, providing only one year as a benchmark for aging ignores the disparities of each person’s experience. According to Stuart Spicker, one of the pioneers of humanistic gerontology, “Aging is a relative process, and individuals of identical chronological age who are called ‘aged,’ ‘elderly,’ or ‘old’ may well represent qualitatively different categories of existence” (160). Not only is a numerical age insufficient in encompassing the entire elderly age cohort, but not everyone who has attained that age will regard it as the threshold for old age.<sup>8</sup> Other factors, including economic, social, psychological, and physical status will affect each person’s perception of chronological age. In other words, “When individual

---

<sup>8</sup> For more information on “story time,” a calculation of aging based on personal, internal perception of time, see gerontologist Gary M. Kenyon’s chapter “Elements of a Narrative Gerontology” in Vern L. Bengston and K Warner Schaie’s *Handbook of Theories of Aging*.

differences defy age categories” chronological aging becomes little better than a “generalized half-truth” (Koller 41).

From the historical evidence, very few physicians on either side of the Atlantic were specifically addressing old age in the first half of the nineteenth century. The majority of medical publications on senescence originated in the United Kingdom and France because both nations had established formal medical training, whereas there were no such standards in the United States until the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> For the few doctors who chose to write about senescence at this time, it appears that many of them struggled with the use of chronological age as a standardized determinant of old age. Although most physicians identified a specific age demarcating the beginning of the elderly years, they also contradicted themselves by identifying several other chronological possibilities for the onset of old age, or acknowledging the possibility that such a definitive pronouncement was an overgeneralization of the individual process of aging.<sup>10</sup> Even though Benjamin Rush, the most prominent American physician at the turn of the nineteenth century and father of early American psychiatry, declared unequivocally that the “middle stage of life” spanned from forty to fifty-seven years old, followed by the commencement of old age, most medical practitioners succeeding Rush were less definitive in their proclamations (Rush “Of Animal Life I” 137).

---

<sup>9</sup> Not only was the US lacking standardized medical training, but it was possible for an individual to advertise him/herself as a medical professional with no training at all until the latter part of the nineteenth century. This practice was so common that Frank Norris used it as the basis of his 1899 novel, *McTeague*.

<sup>10</sup> Rather than be inconsistent, some nineteenth century doctors declined to identify a chronological beginning for old age. Dr. Henry Holland, in the second edition of his *Medical Notes and Reflections* states, “True it is that old age is not to be reckoned merely by number of years. Family temperament, individual constitution, and the incidents of life, all concur to modify the time at which those changes begin which warrant the term in a physiological sense; and to affect no less the rate at which they proceed” (283).

In 1811, British physician Thomas Jameson published his *Essays on the Changes of the Human Body, at its Different Ages, the Diseases to which it is Predisposed in Each Period of Life, and the Physiological Principles of its Longevity*. Like most of his contemporaries, Jameson identifies several stages through which life progresses prior to reaching senescence.<sup>11</sup> He separates life into five periods, each of which are further divided into two epochs (25). When explaining his rationale for claiming that old age begins at fifty-seven, Jameson states:

It might be expected, that the history of old age would commence with the incipient part of man's decay, which is felt in some of the organs soon after forty-five, but it would be considered as a perversion of language in these days, to call men old at the time the body begins to retrograde, in a manner known only to anatomists. The author is, therefore, inclined to designate the 57<sup>th</sup> year, when the failure becomes generally obvious over the system, as the beginning of old age, and, the 81<sup>st</sup> year, as the commencement of the age of decrepitude. (108)

Despite his profession of chronological benchmarks for the epochs of young old age and decrepitude, Jameson cautions people not to regard these age divisions too concretely. Concerned that he might be oversimplifying the life cycle and its sequencing, Jameson advises “at the same time, it is to be understood, that some of these periods vary in their relative extent, from the different length of life among the inhabitants of different regions,

---

<sup>11</sup> Social historian Pat Thane, in her 2003 article, “Social Histories of Old Age and Aging.” explains that old age has traditionally been identified as a life stage. Furthermore, “in everyday descriptive discourse, old age had been divided into what in early modern England was called ‘green’ old age, a time of fitness and activity, with perhaps some failing powers, and the later, last, phase of decrepitude; a division which in the twentieth century in less imaginatively labeled ‘young’ and ‘old’ old age” (98-99).

as well as in the instances of extraordinary longevity” (25). Jameson notes the variability in the aging process, making it difficult to designate when people have actually arrived at the threshold of old age. Jameson expresses his frustration with his inability to arrive at a definitive answer, asserting: “The failure commences so much sooner in some men, than in others, that it is with difficulty we can discover the general plan, which nature pursues in her operations” (110). Despite his tidy divisions of the life cycle, Jameson cannot, with any certainty, arrive at a single chronological onset for old age.

Thirty years later, another British physician, John Reid advanced Jameson’s framework in his 1841 publication, *The Philosophy of Death; or A General Medical and Statistical Treatise on the Nature and Causes of Human Mortality*, by further refining Jameson’s periods and adding a sixth one. Also, within each period, Reid identifies four epochs, rather than Jameson’s two. Reid’s final period is that of “declining and old age” which consists of four epochs: “declining age . . . green old age . . . advanced old age, ripe old age . . . decrepitude, second infancy” (341). Through these four epochs, Reid conflates aging with old age, seeing little difference between these two processes. This confusion may stem from the fact that middle age had not yet been identified as a distinct life stage.<sup>12</sup> Reid may agree with Jameson’s belief that old age is comprised of progressive stages, but he slightly disagrees as to the timing of each stage. Moreover, Reid differentiates between the genders, claiming that women reach old age earlier than men, even though their life-spans are comparable, which further supports the concept of old age as a social construct. The initial epoch, “*declining age*, is generally considered to

---

<sup>12</sup> See Patricia Cohen’s comprehensive study of the creation of middle age in American society in *In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age*.

extend from forty-two to fifty-two in the female, and from forty-eight to sixty in the male” (Reid 354). While Reid’s “declining age” belongs to the aging process, the final three stages classify the age cohort as old. The much shorter second epoch of “*green old age*, may be said to extend to sixty-five in the female and seventy in the male” (355). “*Ripe old age*” spans from sixty-five to seventy-five in women, while it extends between seventy and eighty for men (356). Lastly, the epoch of decrepitude or “second infancy” occurs after the age of seventy-five in women and eighty in men (356). With these four epochs, Reid creates a system that is more sophisticated than Jameson’s earlier conception, as well as one that accounts for the differences in gender. Women, according to Reid, however, reach old age approximately five years earlier than Jameson claims. By this calculation, men also would be categorized as elderly nine years before Jameson’s dates. Clearly, not only is the inception of old age is being revised downward as the century progresses, but sexism is beginning to emerge as men and women are assigned different chronological points at which they have reached this threshold. This sexism can be interpreted either positively or negatively, depending on the social model that these age cohorts supported. In the aristocratic model, women would become privileged faster than men because they would reach old age sooner. However, in the democratic model, women could become superannuated more quickly than men because they would be considered elderly sooner than their male counterparts. By suggesting that men and women attained old age at different chronological points, physicians were furthering the theory that age was a social construction and not a biological constant.

Charles Caldwell, an American doctor who had studied medicine under Benjamin Rush and one of the few nineteenth-century physicians to publish his initial editions in America, appends two more stages to Reid's six, although he does not add divisions within each stage like both Reid and Jameson do. He also concurs with Reid in distinguishing age differences between the sexes. However, he refuses to engage in a detailed discussion of women's lives, merely stating, "It is sufficient for me to observe, that when her menstrual period has closed, without injury to her health . . . her chance for the enjoyment of a green old age, and the attainment of longevity is far more promising than that of the male" (Caldwell 10). Caldwell may be avoiding further discussion of women out of a sense of Victorian social decorum or a lack of medical knowledge. However, Caldwell expands in great detail on men's senior years. For men, Caldwell designates two stages of senescence – "*decreascent virility*," which extends from forty-five or six to sixty-five or seventy, and "*confirmed senility*," which covers the final years of life (9, 10). Caldwell's stages are more hesitant in naming an exact date for the onset of each period than either Reid or Jameson and they also overtly acknowledge a sexual fertility component that neither man previously does. Also, where Jameson cautions readers not to uncritically accept his chronological stages, Caldwell creates a range of ages for both the beginning and conclusion of each phase, indicating his ambiguity over strict chronological determinacy. In fact, Caldwell rejects any definitive chronological age for establishing senectitude, particularly *infirm* old age. He claims, "Nature has established no such boundary-point. Its erection is the unauthorised work of superstitious man" (16). As a result, Caldwell is conflicted over whether to accept the chronological

stages of the life-span that are endorsed by previous medical practitioners or whether to accept the concept that old age is attained by individuals at differing points.

Later physicians, including Britain's George Day and Bernard Van Oven, are even less definitive about chronological age than Caldwell. Day's and Van Oven's similar reluctance to delineate a specific age for the onset of senectitude is not surprising given that the pair were colleagues. Although Day accepts the premise that men and women age differently, and that old age can be separated into several epochs, his dates conflict in various sections of his essay.<sup>13</sup> Day presents the four stages of old age – declining age, advanced age, mature or ripe old age, and decrepitude with their attendant ages at the beginning of his treatise.<sup>14</sup> Like Reid, Day also conflates aging and old age, but Day's final three stages are all categorized as occurring within old age. When discussing the death rates in London from 1843-1847, Day places his cut-off age at 60, claiming that “about two-sevenths [of deaths at this time] are recorded as dying from the effects of old age” (66). Then, when examining the variety of diseases that affect the elderly, Day cites the importance of the onset of neuralgia “between the ages of 50 and 60” and even sciatica as early as the forties, which is one of “the most common forms of neuralgia that are called upon to treat in old people” so his definition is not entirely fixed

---

<sup>13</sup> Day claims “The age at which [decline] commences varies considerably in the different sexes, but it is most commonly observed to begin at about the 40<sup>th</sup> year in women, and the 48<sup>th</sup> or 50<sup>th</sup> in men” (26).

<sup>14</sup> Day states, “The years of declining life are naturally divisible into the following epochs:

1. Declining age, extending in women to about the fifty-second year, and in men to about the sixtieth.
2. Advanced age, or incipient old age, extending in women from fifty-three to about sixty-five, and in men from sixty to seventy.
3. Mature or ripe old age, dating from the preceding period, and extending to about seventy-five in the female, and eighty in the male.
4. Decrepitude, or second infancy, constituting, in those whose span of existence is so far prolonged, the last epoch of human life” (26).

(122,123). Day's contemporary, Bernard Van Oven, is also equally as conflicted, initially maintaining the onset of old age at fifty, where the physical body begins its decline, although he says mental faculties can continue longer unchanged (38). Later, however, Van Oven calls the middle period of life "from 30 to 60 years of age", so even doctors are not consistent themselves, indicating the confusion over chronological age (102).<sup>15</sup> Van Oven tries to reconcile these differences, claiming that old age begins "generally between the age of fifty and sixty-five years" when "the presence of a healthy green old age is at once manifest" (107, 108). As for women, Van Oven also agrees that senescence begins earlier in women, after the changes of menopause, which he says occur "At some period between 45 and 55 years of age" (113). However, this gender differentiation only adds further uncertainty to the chronological dating process, revealing how conflicted physicians had become in the sixty years since Benjamin Rush first indicated the onset of old age. This ambiguity also indicates how the social construction of old age was shifting during the nineteenth century. The inability of physicians to precisely identify a single age for the onset of senescence in either men or women demonstrates how contested the definition of old age was during this era.

### **Biological Senescence: Gray Pates, Bald Pates, Wrinkles, Oh My!**

Another form of measuring old age can be achieved through assessing biological changes. These transformations have been consistently documented and agreed upon in the twentieth century, but in the nineteenth century, as modern medicine was in the

---

<sup>15</sup> According to Patricia Cohen, physicians did not begin to identify middle age as a distinct life stage until after the Civil War, so the confusion over the start of old age extends into the decades that twenty-first century individuals would classify as middle age.

process of being developed, these changes were not so nearly straightforward.<sup>16</sup> Carole Haber notes that antebellum medical professionals typically relied on external, observable phenomena during a patient's senior years, but they also understood the general internal changes that occurred in old age. These physical alterations were always perceived negatively by nineteenth-century physicians:

Merely by growing old, the individual had developed the exterior symptoms and internal lesions that were the signs of specific debilitating illnesses. . . . Even in the seemingly healthy and active, fibrosis, ossifications, and other lesions were found to exist. In old age, disease seemed to be a discrete condition. As revealed by the deterioration of tissues, it was an inherent, progressive part of senescence. (Haber 60)

Although doctors could not discern the microscopic changes and genetic alterations that occurred in the elderly, they were aware that numerous changes did occur and they often

---

<sup>16</sup> In *Social Gerontology*, Marvin Koller succinctly sums up the qualitative biological changes of old age:  
*Brain and nervous system*: overall slowness of reaction, possible impairment in initiative, disturbances in thinking and judgment, short-range memory losses or absentmindedness  
*Eyes and vision*: diminishing visual acuity, decreasing light accommodation, poor night vision, difficulty distinguishing blue and green light, falling off lateral vision, receding clarity  
*Ears and hearing*: loss of hearing ability, presbycusis slowly cutting down ability to hear higher pitches, and increasing inability to hear normal ranges  
*Nose and tongue*: suspected losses in olfactory nerves, decreasing taste sensations  
*Teeth*: recession of jaws, gum difficulties, and decay and loss of teeth  
*Voice*: limiting of pitch, less volume, prolongation of sound increasingly difficult, slower speech  
*Heart*: increasing rate of heartbeat, increased blood pressure, declines in total blood flow  
*Lungs*: decreasing ability to transfer oxygen to bloodstream, slower breathing rates  
*Digestive system*: diminishing volume of gastric juices, but fairly stable overall ability to absorb foods for tissue-building  
*Reproductive system*: menopause for women, slower climacteric for men, sexual activity not necessarily impaired  
*Bowels and bladder*: loss of muscle tone, prostate enlargement, increasing urination but less volume of urine, possible constipation  
*Feet*: ligament elasticity reduced, less padding, proneness to bruises and calluses, less sensitivity to temperature changes  
*Skin*: laxness and wrinkles, lighter skin complexions prone to quicker aging (95-96)

tried to exhaustively catalogue both internal and external variations for both fellow physicians and laymen alike. However, doctors were impeded in their internal studies because post-mortems were not regularly performed either in the United States or Great Britain. Only in France were post-mortems conducted with any regularity until the late nineteenth century. Therefore, the majority of observations that antebellum physicians made on biological age were based on external phenomena, while broad generalizations, although some would later be proved correct, were made about internal functions.

Macroscopic changes in organs and bodily functions were much more easily observed by nineteenth century doctors. Some, such as Reid even declared old age “may be said to commence only when the bodily powers begin to diminish” (351). Externally, most physicians noted changes in the skin and hair in their elderly clients. Reid refers to these transformations, noting “wrinkles appear about the face and neck, which, together with the grey and scanty hair, form the most decided symptoms of advancing years” (352). Although most of Reid’s colleagues did not believe wrinkles and gray hair were the most significant changes the elderly experienced, they did comment on the dryness of aged skin, which Charles Caldwell blamed on “a diminution of the humidity of the body, in proportion to the amount of its solid matter” (10). As for changes in the hair follicles, Van Oven claims that grayness and baldness are often indicators of old age, but he says the change is not universal nor does it always occur in old age, so it cannot be used as a reliable marker of change: “in many individuals the hair becomes absolutely gray before 30, and long before the slightest decline of any of the corporeal powers can be suspected” (40). Also, “baldness not unfrequently occurs in early manhood, and is therefore no sign

of age, nor an invariable accompaniment of it” (40-41). With this designation, Van Oven more precisely differentiates between physical signs of change and indications of old age, which are two different but occasionally coinciding processes.

Internally, physicians could also perceive changes in the organic structures, but they often incorrectly ascribed the causes of these changes because they lacked an understanding of cellular functions. For example, they repeatedly comment on the distortions occurring in the circulatory system in old age. Antebellum American physician George E. Day’s description best encapsulates the medical understanding of the era:

The size of the heart and thickness of its walls, usually diminish with advancing years; occasionally, however, we find that this organ is increase in bulk and power, in consequence of the greater resistance offered by the vessels of the passage of the blood. . . . The arteries contain deposits of calcareous salts and fatty matters, which deprive them of their proper elasticity, and besides converting them into mere rigid tubes, predispose to rupture of their coats and aneurism. (35)

Medical understanding, however, did not extend to the causes of circulatory changes. Likewise, other changes, including lower breathing capacity, shrinkage of the brain, fluctuating bodily secretions, digestive difficulties and alterations in sexual patterns were witnessed but misinterpreted. These physical transformations were at times attributed to bodily humors, climacteric disease, or hormonal imbalances.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of their

---

<sup>17</sup> See Benjamin Rush’s lectures “On Animal Life I” and “On Animal Life II” for information on “passions in the blood.”

misunderstanding of the origins of biological change, physicians could agree that they were observing physical changes manifest themselves in the elderly.

Although nineteenth century physicians largely concurred as to the biological changes of the elderly body, we must be cautious in relying too heavily on these definitions of these external and internal signs. Twentieth-century doctors, Vera and Jerome Peterson advise us that “Biological age of the various organs is not uniform and may be even more variable with advancing years and in different individuals” (156). Even in the nineteenth century, Van Oven recognized that not all biological changes were uniform, although his observations were only confined to hair and skin age. Understanding senescence through biological transformation then, is only partially successful because it differs according to the individual. What conclusion we can draw from nineteenth-century writings on biological old age is that physicians acknowledged physical differences between the elderly and other age cohorts. These medical texts emphasize the difference between the aged and other adult groups and place the elderly in a separate social category as a result of their biological disparity. These biological divergences also align with the concept of the elderly as a group in decline because all of the medical research indicated a diminishment in biological functioning in old age. This categorization of the aged as a biologically deteriorating group thus aided proponents of the democratic social model because it implied that the elderly were no longer capable of sustaining their previous level of physical exertion because their bodies had weakened with old age. Conversely, supporters of the aristocratic model seized on the idea of the body’s physical decline as a reason for privileging the elderly out of a nostalgic respect

for their former abilities. Furthermore, aristocratic model allies argued that despite biological degeneration, the elderly could still have intact mental faculties, through which they could continue their moral and ethical guidance of younger generations as well as provide intellectual leadership to the nation's institutions.

### **Cognitive Old Age: Memory and the Elderly, or, Where Did I Put My Spectacles?**

Related to biological old age, cognitive senescence explores the changes in the brain's functions that occur in the elderly. Although we are still in the early stages of understanding the mysteries of the brain, significant strides in deciphering mental operations have been made within the past two centuries. In fact, psychologists Scott Hofer and Duane Alwin are confident enough in the field's progress to claim, "there is general agreement that systematic age-related declines in cognitive functioning occur in midlife and older age across multiple domains, including speed of processing, episodic memory, attention, and verbal fluency" (x). While Hofer's and Alwin's statement suggests that there is broad accord among psychologists studying cognitive functions, some psychologists dispute the link of cognitive decline to biological old age, preferring to attribute deterioration to a variety of other factors including disease, genetics, and environmental factors.<sup>18</sup> Regardless of the causative agents, however, it appears that a link exists between cognitive decline and old age.

---

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion on diseases related to cognitive decline, see psychologists Avron Spiro's and Christopher Brady's article on the potential link of vascular disease and mental decay, "Integrating Health into Cognitive Aging Research and Theory: Quo Vadis?" or neuropsychologist Robert Wilson's exploration of neuropathological lesion accumulation in the brain in "Neurological Factors in Cognitive Aging" both located in Hofer's and Alwin's *Handbook of Cognitive Aging*. For discussion of genetic influences on

If old age and a decrease in cognitive functioning are correlative, psychologists must explain what structural changes the physical brain undergoes as it ages and what effects these alterations have on mental processes. In their article, “Theories of Neuropsychology and Aging,” psychologists Diana Woodruff-Pak and Michelle Papka summarize the most current rationales for cognitive aging, which they attribute to either declines in prefrontal cortex executive functioning or losses in medial temporal lobe declarative memory (117). The brain’s frontal lobes control both cognitive components, including but not limited to “planning, organization, thinking divergently, inhibiting and self-monitoring” as well as the metacognitive functions of attention and working memory (118). According to Woodruff-Pak and Papka, studies shows that this part of the brain is often the earliest affected by aging and suffers the most damage relative to normal aging. Thus, the elderly will show signs of cognitive and metacognitive impairment, although the level of decline varies based on the individual. As the brain’s circuitry, built upon a grid of synapses, begins to misfire or respond slowly to chemical stimuli, deficits in declarative learning and memory can occur.<sup>19</sup> While these psychological transformations appear calamitous, they may exhibit themselves as simply as a pair of misplaced keys, trouble remembering dates, or slowed facial recognition, depending on the individual.

Memory changes are in fact the most apparent manifestation of cognitive old age, but like

---

psychological aging, see cognitive psychologist Chandra Reynold’s article, “Genetic and Environmental Influences on Cognitive Aging” in Hofer’s and Alwin’s *Handbook*.

For discussion of social structural changes and their role in cognitive decline, see Duane Alwin’s “Social Structure and Cognitive Change” also in Hofer’s and Alwin’s *Handbook*.

<sup>19</sup> Woodruff-Pak and Papka caution that degeneration of the hippocampus, which houses the medial temporal lobes, has not been proven to be part of the normal aging process, and could be related to neuropathological diseases including dementia or Alzheimer’s (123).

biological senescent, these transformations are neither consistently observed nor uniformly occurring at any point in time for the elderly.<sup>20</sup>

Even though modern psychology was a field unknown to the antebellum populace, many physicians made general observations on the brain's functions in their medical work that prefigure twentieth-century research and discoveries. Lacking a scientific language to express cognitive transformation, nineteenth-century physicians relied on physical observations and the language of emotion to describe cognition in the elderly. Although Benjamin Rush misunderstands the causes, he accurately perceives mental decline in old age. Rush claims, "the hardness of the brain disqualifies it for the celerity and variety of motions which are necessary to a just exercise of the faculties of the mind; hence their torpor in old age" ("Lectures Upon the Mind" 436). Hardening of the brain matter may not actually be the cause of mental decline, but Rush correctly observes the sustainability of implicit memory despite the deterioration of explicit memory.<sup>21</sup> Rush also details the types and order of normal memory loss in old age: "The memory exhibits the first marks of decay. It fails, first, for names; second, for words; thirdly, for place; fourthly for substances, particularly faces; fifth and last, for ideas. The imagination fails next; and then the understanding" ("Lectures Upon the Mind" 538-39). Like his successors, Rush believed that mental decline could be mitigated or even

---

<sup>20</sup> See cognitive psychologists Susan Old's and Moshe Naveh-Benjamin's research on explicit and implicit memory for a description of the type and variety of decline that can occur during cognitive senescence in their article, "Age-Related Changes in Memory: Experimental Approaches."

<sup>21</sup> Although Rush does not use the terms explicit or implicit memory, he refers to these two functions, explaining, "Where the brain loses the power of receiving fresh impressions, it loses the power likewise of having former or past ideas renewed upon the mind. We see this in idiots; likewise in old people who are childish. Where they are not childish, impressions renew the ideas of *early* life *only*, for the impression made upon the brain in advanced life act so feebly and superficially upon it, as not to excite notions that are capable of reproduction either directly, or by means of association" ("Lectures Upon the Mind" 487).

avoided. To protect the mind from decay, Rush advocates for moderate mental exertion. He declares that “Old people who continue to read, to work, to converse, and to do business, generally retain all their faculties, not excepting even their memories, long after their bodies yield to the influence of time upon them” (“Lectures Upon the Mind” 539-40). If the elderly follow a routine of temperate mental application, in Rush’s opinion, they can delay the normal cognitive aging process, perhaps even until their deaths. If restraint is not exercised, and the mind is either overtaxed or underutilized, it will undergo normal aging and result in cognitive loss in old age.

Other early nineteenth-century physicians supported Rush’s positions on memory decline and moderate mental stimulation for the elderly.<sup>22</sup> While Rush’s successors may have concurred with his findings, they made little to no advancements in the precise study of cognitive senescence. Not until Caldwell’s 1846 publication of *An Essay on the Disorders of Old Age, and on the Means for Prolonging Human Life* did another physician more fully document various forms of mental decline in the elderly brain. Caldwell differentiates between the physical brain and the psychological mind, a delineation upheld by modern cognitive researchers. He believes that the mind remains constant while the body deteriorates:

Between the *mental* and *material* substances however of man, there exists, as respects the influence of age on them, a radical and most important difference, which seldom receives the attention it deserves. The *former* (as I feel persuaded) *never changes*, while the *latter* changes *during life*,

---

<sup>22</sup> In 1818, British physician Anthony Carlisle cautions against too much mental stimulation, warning, “It may also be assumed as a general fact, that the hurtful influences of mental labour, or moral suffering, prove more injurious to the bodily health as life advances” (66).

like a *perpetual motion*. There is reason to believe (as far as belief is predicable in relation to the subject) that, in the same individual, the mind or spirit of the *infant*, the mature adult, and the *centenarian* is *identical*.

(Caldwell 6)

According to Caldwell, the physical body degenerates in accordance with chronological aging while the mind resists these changes. To explain then how it appears that mental changes come from the mind but are actually caused by other processes, Caldwell notes, “The reason of these changes in mental manifestations does not consist in any alteration in the mind or spirit itself; but in an alteration in the body, the instrument on and by which alone the mind operates *in all* sublunary concerns” (6-7). Caldwell’s language may be more embellished than Rush, but he is essentially making a similar claim – aging of the physical brain results in mental alterations that manifest themselves in old age. Caldwell also cites the mental faculty that fails first and most often for the elderly: “That act, in which the intellect of persons advanced in years, *first most frequently*, and *most troublesomely fails*, is that of *remembrance* – especially the remembrance of *recent* events, and of the names of *persons, places, and things*” (25). As memory fades, it becomes more difficult for the elderly to retrieve data and this decline marks their cognitive age.

While cognitive senescence may appear to be a more reliable technique of assessing old age given the variability of chronological and biological benchmarks, using this method still results in unforeseen complexities. First of all, minds do not all change in the same way or at the same time among individuals. In his discussion of cognitive

development and decline, psychologist Christopher Hertzog balances the need to see cognition both “as something that (a) changes within persons in complex ways” and “(b) varies between individuals” (35). Furthermore, cognitive senescence may manifest itself differently in people for reasons that are not entirely currently understood. Hertzog supports this theory, claiming, “Although there are normative changes across the adult life span at biological, psychological, and social levels, there is also diversity in the expression of age-related changes in structures and mechanisms on cognition” (35).<sup>23</sup> Not only does measuring cognitive age risk overgeneralizing changes in the mind, but it also risks decontextualizing history. We must be careful of drawing too many specific links between our contemporary knowledge of cognitive change and the past, because, as sociologists Dale Dannefer and Robin Patterson caution, senescence “is historically and socially contingent” so “it cannot be a matter of transcultural, transhistorical universality” (107). What we do discover in nineteenth-century writings on cognitive functioning mirrors the results of biological and chronological old age. Antebellum experts could not discern any absolute moment of cognitive decline that marked the onset of old age. Nineteenth-century physicians also acknowledged that cognitive degeneration was not a uniform process, so not all elderly people would display changes in their cognitive function. Because of the variability of cognition in the aged, advocates of the democratic social model claimed that this inconsistency supported their intention to judge each person according to his/her individual merits. Even if some seniors had experienced a

---

<sup>23</sup> In support of Hertzog’s argument, see psychologist Keith F. Widaman’s claim that the centrality of individual differences needs to be at the forefront of future cognitive studies in his article “Integrative Perspective on Cognitive Aging: Measurement and Modeling with Mixtures of Psychological and Biological Variables”.

biological decline, the elderly who maintained a high level of cognitive function could contribute to the nation's productivity, even if only on an intellectual level. The portion of the elderly who had lost cognitive abilities, however, could no longer be productive contributors to society and deserved to be marginalized because of the burden they posed for their communities. Conversely, supporters of the aristocratic model argued that all elderly should be revered regardless of their cognitive capabilities because they had previously been productive members of society. Therefore, out of a nostalgic respect for the elderly's former achievements, the aged deserved to be automatically privileged.

**Socio-Environmental Senectitude: To Engage or Disengage? That is the Question.**

While cognitive senescence occurs within the individual, socio-environmental age reflects the changing ways in which elderly persons engage with their surroundings. Individuals do not simply reach an internal – chronological, biological, or cognitive – old age; rather, these internal transformations manifest themselves in the interactions between the person and his/her environment. Although researchers agree that change occurs in the ways in which the elderly relate to their surroundings, they do not agree on the form that these new interactions take. The two dominant theories of socio-environmental age are the disengagement and activity model. The disengagement model, now roundly criticized and largely dismissed, was first proposed by sociologist Elaine Cumming and psychologist William E. Henry in *Growing Old: the Process of Disengagement* (1961). Essentially, Cumming and Henry believed that the elderly

gradually withdrew from society, shifting their energy from the external world to focus on interiority.<sup>24</sup> As Cumming and Henry explain:

In our theory, aging is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social systems he belongs to. The process may be initiated by the individual or by others in the situation. The aging person may withdraw more markedly from some classes of people while remaining relatively close to others. His withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself; certain institutions in society may make the withdrawal easy for him. (14)

This separation between the individual and the outside world would allow the elderly to reserve limited energy resources and utilize them for self-preservation. While Cumming and Henry intend for the disengagement model to be entered proactively by seniors, it may also be forced upon them by external sociocultural factors.<sup>25</sup>

In response to the disengagement model, proponents of the activity model contested the necessary and inevitable withdrawal from society that Cumming and Henry predicted. Researchers including developmental psychologists Erik and Joan Erikson, Helen Kivnick, and Bernice Neugarten argue that the onset of old age does not require

---

<sup>24</sup> Psychologist Peter Coleman and biomedical engineer Andrew McCulloch support the concept of the aged's shift towards interiority, claiming "Indeed the one major developmental process during ageing that had been observed in a wide variety of setting is an increase in *interiority*, a change in orientation from outer world to inner world" (252).

<sup>25</sup> Carole Haber states, "Every culture has also recognized that at some point elderly individuals may be forced to withdraw from society; the onset of physical or mental infirmities will hinder their activities. Regardless of past accomplishments or former skills, they might then find themselves judged incompetent. So stereotyped, the elderly will fall into a new category, that of the 'overaged' or superannuated" (1).

the elderly to retreat from their leisurely and/or professional pursuits or their interpersonal relationships with family, friends, or co-workers.<sup>26</sup> Essentially, the activity model “holds that the norms of middle age remain consistent throughout the later years of life, and that successful aging is dependent on the extent to which roles and relationships of middle age can be sustained” (Colen 18). Instead of retreating to a world of interiority, the elderly can continue to maintain healthy, productive relationships with others and engage in a variety of meaningful personal and professional activities.

Instead of being antithetical, vital involvement and disengagement theories may actually be synthesized by the more recent concept of socioemotional selectivity theory. Formulated by psychological gerontologists Margaret M. Baltes and Laura L. Carstensen, socioemotional selectivity theory:

states that an essential set of social goals motivates social contact throughout life. According to the theory, specific socio-psychological goals can be classified into two broad categories: (1) information (or knowledge) seeking and (2) emotional regulation (including emotional meaning). The theory claims that the activation of particular social goals is contingent on the social, psychological, and cognitive conditions the individual perceives. (215-216)

Here, the elderly, who perceive time as more limited than younger people, seek emotionally fulfilling relationships, often within close kin and friendship networks.

Instead of engaging indiscriminately with all possible external stimuli, a senior becomes

---

<sup>26</sup> For a more detailed discussion of old age and engagement, see *Vital Involvement in Old Age* by Erik Erikson, Joan Erikson, and Helen Kivnick.

more selective in his/her interactions with others in order to maximize his/her personal satisfaction. Therefore, behavior that may be superficially regarded as disengagement is actually a strategic deployment of the elderly's limited resources and energy.

Uncannily, the nineteenth-century discussion over socio-environmental aging mirrors the contemporary debate. Although they lacked modern research methods, medical practitioners observed their senescent patients' behavior and recorded it in their notes and lectures. In his second lecture on human health and behavior, Benjamin Rush acknowledges a shift in the emotions of the elderly. Positively, he notes "an intense and preternatural affect for grandchildren, and in some instances an increased vigor" ("Of Animal Life: Lecture II" 137). However, he also cautions that many negative attitudes also appear, which may mimic disengagement, including "a violent and unnatural disaffection for their own children, peevishness, malice, and a constant hatred of the manners and fashions of the rising generation . . . But the most steady stimulus under this head is avarice" ("Of Animal Life: Lecture II" 137-38). Rush observes patterns most closely associated with the theory of socioemotional selectivity, where his patients choose to continue positive relationships with their grandchildren but simultaneously terminate negative or unproductive connections, even if these associations include their own children.

Other doctors, such as Anthony Carlisle, encouraged the elderly to selectively engage in emotional commitments or physical and mental activity. Carlisle counsels, "Quietude and repose best becomes the constitutions of the aged, since the springs of life in them are rather weakened than invigorated by excessive action" (9). By preserving the

“springs of life” as long as possible, individuals could supposedly extend their lifespan several decades. George Day, Thomas Jameson, Henry Holland, John Reid, and Bernard Van Oven all promoted some form of moderate activity in old age, both as a method of preventing cognitive deterioration and conserving the body’s dwindling physical resources. By practicing moderation, the elderly could begin to remove themselves from circumstances that were too emotionally, physically, or mentally taxing and could channel their energies into productive and personally satisfying situations, thus retaining a circumscribed utility within their homes and communities.

Like the other definitions of senescence, socio-environmental age was co-opted by both sides of the social model debate. Champions of the democratic social model perceived selective activity as a potential, but not a definite weakness. They based their evaluation upon the type of engagement that the elderly maintained. If the aged remained active in the economic, domestic, or cultural spheres, then they would continue to be respected by other age cohorts. However, if they ceased to engage productively within these same areas, then they would lose their social rank. On the contrary, advocates of the aristocratic model again relied on nostalgia for the elderly’s former capabilities to justify their continued social privilege. Respect should be given to the aged out of an acknowledgement of their past abilities rather than their current circumscribed participation in antebellum society. Furthermore, aristocratic model supporters averred that the elderly should be revered for their continued social engagement, however limited, because it reflected their commitment to continue to guide younger generations and contribute to the nation’s productivity.

## **Antebellum Newspapers: Popular Images of Senescence and the Social Contract**

To this point, much of my previous discussion on senectitude relies on the interdisciplinary expertise of a variety of specialists, including doctors, psychologists, sociologists, and gerontologists. However, the majority of the antebellum population was comprised of non-professionals who had not methodically studied old age. Therefore, it is important to look at the cultural productions to which the general population had access. With the increase in literacy rates and the rapid expansion of transportation networks, one form of writing that proliferated across the nation was the newspaper. Because these papers were intended to appeal to the broadest audience, they provide valuable insight into the general attitude towards old age. From reading accounts in these antebellum newspapers, we learn that there was an unspoken social contract between the generations by which the elderly had to abide in order to be deemed socially acceptable – they should demonstrate strong attachments to their families but they must not engage in romantic or sexual relationships with younger age cohorts, they should exhibit a work ethic either within or outside the home depending on gender, they should maintain physical and mental health, and they should be law-abiding citizens. In return, younger generations should demonstrate respect for the elderly by providing for their physical and emotional needs and protecting them from abuse and crime. This social contract system provided the basis for both the aristocratic and democratic social models.<sup>27</sup> However, what elements each model chose to prioritize differed. These newspaper articles help us begin to gauge how younger generations responded to the elderly and provide clues as to

---

<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the development of the criteria of the social contract in nineteenth-century American society and its origins and principles in eighteenth-century Scottish Moralistic theory, see the following section on sentimental literary theory in this chapter.

how they perceived the literary portrayal of the elderly that we will examine in the subsequent chapters.

Whether this social contract was employed in the aristocratic or democratic social model depended on how the average citizen viewed the elderly. Just as no single definition for the aged can be located in professional texts, the general populace was also conflicted over the socially constructed identity of the senescent. While a portion of society treated the elderly considerately out of a nostalgic respect for their position as a transitional generation as evidenced by their adherence to the social contract, another segment of society disparaged the elderly and began to associate senectitude with the negative connotations of obsolescence and boorishness. Proponents of the aristocratic model positively viewed the elderly for their parental roles and their continued participation in economic and cultural spheres, often noting their achievements in the propagation of large families and their continued involvement in a variety of workspaces. Meanwhile, supporters of the democratic social model credited productive elders, but they also drew attention to the criminal activities of seniors and created an assortment of epithets based on the language of senescence to discredit members of society that they viewed as indolent, shiftless, or inane. The inception of these disparaging terms, including “old fogy” and “old spooney” indicates an increase in gerontophobia among the general population, which further influenced the social model conflict.

The primary role of the aged in the antebellum era was that of family matriarch/patriarch. Newspaper accounts of large, harmonious extended families abounded at this time. Elderly men and women were praised for having numerous

children because they were helping to populate the country with offspring that came from a long lineage of American descendents versus the population increase that was occurring as a result of immigration. The *Southern Patriot* praised an unnamed “elderly lady” who had recently died and “bore her husband twenty-two children, and never gave him a cross word” (“Bear” 2). In another article, an older woman, Mrs. Sarah Lawton, celebrated her seventy-seventh birthday with her family, including children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. While giving a speech to the celebrants, Mrs. Lawton noted that she was happy and content with her life because God “has given me a family eighty four in number . . . all my children and grandchildren who are grown are professors of religion” (“A Heaven” 1). Even though she was a widow, Mrs. Lawton rejoiced in her large and peaceful family who surrounded her in her old age. Men too were distinguished for their production of prodigious families. Mr. Jesse Harbor, who was seventy-two, had thirty children – thirteen from his first wife and seventeen from his second wife. As the article glibly notes, Mr. Harbor “is remarkably active for a man of his year, as will readily be inferred” (“Thirty” 107).<sup>28</sup> These matriarchs and patriarchs provided a link to a previous era when society believed family units were more stable.<sup>29</sup> Nostalgia and the desire to recapture the former glory of American familial history prompted such effusive commentary on these aged matriarchs and patriarchs. Because the aged parents fulfilled their domestic roles in raising and providing care for their children, their offspring

---

<sup>28</sup> Supporters of the democratic model might have also noted that Mr. Harbor was still actively making domestic contributions to society as the article hinted that more children could follow the thirty that were already born!

<sup>29</sup> See Carole Haber’s *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America’s Past* where she argues that despite data that shows “A majority [of the elderly] remained secure in their families, their employment, and the ownership of their homes . . . To contemporaries, it seemed that dependence among the aged was rapidly expanding” (34).

returned their parents' and grandparents' care and affection as their ancestors reached old age. In these families, the contractual relationship achieved its ideal iteration – loving parents produced children who would contribute to the nation's economic productivity and formation of cultural identity, and in return for the physical and emotional care and guidance they received as children, these offspring would willingly provide physical and emotional care for their elderly parents. This affection of the young for the old sprang directly from the youth's nostalgia for their elderly family as they recalled their relatives' efforts to raise morally upright and industrious children.

While many of the antebellum aged were partners in long-lasting marriages or widows or widowers, some older citizens were entering marriages with partners many years their junior. And while society lauded the senescent who had founded large families, they were highly critical of marriages between such disparate age cohorts. These May–December romances were so common in New Orleans that a group of young men who called themselves the “Sheet Iron Band” gathered outside the homes of the newly married pairs when “any old gentleman . . . manages to buy or coax some blooming maiden to marry him, or when some rich widow, ‘fair, fat and forty,’ entices a ‘nice young man’ to her arms” and regaled them with a noisy racket until the couple made a sizable donation to the Orphan Asylum (“A New-Orleans Humor” 4). If the elderly were going to flout social conventions and marry outside their age group, they were going to have to pay for their contravention. And pay they did; as of 1850, the band had “extorted \$45,000 as donations” (4)! In one particular instance, “An old bachelor of forty-five, had married a youthful maiden” and gave the band “a check for \$250” (4).

The elderly who married significantly younger partners were breaking social conventions because they were literally joining the past with the present. These May-December marriages were taking a desire for nostalgia one step too far for the majority of society. While young people should harbor a healthy respect for the elderly who conducted themselves responsibly, they certainly should not cross the boundary of respect and romantic love to *marry* the aged. Young men and women would be tied to the past through their senescent spouses and would be deprived of their youth as they tended to their older partner. Furthermore, these articles suggest that money and not love motivated these unions, which contradicted sentimental social notions of marrying for love. By using their money to find a mate, the elderly were acting decidedly undemocratically, leveraging their economic position to appear more attractive to youth who might not otherwise have agreed to a marriage with a senior. However, even if some members of the younger generation were willing to marry their elders, the majority of society felt that these marriages were unnatural and the aged should be held up to public scrutiny, either in such humorous practices like the Sheet Iron Band or through the publication of their deeds in the news.

Beyond the family circle, elderly men and women could be found pursuing a myriad of occupations, although the sphere of those activities differs based on gender. Society expected that able-bodied seniors would continue to labor in order to either maintain self-sufficiency or to contribute to their family's finances.<sup>30</sup> While women

---

<sup>30</sup> See historian Brian Gratton's article, "The New History of the Aged: A Critique" in *Old Age in A Bureaucratic Society: The Elderly, the Experts, and the State in American History* where he claims, Scattered findings from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries show a fairly consistent

tended to labor within the home, men worked outside the domestic confines. Hundreds of advertisements, both by aged women offering their services as well as families, couples, or singles seeking domestic assistance attest to the considerable number of female senior workers in the mid-nineteenth century. Cooking, washing, sewing, ironing, baking, and housekeeping were the most common jobs in which elderly women participated; however, women were not limited to these positions. A smaller number of senescent women engaged in professions either tangentially or entirely unassociated with the domestic sphere. For example, Mrs. Slater, “an elderly lady . . . keeps a boarding house on Allston Street” in Boston (“Accidents” 2). Others worked in education as teachers or assistants. A few older women even worked in non-traditional occupations, such as medicine or acting. One anonymous woman, living on Eighth Avenue in New York City in 1857 advertised her services as a “Botanical doctress” who “treats hopeless insanity, fits, and all aberrations of mind, with most eminent success, in an original manner of her own” (*The New York Herald* 7). That same year, Mrs. John Gilbert, “one of those performers in the peculiar line of ‘elderly ladies,’ without whom no well regulated theatrical establishment is complete” hosted an annual benefit performance in concert with her husband in Boston (“Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert’s Benefit” 2). Even more unusual, Mrs. Fox, “an elderly lady” in conjunction with her daughters, known as the

---

and stable pattern of high labor force participation and some accumulation of wealth for the majority, and downward mobility, poverty, and dependency on children for a minority” (17).

For a critique of economic status and old age, see Pat Thane’s article “Social Histories of Old Age and Aging,”

where she argues, “For the propertyless and impoverished there was, through most of time, little choice to but work for pay for as long as possible, whereas the propertied minority could in all times afford to retire from work when they chose. . . . the poorest people expected, and were expected to, work to late ages” (99).

Rochester ladies, hosted séances that were attended by the intellectual luminaries of the day including Nathaniel P. Willis, James Fennimore Cooper, and the Rev. Dr. Hawks (“More of the ‘Spirits’” 1). Through these professions and others, older women proved they were capable of both self-sufficiency and providing financial assistance for their families.

Although there is evidence of elderly women working outside the home, senescent men were much more likely to work in a variety of occupations beyond the domestic sphere. While advertisements for women’s positions highlighted household tasks such as cooking, sewing and tending to children, classifieds for men’s work included jobs as collectors, clerks, investors, and bookkeepers. Older men were also employed in rural pursuits including agriculture and fishing, including Mr. Harper, a “fine, bluff, hale, hearty, ruddy cheeked farmer, who has outlived the allotted span of ‘three-score years and ten’” and was the father of four sons who founded the Harper’s publishing dynasty (“The Harpers” 2). Some worked in highly physical careers, such as “an elderly gentleman named Heeny, who was mining near Ione City” in California (“Found Dead” 2). Also, factories provided another source of employment for the senior population. Jonas Greenwood, “an elderly man” living in Worcester, Massachusetts, worked “in the employ of Allen & Thurber, pistol manufacturers” (“Jonas Greenwood” 1). Other older men worked more genteel professions located in towns or cities. Fontaine, the New York correspondent for *The Weekly Wisconsin Patriot*, describes his encounter with an “an old gentleman” working for the tailoring establishment of Messers. A. & G. A. Arnoux (Fontaine 5). Those with a higher education also engaged in medical,

political, and educational careers well into their twilight years. At the University of Pennsylvania, the oldest medical college in the United States, several faculty members were in their seventies, but were still active lecturers. Dr. Chapman, “an old gentleman of about seventy-five years of age” and Dr. Hare, “a man upwards of seventy years of age” continued their daily lectures for students alongside other, younger professors (Sigma 2). Regardless of their profession, elderly men engaged in a variety of occupations, illustrating their continued participation in the market economy at all levels.

These aged men worked not just out of necessity, but also out of a sense of social responsibility. Both old men and women were praised by the general populace for their productivity and contributions to society, whether through physical labor or intellectual production. Beyond upholding their side of the social contract, the working elderly were appropriated by both sides of the social model debate. Curiously, neither faction chose to portray work negatively, although realistically some elderly continued to work out of necessity rather than desire. Aristocratic model allies praised the aged for continuing to impart moral and ethical guidance to younger generations through their demonstrated work ethic. The fact that so many old men and women continued to work and maintain their independence so as not to burden their families and communities was also another reason that they should be respected. Proponents of the democratic model also seized upon the large numbers of working elderly to support their claim that all adults should be equally judged according to their productivity. Because a significant portion of the elderly was maintaining its economic and domestic output, these aged men and women would not be displaced with the adaptation of the democratic model, but they would be

justly rewarded for their work rather than merely honored for their age. Therefore, the democratic model would continue to uphold the social contract, but would also create a more equitable society rather than the age-based hierarchy of the aristocratic model.

Not all depictions of the senior community in antebellum newspapers were sanguine, however. Despite all the stories celebrating the vigor and activity of the elderly, many articles portrayed the frailties – physical, mental, and moral – of the senescent. The articles that reported on the weakened health of the elderly often drew direct comparisons between the ailing aged and their healthier, younger counterparts, suggesting that the old could become a burden to younger generations. The sick could not continue their productivity inside and outside the home and consequently became an encumbrance on younger generations who also now had the added trouble of caring for elder members.<sup>31</sup> Both men and women were reported to be suffering from a variety of corporeal ailments; while some disorders were comparatively slight, such as loss of hearing, others were more serious. An article in *The New Hampshire Gazette*, describing the influenza outbreak in the state, notes that while other age cohorts only suffer the inconvenience of “a violent headache and sore-throat, . . . a violent cough, soreness of limbs, chills, [and] burning fever,” older people suffer “prostration” (“Portsmouth” 1). Older, ill persons were frequently described as “frail,” “delicate,” “feeble,” and “infirm.”

More problematic, and perhaps less understood by the general populace, were mental health issues. Although people recognized that the mind did not always remain stable, there was little medical understanding about the causes and manifestations of, or

---

<sup>31</sup> Pat Thane notes, “older people in the past . . . were rarely simply dependent upon others, unless they were in severe physical decline,” but those who were could pose a burden for their caretakers (101).

treatments for people who experienced mental illness. Even less well understood were psychological issues affecting the elderly. The asylums established across the country housed all patients together, with no regard to age.<sup>32</sup> The term dementia had only come into usage in the early nineteenth century, after the French physician, Philippe Pinel described his patient's loss of memory and motor skills as "démence" and Alzheimer's would not be identified until the twentieth century. Despite the lack of a clear medical definition, however, some older people suffered from very real symptoms. In 1842, an article in *The Constitution* recorded a conversation an unnamed reporter had with an elderly female patient in the recently opened Blackwell's Island asylum. The woman appeared to be physically healthy, but she was under the illusion that she was the wife of President Tyler ("Lunatic Asylum" 2). As wretched as nineteenth century asylums may have been, mentally ill persons who were not confined posed a danger both to themselves and others. An elderly man in California only identified as A. Harlan jumped from a steamer to his death after "he was discharged from the Insane Asylum" ("Suicide by Drowning" 2). Across the country in Ohio, several old ladies committed suicide by hanging themselves. The reporter could not attribute a cause to these deaths, except "extreme melancholy, and perhaps partial derangement" ("Suicide Mania" 2). Psychologically disturbed seniors also could threaten others. In Maryland, "Mr. Harbough, an aged man, who was laboring under a derangement of mind" attacked a young visiting female relative with a hatchet and hacked her skull open ("Distressing Occurrence" 4). The number of older persons struggling with mental illness in the

---

<sup>32</sup> See historians Barbara Rosenkrantz's and Maris Vinovskis's research on antebellum New England asylums in "The Invisible Lunatics: Old Age and Insanity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts."

antebellum era is unknown, but these stories indicate that “social rank of the old is determined by the balance between the cost of maintaining them and the contribution they are perceived as making” (Eisdorfer xv). The elderly who were physically or mentally disabled, and those who could even become a threat to their families and communities were perceived by society as inconvenient at best and a liability at worst. Advocates of the democratic social model used these type of stories to prove the ailing aged were not upholding their side of the social contract and therefore were a drain on society’s resources. On the other hand, promoters of the aristocratic model acknowledged that the elderly were not fulfilling their half of the social contract, but that they could not be blamed for circumstances beyond their control. Also, the likelihood that these ill individuals would be marginalized because they were not productive was all the more reason why they should be protected under the aristocratic model. In this case, nostalgia became a motivating force to safeguard the most at-risk aged out of a respect for their former achievements rather than their current mental or physical condition.

Elderly law-abiding citizens who became the victims of crime were portrayed sympathetically by the press. Newspaper often portrayed crimes against the elderly with sensational language to convey the outrage that people felt when the social contract was violated in such a direct manner. Stories ranged from mundane pick-pocketings to scandalous murders, but the commonality that united all of these articles was an emphasis on the advanced age of the victim and his/her vulnerability that the criminal unfairly exploited. The case of “an old gentleman” who fell asleep on the train from Hartford to New York and had money stolen from him was all too common (*Boston Daily Atlas* 2).

Other people were robbed after being surveilled while conducting business, with some of these confrontations ending in murder. In Alabama, Mr. Allen Page, “an old and highly respected citizen” was waylaid and shot to death by “two brothers, Irvin and Stephen Ward, one of whom was present at the time that Mr. Page received the money for his cotton” crop he had just sold (“The Tragedy” 2). Even in the domestic sphere, the aged were unsafe from criminals who showed a blatant disregard for the social contract. One murder that had an identifiable cause was a case in North Carolina where a man who had been separated from his wife, attacked his mother-in-law, “an old lady 80 years of age,” with an axe and “split her head across the temples, and chopped her body to pieces in such a manner as to render it impossible for the jury of inquest to join together the separated and mangled parts” (“Foul” 2). In another household quarrel, Mr. Fox, “who was quite an old man,” was shot by his landlord after they disagreed, leaving behind “a wife who is in a very delicate condition, and two young children” (“Dreadful” 3). These aged victims were all preyed upon by unprincipled criminals who flouted the social contract and respect due to the law-abiding elderly. Both sides of the social model debate abhorred these crimes because neither side advocated violence.<sup>33</sup> The press indicates that these crimes are even more heinous because they were perpetrated upon the decent and respectable aged who deserved better treatment from the nation’s younger generations.

As outraged as the public was over these violations of the country’s seniors, they were equally as severe upon any aged person who committed a crime. These old men and women were directly breaching the social contract by victimizing younger

---

<sup>33</sup> Even Herman Melville, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the Young America movement, only kills Ahab because Ahab had already breached the social contract in his hijacking of the whaling voyage to pursue Moby-Dick. Therefore, he is not an innocent victim of a crime.

generations to whom they were supposed to be exemplars of morality and lawfulness. Therefore, the criminal elderly deserved no pity and were castigated for their misdeeds. Several articles linking men to sexual assaults against young, underage girls were perhaps the most salacious transgressions cited in daily newspapers because the only socially acceptable sexuality ascribed to the elderly was that of propagators of the nation's populace. Persons such as George White who "committed a very aggravated and indecent assault" on an eight-year old girl, were known to have raped their victims ("Police Intelligence" 2). Other senior men were involved with violent murders, assaults, and even an attempt at blowing up a government office.<sup>34</sup> Some felons were involved in less physical offenses, such as shoplifting, forgery, perjury and larceny. Class was not a determinant of criminal activity among the elderly, as evidenced by the case of George Bowne, "a venerable looking old gentleman, between sixty and seventy years of age . . . a member of one of the oldest and most respectable Knickerbocker families" who was convicted of forging checks for a second time ("Bowne" 5).

Older women comprised a smaller percentage of criminals, and when they committed crimes, their infractions tended to be less violent. Their transgressions, however, were no less censured by the public. Women were commonly convicted of shoplifting, such as Eliza Schrieber, "a genteelly dressed elderly person" who stole a piece of silk from A. T. Stewart & Co. and pled guilty to a charge of grand larceny ("A Fashionable Female Shoplifter" 5). On a more serious note, women were also convicted

---

<sup>34</sup> On August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1857, William Evans, "an elderly man" unsuccessfully attempted to blow up the Merchants' Exchange in Philadelphia with gunpowder because he had supposedly been cheated out of money and had his business ruined by members of the Exchange according to *The Weekly Wisconsin Patriot* ("Attempt to Blow up an Office in Merchants' Exchange" 3).

for vagrancy and various forms of fraud. One unnamed woman, “an elderly lady of respectable appearance” convinced a landlord to lend her the keys to one of his properties so she could examine it. The next day, when he checked on the house, he found that she had moved into the property with her family without informing him or entering into a lease (“The Last Game” 2). By far, women were reported as perpetrating fewer crimes than men, but the potential for elderly female criminal activity existed. And, even though the aged did not commit the majority of crimes, police blotters and court records show their involvement with the law throughout the antebellum era.

The public had to acknowledge that some elderly broke the social contract, but how they should be treated depended on which social model a person championed. Democratic model supporters had the easiest solution; senescent criminals were unproductive members of society and should be disparaged and marginalized as a result of their actions. Proponents of the aristocratic model were in a quandary because they automatically privileged the elderly, yet here the aged were directly flouting the social contract. Advocates of this model resolved the issue by relying on nostalgia, claiming that in their younger years the elderly were lawful, but the current state of society had driven them to their crimes and therefore they should not be blamed for their actions because they were victims of circumstance. However, this justification failed to completely reconcile the reverence of the elderly with the aged criminal population because not all crimes were circumstantial ones. Although economic crimes, such as theft and forgery, and even some violent crimes, like assault or murder, might be adequately explained by social conditions, some were motivated purely out of self-

interest. Therefore, the aristocratic model was less successful than its counterpart in resolving the disparity between the social contract and elderly criminals.

Despite the existence of a social contract between the young and old, an increase in gerontophobia can be detected in antebellum newspapers.<sup>35</sup> Even if the elderly were fulfilling their portion of the social contract, they could still be subject to ridicule, which mostly assumed the form of verbal taunting through name-calling. The mockery that some seniors experienced simply by virtue of their advanced age indicates that the social contract was neither universally acknowledged by younger generations nor was it wholly functioning at this time. Respect was no longer automatically granted to the elderly even if they upheld their side of the social contract, which indicates that society was shifting away from a reverent attitude towards the aged to one that was more dismissive of their status and relegated the senescent to the past. This change in attitude is evident as the words associated with old age became terms of contempt either employed directly toward the elderly or, as in politics, used against opponents who may not have been chronologically old, but the term connoted their stance or demeanor within the political arena. In the 1850s, reporters and political opponents repeatedly referred to candidates or incumbents as “old fogies”. Originating in the late eighteenth century, the term initially referred to invalid soldiers.<sup>36</sup> From the original usage, the phrase soon began to allude to any person with outdated ideas. Consequently, in politics, an “old fogy” was anyone who no longer held current, applicable views and was politically irrelevant. In explaining why

---

<sup>35</sup> See David Hackett Fischer’s argument in *Growing Old in America*, where he contends that after 1820, “a new pattern of change emerged – a process of continuous, stable evolutionary change in which gerontophobia became progressively more intense” (101).

<sup>36</sup> According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the phrase first was used in print in 1785 in Francis Grose’s *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* where it referred to ailing or paralyzed soldiers.

James Buchanan was not a popular Democratic choice for the presidential nomination in 1856, *The New York Herald* explained that among other reasons, “He is distrusted by the younger democratic Southern politicians as ‘an old foggy’ and a timeserver,” because he had been seeking the nomination for twelve years (“The Presidency” 4). The term was often used in editorials of the era, such as the eponymous article, “Gallery of Living Fogies. – No. 1” where several US senators are derided as “old fogies,” including Michigan senator Commodore Stockton to whom the anonymous writer ascribes the title “His most unapproachable Foginess” of the Senate (2). The editorialist further explained his reasons for designating Senator Stockton as a foggy:

[He] is unimpeachably ‘respectable,’ and venerably stupid – garrulous beyond precedent, and gouty without doubt. Indebted for his position solely to his wealth, pampered by a long course of flattery and good dinners, a great man in a small neighborhood, he has all the elements of prosiness, dignity and dulness [sic] ‘so mixed in him that nature may stand up and say to all the world this is a’ – Foggy” (2).

Dignity alone was no longer a sufficient personality trait to garner respect, but instead it could become a liability when it receded into perceived snobbery or elitism signaled by “flattery and good dinners”. An “old foggy’s” advice was also antiquated and disregarded, becoming garrulousness – an unwanted person talking too long for any of his or her listeners to tolerate. Even health became a point of derision; infirmity was a sign of weakness in the physical body and a source of annoyance for the observer who probably would be forced to listen to the sufferer (who is talkative) complain about his or her

ailments and may have to make accommodations for the afflicted that are inconvenient to the healthy. Thus, being old turned into a liability because it became synonymous with illness, irrelevance, and irritation in political parlance. And, if old age could be ridiculed in the political realm, there was no preclusion for this negative attitude to affect other spheres as well.

Other terms of disdain related to age were employed at the time, although none were used with the same frequency as “old fogy.” Like “old fogy,” these other phrases all utilized the term old in conjunction with other descriptive words to create a derisive epithet. These terms were most often applied by younger men referring to their elders. For example, the anonymous writer attending an 1858 performance of *The Stranger* in New Orleans, noticed that an older man sitting next to him was not watching the play, but was making some type of calculation. Upon appealing to the man “by taking hold of his larboard ear and pulling his head round so that his gold spectacled eyes were brought to bear upon us,” the writer learned that the senior was counting the number of mustaches in each section of theater to prove that the presence of facial hair corresponded with gentility (“Sub-Nasal Hair” 3). Throughout the article, the writer referred to the gentleman as “old Wrinkles” and even at one point, directly called him “old hog” and never mentioned the man’s name. Since the writer felt justified in calling the old man a variety of appellations, we, as the readers, have little other information to empathize with the aged theatergoer, and are compelled to accept the writer’s dismissive attitude. In another case, an anonymous reporter recalled a meeting with an elderly friend who regaled his colleagues with stories of former disagreements, vividly reenacting them.

The unnamed general, a “septuagenarian,” embarrassed his friend by recalling a time when a younger man insulted him, but the way in which the old man told the story made others in the Exchange think it was the reporter who had offended him, and, in his exasperation, the writer calls him “an old SPOONEY” (“A Scene” 2).<sup>37</sup> Although the reporter considered the senior man a friend, he uses the derogatory term out of frustration at the way in which the general unknowingly humiliated him, and made the surrounding businessmen suspicious of the writer. However, the older man still appears foolish in the article and the journalist is ultimately to blame for the depiction he creates.

When reporters were not maligning their elderly acquaintances, other citizens were more than ready to criticize them. Mr. Henry Groves, “an elderly gentleman” was attacked by a fellow townsman, John Sesaur on the pretense “of being old” (“Brutal Assault” 1). Not only did Sesaur physically assault Groves, but he also called him a “grey haired old rascal,” which the article indicates is a direct quote from Groves’s allegation (1). In an editorial describing the “fast young man” from the same decade, the writer described the disrespectful young man’s insults to his parents, calling his father “the old gov.” and “the old buck” and his mother “the old woman” who is more suited to be his grandmother than mother (“The Fast Young Man” 4). These affronts were merely part of a pattern of dissolution that ultimately lead to the youth’s arrest for forgery. This article suggests that disrespect towards the elderly could eventually lead to a breakdown of society’s morality. And, as society groped its way towards establishing a national

---

<sup>37</sup> Although “old spooney” is not one of the entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “spooney,” with the alternate spellings of “spoony” or “spoonie” is. The first definition, “a simple, silly, or foolish person; a noodle” came into usage in the late eighteenth century and was used frequently in the mid-nineteenth century. The second definition, “one who spoons or is foolishly amorous” was devised during the mid-nineteenth century, approximately sixty years after its original usage.

identity, it was concerned that changes in country's culture of respect could lead to the destruction of the family and community, which both were constructed upon the moral foundations of the social contract. This blatant lack of respect disturbed proponents of the aristocratic system because it indicated a fundamental shift in the way members of society were beginning to think about their superiors – not just their ancestors, but potentially all leaders as well. This lack of respect could potentially lead to anarchy, which conservative critics feared, but champions of a democratic system only saw this treatment of the aged as a progression towards a democratic model where everyone would finally be assessed according to his/her capabilities.

### **Sentimental Literary Theory: From Social Contract to Social Model**

While newspapers provided an insight into the general public's attitude toward the elderly, the ways in which the generations approached the social contract, and how the social contract was deployed by both the aristocratic and democratic social models, sentimental literature presented author's extended perspectives on these subjects. Sentimental literature had the added benefit of creating "the arousal of pathos through conventional situations, stock familial characters and rhetorical devices," which "buttonholes the reader and demands an emotional, even physical response" (Todd 2). Through the use of emotional language and the resulting affective bond that the sentimental author created with the audience, writers could promote their social model, whether aristocratic or democratic, in a genre that had a wide-ranging readership, which resulted in a broad cultural influence. While purveyors of emotional literature were often

derided by their contemporaries – Hawthorne’s comment about the “damn’d mob of scribbling women” was only one of many public and private condemnations leveled at these authors – these writers commanded the literary marketplace for three decades, reaching the zenith of their power in the 1850s.

Credited with introducing the first best-sellers written and published in the United States, sentimental novelists had a large public readership leading up to the Civil War and culminating in Augusta J. Evans’s 1867 novel, *St. Elmo*. With an expanding home-grown publishing industry (Harper’s, J. B. Lippincott, Leavitt & Allen, Scribner’s, Putnam’s, D. Appleton & Co., A.S. Barnes & Co., Little, Brown and Company, Fetridge and Company, and Ticknor and Fields were all founded during this era) increasingly responsive to the demand for sentimental texts, both male and female authors churned out hundreds of novels to meet the desires of their printers and purchasers. With such a varied and intensive literary output in only a few decades, the sentimental form was employed by authors in so many ways that its structure and intent became distorted and disparaged by other writers and critics eager to promote their own work in a highly competitive market. Although some critics, such as Ann Douglas, consider sentimentalism maudlin, “campy,” or “rancid writing,” sentimental texts convey powerful messages of emotional import, from the deepest despair and grief to the heights of passion and joy (6, 256). Although these novels reached their pinnacle in the 1850s, their origins can be traced back 100 years and three thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean to Great Britain where the concepts of sentiment and the social contract, two cultural and

societal influences that would define the relationship between the generations in sentimental novels, were first systematically explored by David Hume and Adam Smith.

In 1751, David Hume published his philosophical treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. One of the leading Scottish Moralists along with his contemporary Adam Smith, Hume expounded upon the moral foundations of society, claiming that society operates based on scientific rationality rather than religious determinations. In attempting to ascertain the source of people's morals, Hume separates reason from sentiment. Whereas Hume identifies reason as "a chain of argument and deduction," he considers sentiment "an immediate feeling and finer internal sense" (3). Hume concludes that reason and sentiment operate in concert with one another because reason alone is insufficient for making a decision. It must be accompanied by sentiment "in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies" of society (199). In short, "*reason* instructs us in the several tendencies of actions," but sentiment "makes a distinction in favour of those, which are useful and beneficial" (199). Even though Hume intended for reason and sentiment to work as complementary informers of decisions, his separation of reason from sentiment for the purposes of definition foregrounded the problematical nineteenth century division of emotion from intellect, which was also considered a clash between irrationality and rationality and the conservative versus the progressive. This schism provided the foundational arguments for the aristocratic and democratic social models, where the aristocratic model became aligned with sentiment as a conservative, backwards-looking

system, while the democratic model became partnered with reason as a progressive, forward-thinking design.<sup>38</sup>

Hume asserts that the basis for sentiment comes from one's own feelings.<sup>39</sup> Sentiment and reason then collaborate "to teach us our duty," which Hume believes is the ultimate goal of morality (5). As we experience emotion, we are more likely to feel an attachment to others who feel similarly to ourselves. Hume identifies this sensation of connection as sympathy, although contemporary society would recognize his definition as empathy, a word not coined until the twentieth century. While our level of sympathy for others may fluctuate, it also leads us to seek out a benevolent society, where our self-interests are less important than the functioning of society at large.<sup>40</sup> Hume sees sympathetic benevolence as utilitarian and essential for a constructive society. As people come to recognize and accept the effects of sentiment upon their daily decisions, they desire to improve society. Sentiment, then, is crucial for the construction of stronger, more cohesive communities that will benefit all members of society, from the young to the old, because it motivates people through their emotional response to act in the best interest of both themselves *and* others. As these mutually beneficial communities are constructed, the social contract that Hume envisions will provide the foundation of society is created based on both reason and sentiment. The old enter social contracts with

---

<sup>38</sup> Because both social models represented a segment of the elderly's position as a transitional generation, Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History' can also be deployed as an appropriate image in both organizational structures.

<sup>39</sup> Hume states, "what each man feels within himself is the standard of sentiment" (4).

<sup>40</sup> "Sympathy, we shall allow, is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons, remote from us, much fainter than with persons, near and contiguous; but for this very reason, 'tis necessary for us, in our clam judgments and discourse concerning the character of men, to neglect all these differences, and render our sentiments more public and social" (Hume 99).

the young because both will benefit from the establishment of guidelines that will provide a standardized behavioral model to which both parties will adhere. Ideally, the old would secure reverence and protection in their senior years and the young would gain guidance and affection in their youth. In this way, a harmonious community would be created where everyone's physical, economic, and emotional needs were met based on their faithful execution of their portion of the social contract.

Like Hume, Adam Smith believes that sympathy is the way in which people emotionally connect to one another. However, while Hume reasons that sympathy is felt between different people based on their relative association, Smith avers that we can only truly experience sympathy by placing ourselves in the position of the person being subjected to an emotional situation: "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation" (3). By walking a mile in another person's shoes, so to speak, we can empathize with whatever feeling another person experiences, which will also draw us closer to him or her. Smith's point was critical for sentimental authors to master when they wrote about the aged because a large segment of their readership was not elderly and would have to develop sympathy through the literary experience. As we empathize with others, however, we do not feel all emotions uniformly. Rather, the intensity of our empathy is commensurate with the strength of the passions undergone by the original subject.<sup>41</sup> In other words, our level of empathy depends on how strongly our imaginations replicate the emotional force of the

---

<sup>41</sup> Smith explains "to be in pain or distress of any kind excites the most excessive sorrow, so to conceive or to imagine that we are in it, excites some degree of the same emotion, in proportion to the vivacity or dulness [sic] of the conception" (4)

individual, which is why nineteenth-century authors of sentimental literature created such intense scenes intended to move the reader. Promoters of the aristocratic social model needed their audience not only to be able to empathize with their elderly characters, but they also needed them to feel deep, strong emotional attachments to the aged in order to convince readers that social consonance could be achieved through the privileging of the elderly. Conversely, supporters of the democratic social model desired to engender a strong *negative* response in the reader towards the elderly so that the audience would not want to privilege the senescent out of nostalgic, emotional attachment, but, out of anger or disgust, they would demand that the aged be evaluated just as younger generations felt they were being judged by their elders.

According to Smith, the sentimental ties of attachment lead us to desire social consonance. Through a benevolence of feeling, positive societal relationships are built upon the mutual desire to help one another build an altruistic community using a social contract similar to Hume's. Symbiotic and mutually beneficial associations develop because all members of society need one another and they desire communal harmony:

All the members of human society stand in need of each other's assistance, and are likewise exposed to mutual injuries. Where the necessary assistance is reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem, the society flourishes and is happy. All the different members of it are bound together by the agreeable bonds of love and affection, and are, as it were, drawn to one common centre of mutual good offices. (Smith 124)

The resulting benevolent society is Smith's ideal community; if this paradigm cannot be achieved, then the second best society is one of utility and practicality.<sup>42</sup> Smith's secondary society foreshadows the democratic model, where each person is judged according to his/her productivity or contribution to society, but no higher affective bonds, such as those between the young and old, are necessarily recognized or privileged. The only society that cannot sustain itself, however, is a cruel society.<sup>43</sup> In short, society may survive in a utilitarian state founded on practical justice – a communal form of the Hippocratic oath's promise "to do no harm," but it will only thrive through benevolence. Smith believed that reason alone could inform the social contract and create a utilitarian or democratic society, but the most successful form of society would be one where the social contract was based on both reason and sentiment, which would result in an aristocratic society. Smith and Hume's proposed dual foundations of a social contract would most directly benefit the elderly because the sentiment of respect would protect the aged's social status when reason could not. In a democratic model based solely upon reason, the elderly who were infirm or not economically or culturally productive would lose their social position because reason would argue that their lack of productivity was burdensome to society. Thus, the language and emotion of sentiment were necessary

---

<sup>42</sup> A utilitarian community "may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility, without any mutual love or affection; and though no man in it should owe any obligation, or be bound in gratitude to any other, it may still be upheld by a mercenary exchange of good offices according to an agreed valuation" (Smith 124).

<sup>43</sup> Smith reasons that society "cannot subsist among those who are at all times ready to hurt and injure one another. The moment that injury being, the moment that mutual resentment and animosity take place, all the bands of it are broken asunder, and the different members of which it consisted are, as it were, dissipated and scattered abroad by the violence and opposition of their discordant affections" (124-25).

tools for the avocation of the preservation of the elderly's social rank in the aristocratic model.

According to Smith, whether we live in a benevolent or a utilitarian society, we must examine our own sentiments by using a "mirror" to evaluate our feelings (162). By assessing our feelings from a distance, we can obtain more objective insight into our sentiments and determine whether they are operating for the betterment or detriment of ourselves and society.<sup>44</sup> Fortunately, society provides us with the very mirror by which we can judge our own emotions. By engaging with society, we are "immediately provided with the mirror which [we] wanted before" (162). Once we have examined our reflections in other members of society's reactions towards our emotional expressions, we can ascertain how our subsequent actions may affect our community. This was precisely the effect that sentimental authors depended on their audience experiencing when promoting either social model. In the aristocratic model, writers wanted younger generations to look in the mirror of society and see the elderly as living connections to the past as well as compassionate guides who, in their youth, had labored toward the improvement of society and upheld their side of the social contract and were therefore automatically deserving of respect. By becoming aware of these emotional bonds of society, younger generations could demonstrate their humanity and fulfill their part of the social contract. Sentimental authors who supported the aristocratic model relied on readers cultivating a nostalgic emotional bond with their elderly characters. Readers who

---

<sup>44</sup> Smith explains the reason why we need to examine our sentiments from a distance: "We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them, unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour [sic] to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring [sic] to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them" (161).

identified with senescent characters and wanted a harmonious community would support an aristocratic model because it would protect the elderly's social position, thereby benefitting the aged as well as the young who would gain the guidance and affection from their elders through the social contract that the aristocratic model would introduce. Proponents of the democratic model also saw society as a mirror, but instead of imaging a nostalgia reflection of the past, their mirror was one of productivity, where they looked at the elderly and judged them according to their current contributions to society. Just as younger generations were evaluated on the productivity, advocates of the democratic model believed the same criterion should apply to the aged. Both the young and old could fulfill their social contract by continuing to contribute to the nation through economic, domestic, or cultural pursuits. Champions of the democratic social model also believed in a social contract, but theirs was based solely on reason, rather than a combination of reason and sentiment as Hume and Smith proposed. They eliminated sentiment in order to be able to take a more objective view of the elderly through the lens of production. The aged who met their obligatory output were granted respect, but the ones who failed, for whatever reason to sustain their expected productivity were marginalized because they were perceived as hindrances to the nation's economic, domestic, and intellectual development.

Hume and Smith's social contract as well as their definitions of sentiment and sympathy were appropriated nearly one hundred years later by antebellum American sentimental authors who wanted to engage in the contemporaneous conflict over the form the social model should take in the nation. These concepts, which were familiar to the

general population as we have already seen in antebellum newspapers, provided authors with readily available and widely understood theories that they could use to support their social agenda. Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, the first expansive defense of sentimentality of the twentieth century, explains how authors could productively use ordinary influences within their texts to appeal to readers. By "tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions" and "reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form," a novel could have an "impact on the culture at large" (xvi). Tompkins values sentimentalists for adopting ordinary influences into their texts to appeal to the public with recognizable tropes, situations, and characters. Winfried Fluck further expounds on Tompkins's espousal of the familiar, explaining that customary imagery did not appear by happenstance in sentimental literature, but was a strategic move used by authors to promote their social models: "By setting up analogies, or . . . models of their own cultural and aesthetic potential," a novel "may achieve its cultural aims" (17). By generating images that resonated with their readers, writers could more easily access readers' emotions through their affiliation with the realistic representations in the text.

In fact, sentimental authors depended upon this connection between themselves and the reader through the text in order to heighten the emotional response from the audience. Winfried Herget describes the process by which sentimental works unite authors to readers through emotional appeal: "The text relates author and reader on the basis of shared sentiments to achieve sympathy, and to move the reader from sympathy to compassion" (4). Herget implies that compassion is necessary to generate action in the

reader. While sympathy will create an emotional response, compassion will propel the reader from feeling to action. Sentimental authors needed their readers to feel compelled to act if they were to be successful in advocating social models.<sup>45</sup> Through the use of elderly characters who could generate nostalgic emotions through their transitional position, the author could demonstrate to readers that both the author's and the readers' emotions coincided and therefore just as the author was moved to act and write her story, so the readers should feel driven to embrace the author's advocated social model.

The author's objective is taken one step further by Elizabeth Barnes in *States of Sympathy*, claiming, "Sympathetic identification – one of the foremost elements of sentimental literature – works to demonstrate, even to *enact*, a correspondence or unity between subjects. . . . Readers are taught to identify with character in such a way that they come to think of others – even fictional 'others' – as somehow related to themselves" ("Introduction" x). For Barnes, the author replaces the bond between him/herself and the reader with a connection between the reader and fictional characters. Sentimental authors' use of elderly characters can complicate this picture because the aged represent a similarity within a difference, given the age differential between old characters and readers as well as the historical position of antebellum elderly as a transitional generation. Barnes's "correspondence" and "unity" suggest similarity, but a sentimental author can actually choose whether to stress the similarities or the differences between elderly characters and younger readers based on the social model that the author wants to promote. There is also no strict division between similarity and difference along

---

<sup>45</sup> Also see Bruce Burgett's link between empathy and potential for change in *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic* as well as Nina Baym's claim that sentimental authors empowered their readers in order to affect social change in *Novel, Readers, and Reviewers*.

the lines of the social models that each author supports. For example, Susan Warner highlights the difference between her aged characters and younger readers in order to reflect her belief that the elderly are special because of their sociohistorical position and should be treated with reverence in the aristocratic model. However, Warner also needs readers to feel a similarity with the older characters so that they will be inclined to privilege the elderly in the aristocratic model because one day they too will be aged and will desire the same level of respect. Warner wants the audience to believe that it is in their own best interest to revere the elderly because they will want such treatment in their old age too. Warner enacts a social contract here based on both difference and similarity in order to promote her aristocratic social model.

Like Adam Smith, Barnes sees the potential for self-examination through the use of a 'mirror,' but Barnes substitutes sentimental characters for Smith's society. Echoing Smith's call for a reflective object capable of allowing us to examine our feelings and intentions, Barnes explains, "One's apprehension of another's experience is understood to be achieved through the mediating influence of one's own emotions. As one subject views another, she must imagine how the other feels; this can only be accomplished by projecting onto the other person what would be one's own feelings in that particular situation" (*States* 5). This is precisely the reaction that sentimental authors like Warner need readers to feel when they experience elderly characters as a similarity contained within a difference. Even though the reader can recognize that the aged are distinctive, the reader must believe that he/she could be in the same situation at some point in the future in order for an emotive connection to be made between the younger reader and

older character. When the reader uses the fictional characters as her mirror, as Barnes instructs, he or she can gain further insight into his or her own feelings. Self-awareness is thereby generated in the reader, drawing him or her closer to the character through the emotional bond the two share as each plot development confronts the reader and character simultaneously.<sup>46</sup> Even though the reader and character may be placed in differing situations, the sympathy between the two is not diminished, but rather may be increased if the emotional ties to the character on the part of the reader are strong.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, proponents of the democratic social system wanted to create an emotional response between readers and elderly characters, but rather than an affective bond, they sought a discordant reaction so that they could avoid the ameliorating effects of nostalgia on the relationship between younger readers and older characters, which could make a younger audience more likely to adopt an aristocratic model instead.

Sentimental authors were aware of the cultural power that their literature possessed and its potential for influencing the course of American society and the formation of a national identity through the organization of social ranks. Even Herbert Brown, one of sentimentalism's largest detractors, admits, "In the history of reform, the sentimental novel played an important part" (153). Mary Ryan points out that whatever retrospective view modern critics have as to the motivational power of sentimental

---

<sup>46</sup> Janet Todd explains how the relationship between the reader and character is based on sympathy: "Sentimental literature is exemplary of emotion, teaching its consumers to produce a response equivalent to the one present in its episodes" (4). In other words, sentimental literature literally teaches by example to an audience primed to echo its emotionality and social agenda.

<sup>47</sup> Philip Fisher describes the potential for reader-character identification even in the most far-fetched plots: "The sentimental novel creates the extension of feeling on which the restitution of humanity is based by means of equations between the deep common feelings of the reader and the exotic but analogous situations of the characters" (118).

literature, antebellum critics were well aware of its capabilities. She cites an 1845 article from *The Mother's Assistant*, which concluded, "The time has arrived when literature is to be held responsible to a considerable extent, for the morality of the world" (33).

Twentieth century critics reaffirm the notion of sentimentalism's ability to shape the reader and affect society as a whole. According to Jane Tompkins, we should read the sentimental text as "a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (*Sensational* 126). In her introduction to *Sensational Designs*, Tompkins explicitly spells out her goal:

[To] see literary texts not as works of art embodying enduring themes in complex forms, but as attempts to redefine the social order. In this view, novels and stories should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment. ("Introduction" xi)

Tompkins is emphatic that we should read sentimental works for the ways in which they address social issues because the texts are enmeshed in their cultural milieu, and as such, seek to undertake an exploration into contemporaneous issues facing society. This is precisely the intervention that sentimental authors were attempting to make with their elderly characters. They perceived that America's social order was in flux in the antebellum era and sought to intercede on behalf of the social models that each advocated, believing that his/her system was the correct one and would provide the

solution for an anxious and uncertain society. The elderly were the flexible literary tropes that, through their positioning in the social contract and the emotional response they engendered in the audience, could propel an audience to adopt either social model.

Although other writers concur with Tompkins's assessment of sentiment's role in engagement with antebellum social issues, the majority of later critics, such as Michael Seidel, Janet Todd, and Elizabeth Barnes all support a more measured appraisal of social activism within sentimentalism that allows for literature social influence but also acknowledges its other entertaining and artistic functions.<sup>48</sup> Michael Bell further refines Tompkins's profession of sentimentality's social activism, pointing out the difficulties inherent in translating antebellum novels' individualistic circumstances as a demonstration for social change. Bell agrees "As the major novelists of the time repeatedly affirm, the sphere of personal feeling and domestic life is not inseparable from the wider processes of society and politics. Each encompasses the other" (120). However, "the two scales proved to be increasingly incommensurable. Even the best understanding of social and economic processes does not tell you what you need to know about the lives and more qualities of individuals, and nor can the larger process be understood simply as an imaginary moral aggregate" (120). This is precisely why the elderly were such ideal characters for sentimental authors; because they were capable of representing a variety of positions both in generational time and social space, they could embody Bell's larger "social and economic processes" within a single aged individual.

---

<sup>48</sup> In her article, "Affecting Relations: Pedagogy, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Sympathy," Barnes states, "Sentimental literature – including political, philosophical, and fictional texts – is to a certain extent a response to the cultural anxieties present in the question of patriarchal authority; more than this, sentimental literature shares in the process of creating a new cultural impression" (599).

While Tompkins is not incorrect in seeing cultural change being enacted through the sentimental novel, her acceptance of this as its principal function is too facile. Furthermore, as Lauren Berlant adds to Bell's concern, the consumption of literature, even if it contains advice and moral guidance, does not automatically result in the enactment of any social changes. Berlant believes, "Sentimentality, after all, is the only vehicle for social change that neither produces more pain nor requires much courage, unlike other revolutionary rhetorics" (*The Female Complaint* 66). Couched in a fictive language, sentimentality may convey ideas of change to readers, but unless the reader acts upon those new feelings engendered by the text, the work will remain a form of entertainment. Because the reader is not necessarily spurred to action, the language of sentiment can only effect a limited change, which is why none of the authors we will explore in later chapters had his/her model automatically adopted by society. Both the democratic and aristocratic models had their supporters and detractors, and sentimental literature was used to support both sides of the debate, but ultimately no single piece of literature directly altered the nation's course as society strove to settle on a social model that would be most beneficial to its citizens at that historical moment.

Lauren Berlant identifies the desire for social consonance as a unifying force among sentimental readers. She characterizes this community of readers of sentiment as an "intimate public," which she defines as a group that:

foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, a space where the social world is rich with anonymity and local recognitions, and where

challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans. (*The Female Complaint* 10)

As readers feel these ties to one another that are expressed in sentimental literature, they discover a sense of belonging, which they had not previously experienced. Authors used these newly-formed groups to promote their social models. By deploying elderly to create heightened emotions in readers, authors could then capitalize on the unifying sensations that these characters produced to consolidate readers behind the authors' social agendas. According to Berlant, sentimental literature generated the first American "intimate public." This initial intimate public felt a heightened attachment to one another that was stimulated by expressions of sentiment in antebellum literature.<sup>49</sup> These groups of readers who desired to feel a communal attachment bonded over the shared emotion they located in sentimental literature and created their own sense of social cohesion. Sentimental authors could then capitalize on their audience's longing for community to further their social models by illustrating how each model would benefit society and create the social cohesion that these intimate publics desired. Elderly characters became the vehicles for not just the production of emotion that would unite readers, but also the embodiment of the author's proposed vision for communal solidarity in either the

---

<sup>49</sup> Berlant explains these connective sensations in intimate publics: "participants in the intimate public *feel* as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions. Their participation seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails: varieties of suffering and fantasies of transcendence; longing for reciprocity with other humans and the world; irrational and rational attachments to the way things are; special styles of ferocity and refusal; and a creative will to survive that attends to everyday situations while imaging conditions of flourishing within and beyond them" (*The Female Complaint* 5).

aristocratic or democratic social model. As the mirrors through which readers could examine their feelings and relationships to the elderly via the social contract, aged characters provided the literary device that sentimental authors could use to reach their intimate publics in order to exhort them to social activism by appealing to their desire for societal cohesion.

Despite the optimism that a desire for social consonance creates in readers, as, to paraphrase a line from Clement C. Moore, “visions of utopia danced in their heads,” a truly cohesive society remained elusive, which ultimately diminished the position of the elderly (and other groups at risk of marginalization) in society. Even if sentimental fiction motivated the reader into awareness and political action, the genre of sentimentality often undercut its capacity to generate meaningful social change. On the individual level, Elizabeth Barnes warns, “rather than rescuing us from our isolated position as distinct individuals, sympathy reproduces our isolation by offering us a vision of unity while simultaneously confirming the impossibility of its attainment” (“Affecting” 600). Because our feelings remain our own, we can imagine that we exist in a compassionate union with others, but we never truly view our feelings from outside of ourselves. Even Smith’s mirror is only a reflection of ourselves. As we read about an elderly’s character’s struggles, we may feel an affinity for that character, but we can never *become* that character; our individuality is sustained and we do not undergo the experiences that the character does. At best, we have only a vicarious experience of the aged character’s life. In this equation, while two individual entities may move closer together through empathy, they will never become one. What inevitably happens when

readers can appreciate a character's position, but not intimately identify with him/her, is that readers will support agendas that benefit them, rather than work for the mutual benefit of society that Hume and Smith claim are the ideal societies. As a result, when younger antebellum readers were faced with the choice between the aristocratic model that would immediately benefit the elderly by privileging their position but would eventually profit younger generations as they aged, and the democratic model that would instantly benefit the most productive members of society, who were the young, while marginalizing groups that were not contributing to society in the economic, political, cultural, or domestic spheres, such as the elderly, younger generations gravitated toward the immediate reward of the democratic model. By the end of the nineteenth century, the aristocratic model languished and the democratic model became the preferred social system. However, the 1850s was an era of both social uncertainty and optimism where sentimental literature was employed by both aristocratic and democratic factions in an attempt to influence the reader through the vehicle of the elderly who held a unique position in society at that precise historical moment. The antebellum era was a time when the redefinition of societal organization collided with the existence of the nation's first transitional generation and sentimental literature was the popular genre to capture both in its pages.

## Chapter Two:

### On the Homefront: The Social Contract and the Social Model Debate in the Domestic Sphere

“The Aged are the best qualified for instructing of Youth, and training them up in the Knowledge, as well as animating them to the Discharge of every important Duty in Life.”  
-- Cicero, *Cato Major, or His Discourse on Old Age*

Nineteenth-century literary sentimentalism, which reached its pinnacle in the decade leading up to the Civil War, has recently undergone a renaissance. Throughout much of the twentieth century, critics have considered sentimentalism a hackneyed, maudlin trope employed by uninventive women writers who could only churn out stories replete with orphaned children in order to manufacture sorrow in a passel of simpering female readers of all ages who were too simplistic to understand any other literature. However, beginning in the 1980s, largely as a reaction to Ann Douglas’s scathing attack on sentiment in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), scholars began to re-evaluate the worth of these texts. These scholars argued that sentimental texts included valuable insight into community values and social bonds. In the sentimental novel, the domestic sphere became the space in which authors explored the forms that the social contract between the generations should take and reflected these principles in their avocation of either a hierarchical aristocratic model that privileged all seniors because of their age or an equitable democratic model that evaluated young and old alike on their contributions to the family and home. What twentieth-century critics have overlooked in their rehabilitation of sentimental novels is the importance that authors ascribed to their

elderly characters through their description of the intergenerational social contract and subsequent endorsement of either an aristocratic or a democratic social model. Modern critics tend to consider aged characters as secondary figures essential for little more than the accurate rendering of communities in a novel. They also reduce elderly characters to one-dimensional members of society who either minimally contribute to plot development or at best provide comic relief. Often, senescent characters' roles have been seen as tangential to the text; they could possibly provide an emotional image that teaches a moral, but their presence was not essential to furthering the plot. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's Quaker grandmother in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Rachel Halliday, has been described by critics as presenting an idealized portrait of a family matriarch, but they have missed Halliday's deeper connection to Stowe's formulation of a social contract between the younger and older Halliday relatives and her avocation of an aristocratic social model.<sup>50</sup>

Aged characters provided authors the adaptability to represent not just the older generation within the social contract, but also both sides of the social model debate. Because the senescent represented both the past and present as a transitional generation, they could either be used as nostalgic representations of their previous achievements, which would cause authors to promote an aristocratic model that privileged the elderly on the basis of their advanced age, or they could be represented as reluctant relics resistant to modern societal shifts who deserve to be ignored in favor of younger generations who would embrace change in a democratic social system. As both a hegemonic and

---

<sup>50</sup> See descriptions of Rachel Halliday as an ideal mother in Marianne Noble's *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* and Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*.

marginalized age cohort, seniors could either be rescued from their obscurity by authors supporting an aristocratic social structure, or they could be condemned by champions of a democratic social model for their boundless power and potential abuse of authority. Even the elderly's chronological age could be used to endorse both social models. A younger author might be prompted to support a democratic model because he/she perceived seniors as a social 'Other,' while an older writer might have more empathy for his/her colleagues and therefore promote an aristocratic model to benefit the entire age cohort.<sup>51</sup> By virtue of the multiplicity of social positions that the elderly could occupy and their ability to engender an emotive response from readers, senescent characters were indispensable figures for antebellum sentimental authors who consistently employed them to further their own arguments about the appropriate criteria for the formation of the social contract between the old and the young and the type of social organization that would benefit the largest number of individuals from the implementation of these intergenerational relationships.

Two of the most influential sentimental writers in the 1850s were Susan Warner and Fanny Fern.<sup>52</sup> With their respective first novels, *The Wide, Wide World* and *Ruth Hall*, these women became bastions of their genre. Both novels follow the domestic exploits and hardships facing two young women – Ellen Montgomery in Warner's novel and Ruth Hall in Fern's eponymous text. As these two girls navigate through their often unpredictable lives, they encounter a variety of elderly figures. Through the interactions between Ellen and Ruth and the aged characters they meet, we learn Warner's and Fern's

---

<sup>51</sup> See the introduction for information on the concept of 'Othering.'

<sup>52</sup> Fanny Fern's real name was Sarah Payson Willis Parton. Unless other names are used by critics, I will refer to Parton as Fern throughout the remainder of the chapter.

philosophy of senescence and how it resulted in both women incorporating similar criteria in their intergenerational social contracts even though they differed over the acceptability of nostalgia as a tool for evaluating the aged's ability to uphold their side of the pact. Both women prioritized the domestic roles and moral or ethical leadership of the elderly in their social contracts. However, Warner's intergenerational social contract is also based upon the younger generation's nostalgic view of the elderly's former domestic accomplishments while Fern's contract eschews nostalgia in order to judge the aged's current contributions to the home. This key difference in the interpretation of the social contract leads both women to develop a starkly contrasting view of the senescent, which is evidenced in their promotion of opposing social models. Whereas Warner embraces the aristocratic social model in her novel's idealized community, Fern advocates for a democratic society where the aged are judged according to their behavior and are treated accordingly. In her efforts to prove that the aristocratic model is the most beneficial for a community because it promotes social consonance, Warner creates a variety of aged characters who are always accepted by their communities regardless of their ability to contribute currently to their households or provide sound moral and ethical guidance to younger generations. Because Warner's intergenerational relationships invariably conclude in communal harmony, Warner asserts that the elderly are deserving of the social respect that the implementation of a hierarchical aristocratic model would grant them. Meanwhile, Fern, who draws upon the same social contract characteristics as Warner, but who does so without the lens of nostalgia applied to the contract, determines that the elderly should not be evaluated differently than other age cohorts simply because

of their advanced age, but rather all adults should be assessed on the same criteria, which results in her adoption of the democratic social model.

The disparity between Warner's and Fern's attitudes could not have been greater, and the difference in the critical reception each woman's work received corresponded accordingly. Reviewers gushed in praise of Warner's realistic and sympathetic description of aged characters and attendant moral lessons incorporated into the text. Meanwhile, Fern's work was raked over the coals (and if critics had their way, those embers would have been supplied by immolated copies of *Ruth Hall*) for its cruelty toward the elderly. The extremity of response in both instances indicates the uncertainty over the position of the country's senior populace and the continuing debate over which social model could best serve a transforming nation – two interrelated concerns that were preoccupying society at the time of the novels' publication. While conservative proponents of traditional social values endorsed Warner for her stance of unconditional regard for all elderly and her support of the aristocratic model, they condemned Fern for her pragmatic approach in determining which aged members of society deserved respect and her promotion of the democratic model. However, more moderate and progressive reviewers acknowledged the judiciousness of Fern's social contract, touting its practicality and advantageousness for the members of society who chose to uphold their portion of the agreement. By only rewarding those individuals who currently fulfilled the social contract, as Fern suggests, society would operate more efficiently by not erroneously rewarding the elderly who failed to discharge their social duties. Regardless of critics' censure, both novels were two of the most widely read works of their era as

readers sought to make their own decisions about their literary habits, which, for conservative reviewers, was just another indication that society was transforming before their eyes.

**Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, or, How to Succeed in Your Family and Community by Really Trying**

Susan Warner's first novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, published in 1851, became America's first best-seller and was second only in sales to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* during the antebellum era. The novel focuses on young Ellen Montgomery who is sent to her paternal aunt's farm in upstate New York after reversals in her father's business dealings prevent Ellen from joining her parents on their trip to Europe in search of a more suitable climate for the consumptive Mrs. Montgomery. Although Mr. Montgomery failed to notify his sister, Miss Fortune, of her niece's arrival, she takes in Ellen and begins to educate her in household duties on the sprawling farm. Unused to extensive physical labor, Ellen finds her aunt's expectations odious, but she finds solace in her circle of friends, including the chief farm hand, Mr. Van Brunt and his elderly mother; the reclusive Swiss widow, Mrs. Vawse; and the refined Alice Humphreys and her older brother John, a minister-in-training. While learning her place in the rural community, she discovers that both her parents have died – her mother from her illness and her father in a shipwreck while attempting to return to America. Unofficially adopted by Alice as a 'little sister,' Ellen permanently relocates to the Humphrey's household prior to Alice's untimely death. After several plot twists, she is sent to live

with her mother's relatives, the Lindsays, in Scotland, where she spends several years until she returns to America to (presumably) marry John Humphreys.<sup>53</sup>

Largely ignored since the early 1900s, the novel has undergone a renaissance in critical inquiry. Contemporary reviewers and critics have focused on Ellen's development from child to suitable marriage material for a young minister, giving little attention to the other characters in the novel. Typically, the remaining cast has been depicted as satellites to Ellen, existing for the sole purpose of educating Ellen in her deportment as well as religious, social, and intellectual duties.<sup>54</sup> Given this plot arrangement, virtually every other character in the novel has been dismissed as a mere compliment to Warner's instructional plans for her protagonist.<sup>55</sup> Looking more deeply into Ellen's encounters with members of her community, however, reveals Warner's blueprint for an ideal community based on a social contract wherein the elderly are expected to contribute to their domestic sphere and the young recompense the aged with respect and any material assistance they require. Warner populates her novel with elderly

---

<sup>53</sup> The final chapter that shows Ellen and John as newlyweds was omitted from the original novel after the publisher, George Putnam expressed reservations over the length of the novel. The final chapter was restored in the 1987 Feminist Press edition.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Ann Douglas even goes as far as calling the elderly women of *The Wide, Wide World* Ellen's "beloved and diseased lady friends" (64). Susan Brusky reduces Mrs. Vawse to the role of Ellen's "othermother" in her article "Beyond the Ending of Maternal Absence in *A New-England Tale*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *St. Elmo*" (161), although Veronica Stewart in "Mothering a Female Saint: Susan Warner's Dialogic Role in *The Wide, Wide World*" claims Mrs. Vawse cannot be "a surrogate mother" to Ellen because she cannot "control her granddaughter's behavior" (69). In "A Novel Idea: The Influence of the Literary Marketplace on Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*," Dan Colson lists the characters who he claims are part of Warner's allegory to teach Ellen lessons including the old gentleman, Mr. Marshman, and Mr. Humphreys who are all older men.

<sup>55</sup> One notable exception is Veronica Stewart's article "The Wild Side of *The Wide, Wide World*" that depicts Nancy Vawse as a strong and independent young woman in counterpoint to Ellen's submissiveness. Also, Isabelle White, in "Anti-Individualism, Authority, and Identity: Susan Warner's Contradictions in *The Wide, Wide World*" notes that "later critics (and some of [Warner's] contemporary reviewers as well) praise her minor characters as being clearly and realistically drawn while rejecting her major characters, whom she used as representative (not perfect) models" (40). However, White does not contradict the notion that these more "realistic" minor characters exist solely to teach Ellen lessons.

characters who demonstrate a variety of ways in which the senescent can fulfill this unspoken agreement. Warner creates a society where the elderly have two primary functions – they should be positive domestic role models by providing physical care forming emotional attachments with their families and they should contribute to their community through their physical labor or their moral and ethical leadership. If they aged can comply with at least one of these criteria, then they deserve reverence from younger generations as well as any physical care or emotional attention they might need. Furthermore, if the senescent can only partially meet one of these conditions, then they should be evaluated on their past achievements, thereby introducing nostalgia into the perception of the social contract. Through this social contract, it is possible for all of Warner’s elderly characters to meet their objectives, which is why every aged individual is ultimately accepted by his/her community. This configuration of the social contract supports the aristocratic social model, where all senescent individuals would be accorded respect, if, for no other reason, than having attained an advanced age. By making it possible for all seniors to uphold the social contract, either through their current societal contributions or a nostalgic view of their previous accomplishments, Warner embraces the aristocratic model and claims that every aged person deserves respect because it leads to communal harmony, which benefits every member of society, and not simply the elderly.

We first see Warner’s social contract in action in the anonymous elderly gentleman who rescues Ellen in St. Clair and Fleury’s department store. Although he seems to have no family of his own since he avoids directly answering Mrs.

Montgomery's query as to his familial status, he becomes a de facto patriarch to the female Montgomeries. The gentleman both physically protects Ellen and materially provides for the mother's and daughter's needs. He is instrumental in securing Saunders's firing from his clerking job after he has insulted Ellen and he accompanies Ellen on her shopping trips to ensure that she is safe from other upstart young clerks. The senior also personally buys Ellen an extra dress and winter bonnet to fully outfit her for the harsh winters of upstate New York, showing his paternal concern for her physical well-being. Furthermore, he sends the mother and daughter gifts of various edible delicacies through an intermediary servant in an attempt to fortify Mrs. Montgomery for her upcoming oceanic journey, which not even her husband does. According to Nicole Willey, the old gentleman is an "idealized male character" who "cannot get by with just being kind; he must also teach a moral lesson, though subtle" to Ellen (63). This lesson to which Willey refers is one of communal responsibility. The elderly gentleman, through his officious attentions to the Montgomeries, shows Ellen that individuals must provide for the less fortunate in their communities in order to improve society. Ellen learns that no matter what her position may be, she can always assist someone, and in turn, she will increase the sympathetic connections among community members. Furthermore, "Warner holds up the kind gentleman as a notion of preferred masculinity: the protector and the provider in one, he is also a silent man, but not in the traditional sense of not being communicative; instead, he is willing to listen to girls and women" (64). The elderly gentlemen, by listening to the female Montgomeries, shows he respects and values them, which in turn, increase the mother's and daughter's self-esteem and

binds them more closely to the anonymous senior. By maintaining his anonymity, the elderly gentleman shows that it is this bond of social cohesion that is more important for a successful community than any individual recognition he would receive if his name were known. The gentleman may protest that he is “not good for much now,” but he shows his concern for younger generations by seeking “to please young people” (Warner 51) By deflecting attention from himself to the family, the gentleman reveals his commitment to the social contract by acting benevolently toward the Montgomeris.

Accordingly, both Mrs. Montgomery and Ellen greatly appreciate the gentleman’s officiousness and return his generosity with their respect, thereby upholding their side of the social contract. Although the ailing Mrs. Montgomery is too weak to show much pleasure in the gentleman’s attentions other than a few smiles, she receives his advice and entrusts Ellen to his care for the completion of her shopping. Mrs. Montgomery also permits Ellen to send a note of thanks to him through a servant while respecting his desire for continued anonymity. Ellen painstakingly works through her note in order to best express her gratitude to her rescuer, stating:

Ellen Montgomery does not know how to thank the old gentleman who is so kind to her. Mamma enjoys the birds very much, and I think I do more; for I have the double pleasure of giving them to mamma, and of eating them afterwards; but your kindness is the best of all. I can’t tell you how much I am obliged to you, sir, but I will always love you for all you have done for me. (Warner 55)

Her simple language reveals her desire to adequately articulate her appreciation of a man who not only demands respect for a young lady, but also one who fulfills the parental role, which Ellen's own father has refused to do. She maintains respect for the gentleman's wishes by omitting any curiosity about his identity and her guilelessness in her explanation of her emotions further exposes her trust in the mysterious gentleman. Her obligation to him is paid with a profession of eternal love, which also implies a nostalgic remembrance by Ellen long after she departs the city for Thirlwall. Through her interaction with the elderly gentleman, Ellen has had her first experience with the intergenerational social contract, and her reaction to it, as evidenced by her letter, reveals that she has begun to develop a level of respect for the senescent that initiates her eventual acceptance of the aristocratic social model.

Once Ellen arrives in Thirlwall, she soon meets Mrs. Vawse, who literally lives on the proverbial mountaintop. A displaced Swiss widow with a wild and willful granddaughter as her only living relative, Mrs. Vawse is a much different senior than the elderly gentleman. Given her limited mobility and financial resources, Mrs. Vawse could retreat into her replicated chalet, but she instead sustains an active role in the rural community, which reveals her commitment to the social contract. Not only is Mrs. Vawse a dynamic senior woman who exemplifies morality and ethicality, but Jane Tompkins describes her as "the one completely happy, whole, and self-sufficient character in this novel" (165). Although she is physically impaired and impoverished, Mrs. Vawse is highly involved in the Thirlwall community, dispensing advice to younger generations as well as intermittently working for various families who request her

assistance in order to maintain her self-sufficiency. She also never falters in her love and hope for Nancy, her rebellious granddaughter, even though the entire village has dismissed her as a “bad girl.” Mrs. Vawse’s unwavering faith in her granddaughter shows that she can be committed to even the most ungrateful members of the younger generation, which only increases the respect she receives from other members of the community.

Mrs. Vawse’s domestic role is actually her least emphasized function. So extensive are her contributions to society through her moral and ethical guidance and her work ethic that her position as a grandmother is less important to the community than her other occupations. However, Warner shows that Mrs. Vawse is equally committed to her domestic role as any of her other functions. Mrs. Vawse has the misfortune of being a grandmother to a wayward teenaged granddaughter, Nancy, who is careless and disrespectful. She is constantly losing the family’s cow, which a primary source of sustenance for the pair and she “is mad at granny every day because she won’t go to Thirlwall” (Warner 121). Nancy has little understanding of her grandmother as evidenced in her description of the mountaintop home. Whereas “granny likes it; she will live there,” Nancy is “blessed if I know what for, if it ain’t to plague me” (124). Nancy assumes her grandmother’s actions are intended only to contravene her own wishes to live in the village, and consequently fails to see the personal desires of Mrs. Vawse that transcend any simple desire to thwart her granddaughter’s wishes.

Despite Nancy’s disrespectful treatment of her grandmother, Mrs. Vawse never vacillates in her love for Nancy. She is highly aware of her granddaughter’s impertinent

attitude, but also reconciles herself to it without allowing Nancy to dominate her home. When a snowstorm threatens Mrs. Vawse's visitors, she tells them that Nancy will "not come home if there's a promise of storm," adding, "she often stays out all night" (Warner 193). When her visitors express incredulity over Nancy's disrespectful behavior and virtual abandonment of her grandmother, Mrs. Vawse soothes them, claiming, "I am never alone" and "I have nothing to fear" (193). Acknowledging her granddaughter's faults without directly blaming her or condemning her behavior, Mrs. Vawse proves that she can truthfully acknowledge Nancy's conduct, but she also has faith that time and her own positive example and unmitigated love will reform her granddaughter. She allows others to convey their opinion of Nancy's impropriety without judging their conclusions or disclosing her own opinion of her granddaughter. Because she does not openly ridicule Nancy's behavior, she gives her granddaughter space to choose her actions and ultimately to reform her conduct.

Beyond the judiciousness and love she shows for her granddaughter, Mrs. Vawse represents a dependable source of wisdom and advice for her young friends. Alice Humphreys, the most introspective and thoughtful young woman in Thirlwall, seeks guidance from her when she cannot regulate her own emotions. Proclaiming that she "can't get over" her brother's absence while he is studying for the ministry, Alice seeks "a lesson of quiet contentment" from her mentor (Warner 187). Instead of dismissing Alice's emotions as overly sensitive, Mrs. Vawse comforts her with examples from her own life as well as the Bible. Mrs. Vawse concurs that loss can be painful, such as the deaths of her mistress, sons, and husband were, thereby validating Alice's sentiments.

However, she also finds solace in religion, telling Alice, “They that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing” and “Seek to live nearer to the Lord . . . and he will give you much more than he has taken away” (189). Mrs. Vawse does not pay lip-service to religion; she avers that she has found comfort in her belief in God and is prepared to enter her heavenly home. Rather than expressing impatience in her desire to reach Heaven, Mrs. Vawse professes serenity, stating, “I can wait a little while, and rejoice all the while I am waiting” (189). In the earthly world, then, Mrs. Vawse diligently labors while maintaining a clear, unburdened conscience and serenity as she confronts the troubles of life. Alice observes these qualities and uses them as an exemplar for her own life; she gains fortitude to bear the temporary loss of John during his studies and reassurance that her patience is a pious attribute.

The extent to which Mrs. Vawse is respected throughout Thirwall for her moral and ethical leadership can be seen in Ellen’s final conversation with Mrs. Vawse. After Alice’s death, Ellen receives letters from her parents that Aunt Fortune had withheld from her. These letters indicate that her mother’s dying wish was for her to go live with her mother’s relatives in Scotland. However, Ellen is happily living with the Humphreys and forming a romantic attachment to John. She presents her predicament to Mrs. Vawse, asking her opinion on what action she should take. When Mrs. Vawse advises her to go to Scotland, Ellen initially protests, but Mrs. Vawse advises Ellen, “You must do what is *right*; and you know it cannot be but that it will be the best and happiest for you in the end” (Warner 493). Mrs. Vawse’s lessons in fortitude reveal the proper action, even if Ellen is dismayed at her instruction. However, Ellen accepts the advice because she

trusts Mrs. Vawse's wisdom and respects her position. Moreover, Ellen does not contravene her confidant's counsel because she admires Mrs. Vawse's lived example of resilience despite the adversity she has encountered in her own life. Since Ellen has divulged her dilemma in strictest confidence to Mrs. Vawse, she could potentially ignore her recommendations. However, Ellen has far too much respect for such a capable, intelligent, and contented woman to disregard her advice. In effect, Ellen's reverence for Mrs. Vawse overrides her own desire to remain among friends.

More than a source of wisdom, however, Mrs. Vawse fulfills her side of the social contract through her physical industry and independence. Despite her poverty, she maintains her tidy chalet. Even though the home is comprised of only one room, the floors "were beautifully clean and white, and every thing else in the room in this respect matched . . . dust was nowhere" (Warner 190). When she is not working in her house, she performs various tasks for her neighbors. While she is an "admirable" nurse, she also "goes out tailoring at the farmers' houses; she brings home wool and returns it spun into yarn; she brings home yarn and knits it up into stockings and socks; all sorts of odd jobs. . . she isn't above doing anything" (194). All of these tasks are highly labor intensive, especially for an elderly woman. However, Mrs. Vawse never complains about work and "never forgets her own dignity" (194). Her industriousness allows her to retain her independence, which she highly values, since she refuses to concede to her own granddaughter's pleas to move closer to the village. Despite her advanced age, Mrs. Vawse fiercely guards her autonomy, even if it is gained through hard physical labor. Alice informs Ellen that although Mrs. Vawse "has friends that would not permit her to

earn another sixpence if they could help it . . . she likes better to live as she does” (195). By continuing to work, Mrs. Vawse “becomes master of her fate and subject to no one outside herself,” according to Tompkins (165). Mrs. Vawse says that not only can she “breathe better here than down in the plain,” but that she “feel[s] more free” in her home than in the village (Warner 192, 193). In other words, “autonomy and freedom . . . are the defining features of Mrs. Vawse’s existence” (Tompkins 167). Mrs. Vawse determines that she will not burden anyone, even if, as in the case of her friends, they freely offer their assistance. Only by persevering in her work does Mrs. Vawse feel liberated because she believes that self-sufficiency is part of her social contract with her community. In maintaining her work ethic, she prevents herself from becoming an encumbrance, no matter how welcome it might be, to anyone in Thirwall.

Although she protects her independence, Mrs. Vawse simultaneously relies on the good opinion of her neighbors in order to maintain her lifestyle. These neighbors recognize Mrs. Vawse’s wisdom and industry and return her exemplary actions with their fulfillment of the social contract. Even though she does not accept outright financial charity, Mrs. Vawse is the recipient of employment and various material donations from villagers who respect her industriousness. No one’s gifts are more illustrative of Mrs. Vawse’s revered position in the community than those given by Miss Fortune, who often encourages Alice and Ellen to bring pies, cheeses, meats, and butter to Mrs. Vawse during their visits. Known to her neighbors as a parsimonious woman, Miss Fortune’s rare acts of spontaneous generosity underscore the esteem Mrs. Vawse merits from even the most exacting personalities in the community. Warner later stresses the significance

of Miss Fortune's contributions because she notes that Miss Fortune "very, very seldom was known to take a bit from her own comforts to add to those of another" (338). In fact, such munificence is not limited to Miss Fortune, but the entire neighborhood thinks benevolently of Mrs. Vawse. Alice informs Ellen that "every body respects her; every body likes to gain her good-will; she is known all over the country; and all the country are her friends" (194). In fact, the only person who does not appreciate Mrs. Vawse is her granddaughter Nancy, who is viewed as a social pariah because of her disrespectful behavior. With both sides fulfilling the social contract, the relationship between Mrs. Vawse and her community is harmonious and ideal. Even the obstinate Miss Fortune is softened by Mrs. Vawse's exemplary conduct. Everyone in the community (with the initial exception of Nancy, who later reforms and is accepted by Thirwall's citizens) feels a cohesiveness with Mrs. Vawse. Through her example, we see a very different type of senior than the elderly gentleman of the first chapters, but a no less valid and perfect execution of the social contract. With these two varied illustrations of the efficacy of the social contract, Warner continues to build her case for the acceptance of the aristocratic social model.

While Mrs. Vawse is a model of an independent, intelligent, and energetic elderly woman who easily provides justification for the aristocratic social model, Warner's third example of Ellen's paternal grandmother is a much more difficult case. Warner uses the elderly Mrs. Montgomery to represent the dependence and physical and mental frailty that attends some people in their old age. As a virtually paralyzed and mentally incapacitated senior, Mrs. Montgomery can barely function, much less meet any demands

of the social contract. However, through her support of the aristocratic model, Warner creates a rationale for younger generations' respect of Mrs. Montgomery based on nostalgia and familial love. The first time we see her is when Ellen arrives unannounced at Miss Fortune's farm. Her grandmother, "an old woman," is "sitting by the side of the fire" where Ellen cannot see her face (Warner 99). Whereas both the elderly gentleman in the city and Mrs. Vawse exhibit robust mental faculties, we immediately perceive that Mrs. Montgomery's mind is deteriorating. In fact, Mrs. Montgomery is most likely suffering from some form of dementia<sup>56</sup>. Upon first meeting Ellen, Mrs. Montgomery "looked at her very attentively, but with an expressionless gaze" even though "otherwise her face was calm and pleasant" (101). This failure in recognition prompts Miss Fortune to remind her mother that Ellen is her granddaughter. Not only does the grandmother fail to recall that her son has a child, but she also looks at Ellen "with a half shake of her head" as though she is trying to make a mental connection between Miss Fortune's statement and Ellen's presence (101). Mrs. Montgomery also has difficulty understanding simple concepts, such as when Miss Fortune hosts an apple paring bee to prepare the apple harvest for winter storage. Instead, Mrs. Montgomery believes an actual bee has gotten into the house and asks Ellen, "who's been stung?" (262). Not only is Mrs. Montgomery mentally debilitated, but she is also physically frail and

---

<sup>56</sup> Dementia is a broad medical term that refers to any brain syndrome resulting in problems with memory, orientation, judgment, executive functioning, and communication. Dementia may be caused by a variety of diseases, including Alzheimer's, strokes and other vascular impairments, and Parkinson's. Other, less common causes can include head trauma, Creutzfeldt-Jacob's (also known as mad cow disease), Huntingdon's, HIV/AIDS, Lewy Body, hydrocephalus, Pick's, and Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome. Because Warner lists few direct symptoms of Mrs. Montgomery's illness, she is most likely suffering from dementia brought on by either Alzheimer's or a form of vascular impairment, which are the two most common causes of dementia.

consequently highly dependent upon her daughter. Mrs. Montgomery cannot walk and must be carried around the house. She relies on Miss Fortune and Ellen for even the simplest of tasks, such as fetching items from other locations and reading because her eyesight is failing. Although Mrs. Montgomery is capable of feeding herself, she cannot prepare meals and also needs assistance to dress herself. In every physical and mental sense, she is a burden to her household.

Despite these infirmities that preclude Mrs. Montgomery from upholding her end of the social contract, Warner endows the elderly woman with another redeeming quality – love. Mrs. Montgomery loves her granddaughter and expresses her emotions whenever possible. Although she has trouble recognizing Ellen as her granddaughter, she often demonstrates physical affection for her. Upon their introduction, Mrs. Montgomery asks Ellen for a kiss and “folded her in her arms and kissed her affectionately” (Warner 101). Mrs. Montgomery often hugs and kisses Ellen and even declares she is “a great deal sweeter than any sugar-plums” (245). After awhile, she even defies her daughter’s dislike of Ellen, telling Miss Fortune that Ellen “couldn’t grow handsomer than she was before . . . the sweetest posie in the garden she always was!” (333). Through her demonstrative affection for Ellen, Mrs. Montgomery proves that she has emotional attachments to her family and that it is only her physical and mental afflictions that prevent her from being more actively involved in the domestic sphere.

Because Mrs. Montgomery cannot fulfill her portion of the social contract in the exemplary ways that Mrs. Vawse and the elderly gentleman do, Warner illustrates the dangers of the resulting attitudes that would occur if there was not the safeguard of the

aristocratic social model to protect vulnerable seniors. Warner employs both Miss Fortune and, to a lesser extent, Ellen to show how a failure to respect the aged can negatively impact society through the breakdown of social cohesion and the production of resentment and disgust in younger generations. While Miss Fortune takes physical care of her mother, she gives reader the impression that she does so grudgingly. Mrs. Montgomery's physical needs are met by her daughter – she is fed, kept warm and safe indoors by the fireside, and has no obligation to contribute to the household's maintenance. However, Miss Fortune neither stimulates her mother's intellect through conversation nor exhibits any affection toward her. Brandy Parris notes that Mrs. Montgomery "is largely neglected, shut off from human affection and attention" (40). Miss Fortune also detests her mother's fondness for Ellen, ordering her to "stop that palavering" because "it made her sick" (Warner 134). Miss Fortune at times even openly resents her mother's presence, especially if she makes any request that disrupts the farm's schedule. Even a small request, such as asking her daughter to refill the snuff-box sends Miss Fortune into a tirade, telling her mother, "you'll have to wait" because she "can't be bothered to be running" for her mother (246). Sometimes Miss Fortune's treatment of her mother crosses from verbal aggression into neglect and even physical abuse. When hosting the apple bee, Miss Fortune attempts to exclude her mother by sending her to bed before the guests arrive. Only when Ellen informs her grandmother about the festivities transpiring downstairs, Mrs. Montgomery exclaims, "I oughtn't to ha' been abed! Why ha'n't Fortune told me?" (262). Although Mrs. Montgomery's question remains unanswered by Ellen, the readers can infer that Miss Fortune is deliberately preventing

her mother from joining the celebration. Another time, when she is angry with Ellen and Mr. Van Brunt, Miss Fortune takes out her frustration on her helpless mother, “haul[ing] off [Mrs. Montgomery] to bed . . . with her old mother under her arm” (247). It is through no fault of Mrs. Montgomery’s that she is treated this way. Rather, the onus lies on Miss Fortune, whose “inattention to interpersonal relationships” causes her to neglect and abuse her mother (Parris 47). As a result, Miss Fortune’s continual bitterness has made Mrs. Montgomery afraid of her daughter, because we rarely see her act around Miss Fortune, and Warner informs us that “she seldom was very talkative in the presence of her stern daughter” (177). When Miss Fortune is taking care of her mother’s needs, Mrs. Montgomery responds “with the meekness of habitual submission,” showing that her daughter has control over her that is physical as well as mental and emotional (178).

Although she is not as angry or resentful as Miss Fortune, Ellen, too demonstrates a dislike and an aversion to her grandmother. Ellen is initially wary and uneasy around her grandmother. She “did not like to meet” Mrs. Montgomery’s blank stares and “had no words” to reply when Miss Fortune informs her that the lady who embraces and kisses her is her grandmother (Warner 101). Also, she does not instantly feel a bond with her grandmother, which she does for other elderly members of the community. When Nancy Vawse asks Ellen to accompany her on a walk, Ellen thinks how pleasant it would be to get away from “her aunt Fortune and the old grandmother!” (118). Whereas Ellen has developed a relationship with her aunt as evidenced by her usage of a possessive pronoun to refer to Miss Fortune, Ellen does not yet feel emotionally connected to her grandmother because she does not use a possessive pronoun to refer to her. Ellen

attempts to avoid her grandmother as much as possible by “never [finding] herself alone with her if she could help it” (134). When she must be in her grandmother’s presence, she “shr[inks] . . . from her fond caresses” (134). Ellen is conscious of the emotional, physical, and financial burden that Mrs. Montgomery creates for her daughter. Ellen is also required to watch over her grandmother and cater to her needs throughout the day. She feels disconnected from Mrs. Montgomery and attempts to avoid her whenever possible, sometimes leaving her alone for hours while Miss Fortune is occupied with other concerns on the farm.

If Miss Fortune’s and Ellen’s initial reactions to Mrs. Montgomery were the only responses that readers observed, Warner’s avocation of the aristocratic model would collapse. However, other characters respond differently to Mrs. Montgomery, not only indicating that Miss Fortune’s and Ellen’s actions are inappropriate, but also showing what the proper response should be. By illustrating positive reactions to Mrs. Montgomery, Warner shows that the grandmother, feeble as she is, is deserving of respect from younger generations. Ellen’s first inkling that other people find her treatment of her grandmother disrespectful comes from Alice. Although Alice does not initially directly address Ellen’s improper behavior towards her grandmother, Ellen observes Alice’s ease and attention towards Mrs. Montgomery whenever she visits the farm. Ellen sees that her grandmother “looked remarkably pleased” when Alice would chat with her (Warner 182). We even see Mrs. Montgomery comment on her daughter’s determined and rigid behavior when speaking with Alice, something she never does when alone with Miss Fortune. Eventually, Alice speaks to Ellen about her unsuitable

behavior, asking Ellen, “Can you do nothing to cheer her life in her old age and helplessness? Can’t you find some way of giving her pleasure? Some way of amusing a long tedious hour now and then?” (241). Through these questions, Alice shows Ellen what proper behavior she should exhibit towards her grandmother. Alice’s appeal also implies a nostalgic view of Mrs. Montgomery because she points out that the elderly woman needs cheer, which she presumably had when she was younger. Once reproved by Alice, Ellen must admit “in her inmost heart she knew this was a duty she shrank from” (241).

However, Ellen grows to respect her grandmother, not merely because it is her duty to abide by the generational social contract, but also because she recognizes her grandmother’s love, which binds the two females closer together, resulting in a harmonious domestic bond. After her discussion with Alice, Ellen struggles inwardly over her treatment of her grandmother. At first, she begins to treat her grandmother kindly only out of a sense of duty. With the thought, “a charge to keep I have,” Ellen offers to read to her grandmother rather than play outside (Warner 245). While engaged in reading aloud, Ellen realizes the pleasure her kindness brings to her grandmother and her heart begins to soften towards her. When she finishes reading, she willingly kisses her grandmother “for the first time in her life,” showing that she has already moved beyond a sense of duty and is acting out of respect and familial love (245). Ellen admits that her grandmother has been lonely and Ellen has been remiss in her brusqueness, understanding that she has been “wrong” to “let her alone all this while” (245). Warner notes this change in Ellen, claiming, “with the beginning of kind offices to her poor old

parent, kind feeling had sprung up fast; instead of disliking and shunning she had begun to love her” (246). This affection continues to develop until Ellen leaves Thirlwall for Scotland. By the time Ellen bids farewell to the village, she has developed sensitivity and empathy towards her grandmother’s position. She goes beyond Miss Fortune’s simple physical provisions for her mother to establish a strong emotional relationship between herself and her grandmother in a heartfelt execution of the social contract. And, while Ellen achieves a sense of satisfaction from seeing her grandmother become emotionally fulfilled, Mrs. Montgomery regains a feeling of autonomy and, although she will never gain the independence of a Mrs. Vawse, she can at least begin to speak freely to her own daughter.<sup>57</sup> By learning to respect and love her grandmother, Ellen builds a close bond to her, which is emotionally rewarding for Ellen because she learns to enjoy her grandmother’s affection. Mrs. Montgomery also benefits from this attachment because she feels less marginalized and becomes an active participant in her household. In this way, a harmonious, mutually beneficial family unit is created that profits both generations.

Like Ellen, Miss Fortune’s disrespectful behavior towards her mother is noted by the community and she is censured for her attitude, although much more severely than Ellen is. Because Ellen is young and is still learning about the intergenerational social contract, her behavior is largely excused and the occasion becomes a teachable moment for her. However, Miss Fortune, as an adult, should have explicit understanding of the social contract and should be giving her mother respect. Her negative attitude is often

---

<sup>57</sup> In Mrs. Montgomery’s final scene, she comments to her daughter and Mr. Van Brunt on the lack of community news that currently reaches her, stating, “There ain’t as much news as there used to be when I was young . . . ’seems to me I don’t hear nothing now-a-days” (380).

noted by Mr. Van Brunt and later, Ellen who disapprove of such rough, offensive, and sometimes violent treatment towards such a feeble elderly woman and shun such conduct themselves. Even though no one directly confronts Miss Fortune about her behavior, those familiar with the household roundly condemn her conduct and consequently express lower esteem for her than they otherwise would had she fulfilled her portion of the social contract. With the two characters who initially fail to respect Mrs. Montgomery earning the community's criticism, Warner makes the case that all elderly members of society are deserving of regard. Ellen's transformation from her initial repulsion to her deep emotional attachment to her grandmother only furthers Warner's point that an aristocratic social model is mutually beneficial for all generations. Moreover, this system protects the elderly who are vulnerable to marginalization, neglect, and even abuse because the community supervises the treatment of the aged and can intervene when they see that the social contract is not being upheld by younger generations. Through this communal interest in the elderly's safety, society grows even more cohesive, proving that every citizen can benefit from the aristocratic social model.

Warner's final aged individual is Mrs. Lindsay, Ellen's Scottish maternal grandmother. Unlike Ellen's paternal grandmother, Mrs. Lindsay is a woman of great wealth and power. She is reported to be "not very old . . . not above sixty, or sixty-five" by a family friend (Warner 499). More telling than chronological age, however, is her health and mental capacity, which the same friend describes as "hale and alert as at forty" (499). Her appearance is well-preserved, without "a grey hair on her head" (499). In short, she is "a very fine old lady" and, if contrasted with Mrs. Vawse who is "a fine

wreck” and Mrs. Montgomery who is dependent upon her daughter, Mrs. Lindsay appears to be the most materially comfortable of the elderly women in the novel (499). Like Mrs. Montgomery, Mrs. Lindsay is also culpable for her failure to completely fulfill the social contract, but for vastly different reasons. While Mrs. Montgomery is physically and mentally unqualified to uphold her side of the agreement, Mrs. Lindsay’s selfish personality makes her a negative moral role model for Ellen. Regardless of this inadequacy, Ellen still finds a way to honor her grandmother through familial devotion and a nostalgic connection to her grandmother through memories of her deceased mother. By creating this positive relationship between grandmother and granddaughter out of an incompletely filled social contract, Warner again contends that the aristocratic model is the most beneficial organizational structure for society because all generations profit from a respect for the elderly.

Mrs. Lindsay’s attitude toward Ellen immediately indicates that she will not be the most positive moral and ethical mentor. Although Mrs. Lindsay instantly shows affection for Ellen – her “arms . . . folded [Ellen] as fondly and closely as ever those of her own mother had done” – she also exhibits highly possessive tendencies (Warner 502). While Ellen is overjoyed to find a grandmother who so openly loves her without reservation, she is also aware at the price her grandmother’s love exacts. During this extended embrace, Ellen begins “to know, as if by instinct, what kind of a person her grandmother was. The clasp of arms that were about her said as plainly as possible ‘I will never let you go!’” (502). In her grandmother’s care, Ellen becomes a sort of human doll. Like Mrs. Montgomery, Mrs. Lindsay clearly loves her granddaughter, as

evidenced by the great care she takes with her education, her appearance, and her health. However, this love is tempered by Mrs. Lindsay's ownership of her granddaughter. As Brigitte Finkbeiner explains, her "grandmother and uncle are not interested in Ellen as a human being; they want to possess a pretty plaything that they can form according to their own tastes" (103). Although this control starts innocuously when Ellen first arrives and her grandmother insists she stay with her for the day, this desire to continuously have Ellen accompany her increases to the point where Ellen is "confirmed in the feeling that they would do with her and make of her precisely what they pleased, without the smallest regard to her fancy" (Warner 504). Mrs. Lindsay's principal failure in the execution of the social contract occurs when she commands Ellen to cease reading her Bible in order to spend extra time with her in the morning. By preventing Ellen from reading her Bible, Mrs. Lindsay has crossed the boundary from caring grandmother to negative moral influence. Mrs. Lindsay insists Ellen is "spoiling herself for life and the world by a set of dull religious notions that were utterly unfit for a child" (542-43). Although her son attempts to intercede on Ellen's behalf, Mrs. Lindsay flatly refuses to rescind her orders.

Like her experience with her paternal grandmother, Ellen struggles with her feelings for her maternal grandmother. By this point in the novel, Ellen understands the intergenerational social contract, so she attempts to show affection for her grandmother because she knows it is her duty. Furthermore, Ellen desires to develop a meaningful relationship with her maternal grandmother because she has lost her own mother and her grandmother is a living link to the parent she has lost. By building an affectional bond with her maternal grandmother, Ellen can honor the memory of her deceased mother.

However, she also recognizes that Mrs. Lindsay is failing to uphold her portion of the social contract by choice whereas Mrs. Montgomery was hampered by her physical and mental limitations. Ellen finds a solution to this quandary by striking a compromise within the confines of the social contract. Ellen agrees to obey her grandmother's orders as long as they do not conflict any moral or ethical standards, but if Mrs. Lindsay's commands do contravene any of these principles, Ellen is *required* to defy these decrees because her grandmother has breached the social contract so Ellen is no longer bound to it. By showing her grandmother that she is willing to honor her wishes so long as they provide a virtuous example, Ellen regains her privilege of reading her Bible. Moreover, through her own pattern of respect, love, and obedience, Ellen leads Mrs. Lindsay into compliance with the social contract.<sup>58</sup> By eventually fulfilling her role as moral and ethical guide, Mrs. Lindsay completes her obligations within the social contract and allows Ellen the space to follow her own conscience and conform more fully to the accord as well. As a result, Ellen and her grandmother develop a stronger love for one another because they feel they are fulfilling their social roles. Once again, Warner has taken a complicated intergenerational relationship and demonstrated how the implementation of the social contract leads to stronger, more cohesive communal and familial bonds. Here too, the aristocratic social model has succeeded by preventing Mrs. Lindsay from becoming an overbearing tyrant and Ellen from sinking into resentment. Ellen's willingness to respect her grandmother has redeemed Mrs. Lindsay from her imperious behavior, and consequently, both grandmother and granddaughter establish a

---

<sup>58</sup> Brandy Parris makes the case that "Ellen continually undermines the Lindsays' reconstruction of her by following their rules as closely as she can without sacrificing her own disposition" (59).

more loving and honest relationship with one another where both learn morality and respect from each other.

Through these elderly characters, we see Warner's endorsement of the aristocratic social model develop. Warner creates the foundation for this social model on the social contract, whose two criteria for the elderly are that they should cultivate positive emotional bonds with their families and that they should contribute to their communities through either physical labor or moral and ethical leadership. In turn, the younger generations should exhibit respect for the aged and should provide emotional and/or material aid to any senior who requires assistance. By creating a variety of situations, some of which are difficult, where this social contract can be enacted, Warner establishes her argument for the aristocratic social model. All of the elderly in the novel have their physical needs met; no one is allowed to go homeless or hungry. Furthermore, all of the aged earn respect from one or more members of the community, which allows them to build meaningful affective bonds with younger generations. All of the seniors, as a result, have a feeling of self-worth. In turn, the younger generations gain moral and ethical guidance from the older population. In many cases, they are also physically protected and have their emotional and/or material needs met by the elderly when they are in a disadvantaged position. Consequently, both the aged and the young profit from this mutually beneficial social model. All of the members of society not only have their needs met, but they emotionally thrive in this utopian version of the aristocratic social model.

Warner's vision was well-received by the public who were nostalgic for the stability that Warner's model conjured. Contemporary reviewers roundly praised the novel for its descriptions, characterizations, and moral lessons. Warner's characters, including the senior ones, were not only considered realistic, but they were also regarded as individuals representing a wide variety of behaviors that could be successfully integrated into social contracts. The *New York Times* claimed, "every one will say these and those characters are full of truth and nature" (Nemo 1). *Littell's Living Age's* critic noted that the novel "display[s] a very considerable knowledge of the world and its many-phased people" ("New Books" 95). And the *Christian Review* lauded the "portray[al of] the purest and noblest of characters" ("Art. X." 137). Critics appreciated the realistic elements that Warner included in her characterizations as well as the lessons that readers could learn from the interactions between her characters, not least of which was the respect that younger generations should show for the elderly in the social contract. Invariably, reviewers endorsed the book as a text replete with moral lessons for young readers. The *Albion* stated the novel was "calculated to be of service to children; but which may be read with profit by those of older growth" ("Notices of New Works" 621). The *Zion's Herald's* critic concurred, averring, "let parents buy it for their daughters, and young men for their sisters, not failing to read it for themselves" (B.P. 138). Children, adolescents, and even adults could learn significant lessons from the book according to reviewers. This universal praise and sanctioning of the novel indicates the approval Warner's avocation of the aristocratic social model received from her readership. Her instruction of communal respect for the aged met with a responsive

audience who accepted and encouraged her viewpoint, which was vastly different than the reception Fanny Fern's perspective would receive only three years later.

### **Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, or, I Must Have Been Hatched Because Those Can't Be My Parents**

In his article, "Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature," Richard Freedman claims, "one must search hard in the nineteenth century to find anything approaching the eighteenth century's savagery – or moral realism, depending on how one looks at it – toward aging and the aged" (57). While Warner's promotion of the aristocratic social model and benevolent view of the elderly appears to uphold Freedman's sanguine assertion, Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* challenges this assumption, clearly presenting a bevy of badly-behaving elders. Although Warner argues that an effective social contract will lead to more cohesive bonds between the generations that will become the foundation of the aristocratic social model, Fanny Fern rebels against the utopian quality of Warner's depiction of intergenerational relationships. Fern uses the same criteria as Warner to develop her social contract; she too, believes that the elderly should be evaluated on their ability to develop positive emotional bonds within their families and that they should be productive members of their communities through either their economic contributions or their moral and ethical guidance. Likewise, younger generations should provide the aged with respect, and/or physical and emotional support. However, where Fern differs from Warner is that she believes the elderly should be judged on their ability to fulfill this social contract without the ameliorating effects of nostalgia. Whereas Warner makes allowances for the aged who could not comply with

the social contract because of physical or mental health issues, Fern makes no such considerations. Fern demands that the elderly should be judged based on their merits just like every other age cohort is appraised. Also, while Warner permits senescent individuals additional opportunities to come into compliance with the social contract, Fern believes that once an elderly person has demonstrated that he/she is noncompliant with the agreement, that person should be excluded from society and shunned. By being willing to marginalize seniors for their failure to execute the social contract, Fern supports the democratic social model, claiming that all individuals should be judged equally on their behavior and those who fall short of their social obligations, whether young or old, should be rejected by the rest of society. Fern's pragmatic attitude toward the elderly was not only vastly different than Warner's idealistic embrace of all seniors, but it also unsettled many critics because it forced them to reevaluate a society that had previously prided itself on its magnanimous treatment of senescence. Fern challenges Warner's aristocratic system on the domestic front in *Ruth Hall*, demonstrating that the elderly's failure to uphold the social contract in private has very real consequences in the public sphere.

Lest we think that Fern was simply gerontophobic, we need to briefly look at some of her other writings on the elderly. What we discover from these sketches and newspaper articles is that Fern presented numerous examples of senescent individuals who fulfilled the social contract throughout her career. In the sketch, "Fern Glen" from *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (1853), an elderly bachelor named Peter adopts a young female orphan because she is unloved and neglected. She becomes so attached to

the kind man that she becomes his caretaker in her adult years and the pair develops a deep, emotional, parent-child bond:

It was she who placed the arm-chair under the old elm, when the sun was declining. It was her round arm which supported the trembling limbs of the aged man to his accustomed resting-place. It was she who smoothed the silver locks on his aged temples. It was her voice, whose sweet carol woke him to the enjoyment of another happy day. It was her hand which held the cooling draught to his lips; and there was not a moment when his eye did not linger with blessing upon the light figure that flitted like an angel visitant before him. (280)

The paternal love that Peter demonstrates for the orphaned girl is returned through her officious care as he becomes more frail in his senescence. This profound emotional connection is emphasized when the girl only acquiesces to a marriage proposal after Peter agrees to live with her and her husband. In essence, Fern illustrates the ideal intergenerational social contract in “Fern Glen” – an affectionate and compassionate elder who has emotional, financially, and physically provided for a child is recompensed in the last years of his life by an appreciative and loving adult who understands that her maturity and education has been fostered by the parental figure for whom she now provides.

After the publication of *Ruth Hall*, Fern would return to depictions of the elderly who fulfilled the social contract. For example, in her August 15, 1857 column for *The New York Ledger*, “Mother’s Room,” Fern describes the joy mothers feel taking their

children to see their grandmother with her “wrinkled face, beautiful with its halo of goodness” (Warren *Fanny* 71). In this sketch, the grandmother is designated as the family’s matriarch to whom younger generations make a pilgrimage to not only pay homage to their kind and affectionate ancestor, but also to bask in the enjoyment of the grandmother’s peaceful and pleasant home. Fern would also later describe her own experiences as a grandmother in *Folly as it Flies* (1868). In one of the columns Fern selected for the collection, she describes herself as a grandmother of fifty-four who was raising her granddaughter Ethel after the death of her daughter Grace in 1862. In the article, Fern discusses her indulgence of Ethel and the desire to make life less difficult for her out of love and concern for the child’s innocence. According to her sketch, Fern fulfilled her social obligations as the older generation in her later years. All of these examples support Fern’s avocation of a democratic social model because all of the elderly are successfully upholding their side of the social contract. Consequently, they have been judged to be in compliance with the social contract and therefore deserving of respect and/or physical and emotional assistance from younger generations.

Despite these successful images of intergenerational relationships, Fern castigates her own senior family members in *Ruth Hall* for their failure to uphold the social contract. Published in 1854, Fern’s first novel is a semi-autobiographical account of her first marriage and subsequent widowhood, followed by her determination to support herself and her children by becoming a columnist for Boston and New York newspapers. By all accounts, Fern’s relationships with her father and her first husband’s in-laws were acrimonious and Fern transfers these feelings onto the novel’s primary character, Ruth

Hall, *né* Ellet.<sup>59</sup> Unlike Warner, who even casts the possessive and overbearing Mrs. Lindsay as a woman worthy of Ellen's respect and love, Fern portrays her father and her in-laws in breach of the social contract based on their treatment of her and their granddaughters. Both Ruth's aging father and in-laws become the villains of the novel when they refuse to financially support the young widow and expect her to find unobtrusive employment.<sup>60</sup> After Ruth unsuccessfully attempts to gain employment as a seamstress and a teacher, which neither Mr. Ellet nor the elder Halls encourage, Ruth relies solely upon her own ingenuity and determination to earn money as a writer for daily newspapers. Through her diligence, Ruth becomes a popular and financial success and subsequently severs communication with her father and the Halls, citing their previous contravention of the social contract as just cause for discontinuing her relationship with them. Ruth treats her aging family members in the same manner with which she approaches her brother, Hyacinth and her cousins who have all refused to assist her in her poverty. Ruth fails to draw any distinction between the two generations because she believes that the older generation has as much responsibility to act morally as

---

<sup>59</sup> According to Mary Kelley, "The enmity between Parton [Fern] and her in-laws was intense, to say the least: the mother-in-law, Mary Eldredge, not only omitted Parton from her will but further stipulated that a portrait of her deceased son, Charles, be given to someone other than Parton" (154). Joyce W. Warren notes Fern's "father-in-law, Hezekiah Eldredge, threatened to rewrite his will, leaving all of his money to charity rather than to his two granddaughters unless she agreed to give up the children to him and his wife. She refused, and the will was signed in July 1851" ("Fanny Fern" 124). See Warren's biography, *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman* for a more detailed account of the struggles between the Eldredges and Fern.

<sup>60</sup> The Halls and Mr. Ellet are far from the first elderly characters to be severely portrayed. One possible antecedent for Fern's characters may be Jonathan Swift's Struldbrugs from *Gulliver's Travels*. According to Gerald J. Gruman, "the Struldbrugs are described as vain, opinionated, covetous and garrulous; but Swift pressed beyond classical restraints and dwelled on the overriding passion of these unfortunate creatures eaten up by burning envy and impotent desire" (372).

the younger one and refuses to excuse them on the basis of age, thereby endorsing the democratic social model.

Ruth's aversion seniors who fail to uphold the social contract begins in her own home. Instead of being an engaged parent and moral guide, Mr. Ellet barely communicates with his daughter, establishing only a distant relationship with Ruth during her childhood. While Ruth is at boarding school, Mr. Ellet never visits her and only sends her a few letters, their contents solely concerned with the financial matters of her education. In short, Mr. Ellet expresses little interest in Ruth as a person; he reduces her existence to the dollars and cents she costs him during her upbringing. Linda Huf adeptly appraises Mr. Ellet as a "cankered hypocrite who loves his dollars more than his daughter" (21).<sup>61</sup> Mr. Ellet's sole ties to his daughter are indeed economic ones. As Nicole Willey denotes, Mr. Ellet "is *not* a provider of love or even affection for Ruth at any point in her life" (124). Mr. Ellet later confirms his lack of familial bond with his daughter by explaining to the Halls that "when a man marries his children, they ought to be considered off his hands" (Fern *Ruth* 84). Once Ruth is married, Mr. Ellet no longer feels financially burdened by her existence. Since the pair failed to create an emotional bond, Mr. Ellet thus considers himself liberated from any further obligations towards his daughter whether they are familial, economic, emotional, psychological, or physical commitments. He has no desire to fulfill the social contact with his daughter, preferring to think that he is independent and has no family connection to Ruth.

---

<sup>61</sup> In reality, Mr. Willis was apparently so parsimonious that Fern remembered "during her mother's final illness . . . her father refused to spend the money for the medicine the doctor had prescribed" (Warren *Fanny* 77).

Mr. Ellet's inability to articulate any familial feelings extends to his granddaughters, Katy and Nettie, as well, which is a behavior that Fern condemns more strongly than even his treatment of Ruth. Besides refusing to grant Ruth more than a pittance of a stipend to support her family after her husband Harry Hall's untimely death, he encourages Ruth to give the children to her in-laws because "they will have a good home, *enough* to eat, drink, and wear" (Fern *Ruth* 80). Although Ruth clearly understands that the Halls will teach the girls "to disrespect their mother" and voices her opposition to her father, Mr. Ellet brushes away her ethical concerns, viewing them as "a trifle" compared to the material cost of the children's upbringing (80). In fact, Mr. Ellet only agrees to an allowance for Ruth and his granddaughters because he wants to preserve his reputation in the church. In Willey's estimation, Mr. Ellet's "most damning" trait is that he subsequently "lives in relative comfort and luxury while his own child is close to starvation," which is why Ruth is justified in her rejection of her father after she has achieved financial independence (124).<sup>62</sup> The granddaughters deduce Mr. Ellet's displeasure with their mother from his demeanor toward them, which is consistently distant. Furthermore, Katy and Nettie fear visits to their grandfather, who is brusque and bullies the children because he resents having to financially support them after their father's death. Clearly, Mr. Ellet has no desire to build an emotional attachment with his granddaughters or be a moral or ethical guide for them, which he should have done in order to fulfill his portion of the social contract, especially when they were emotionally vulnerable and left with no male familial influence in their lives after Harry's death.

---

<sup>62</sup> Linda Huf concurs with Willey, claiming "Ruth's father shows himself the hardest of the hard, the meanest of the mean" when he refuses to provide for his widowed daughter and grandchildren (22).

Ruth begins her relationship with her father trying to uphold her side of the social contract, but she finally concludes that her father has no interest in fulfilling his portion so she is no longer bound by its constraints. As a girl, Ruth attempts to please her father with her deportment and intellectual development. However, Mr. Ellet is so detached that Ruth does not even know if he is “satisfied with her physical and mental progress” (Fern *Ruth* 7-8). Shortly after leaving school, Fern prepares for her marriage. At this time, she reflects upon her childhood and realizes, “I never had [a father],” indicating the entire lack of an affectionate or even an emotional relationship between Mr. Ellet and Ruth (13). Although Ruth is not angered by this realization, she determines to emotionally insulate herself from her father by cultivating the type of positive relationship with her husband and children based on the one that she should have had with her parent. Fern asserts that Ruth is entitled to reject her father because he has breached the social contract despite Ruth’s attempts to faithfully execute her role. Also, Ruth, through her reflection, has assessed her father’s behavior and found that he has not honored any of the social contract provisions for nearly two decades. Therefore, he deserves to be marginalized because he has clearly demonstrated his disregard for the pact. Fern asserts that the democratic social model is beneficial because it not only allows Ruth to protect herself from her father’s pitiless demeanor, but it also justly removes Mr. Ellet from an influential social position, which he does not deserve because of his flouting of the social contract.

Like Mr. Ellet, Dr. Hall is equally callous to his son Harry and his daughter-in-law Ruth. Since Harry also experiences difficulties with his parents, Fern demonstrates

that the Halls have also violated the social contract. Their domestic circle becomes a place of abuse – mental, emotional, and, at times, physical. Dr. Hall fails in his duty to be a moral and ethical guide for his son and daughter-in-law. He continually interferes with Harry's marital situation, not out of a desire to assist the young couple, but rather an egotistical urge to prove his own intellectual superiority. When Harry and Ruth move to the countryside after spending a year in the Halls' residence, the elder Halls follow the couple out of the city and Dr. Hall proceeds to meddle with the maintenance of Harry's and Ruth's cottage and property. Dr. Hall discounts his son's decisions and even removes his hedges "by the roots and thr[ows] them over the fence" because he assumes that he is more knowledgeable in horticultural matters (*Fern Ruth* 36). Granted, Dr. Hall "began life on a farm" and had "handl[ed] ploughs, hoes, and harrows" before becoming a country doctor (16). However, it is not Dr. Hall's knowledge that irritates Harry; rather, it is his father's presumption of authority and outright uninvited interference that galls Harry. Although he "was one of the most dutiful of sons, and never treated his father with disrespect," Harry wants to be "master" in his own home, which Dr. Hall's repeated intrusions impede (38). The doctor's intellectual arrogance also contributes to his first granddaughter's death because he dismisses his son's concerns and refuses to attend the child's sickbed until she can no longer be saved. Fern considers Dr. Hall's negligence a crime because it betrays his own family; the life of an innocent child is lost because of one old man's pride and superiority.

Fern also exposes Dr. Hall's other breach of the social contract – his failure to develop positive emotional bonds with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. Like

Mr. Ellet, he thinks of his family members solely in economic terms. However, his parsimoniousness extends to even minute items in his household accounts. He “count[s] the wood-pile, to see how many sticks the cook had taken to make the pot boil for dinner” and “narrate[s] the market prices he paid for each article of food upon the table” (Fern *Ruth* 17, 18). He is also extremely selfish, showing “an unpaternal malevolence” towards the members of his family (Huf 22). While his granddaughter Daisy suffers on her deathbed, Dr. Hall only thinks, “I shall be glad if I don’t get a sick spell myself . . . coming out this freezing night” (Fern *Ruth* 46). He is incapable of sympathizing with members of his family. As Ruth mourns the loss of Daisy, Dr. Hall considers his own reaction, claiming, “I’ve been through everything, and just look at me” (51). He acts equally as callously at Harry’s deathbed, “pompously walking round the bed,” determined to “tell him that his hours are numbered” (63). Willey dismisses Dr. Hall as a man who “never grieves, caring *always* more about his own view and reputation than even about the death of his offspring” (127). Because Dr. Hall “has a well defined social and moral responsibility to protect Ruth” and his grandchildren “in the domestic model” of the era according to Jennifer Larson, his unwillingness to provide for Ruth and her daughters after Harry’s death is yet another sign of his narcissism and failure to meet his obligations to the social contract (544).

Despite Mr. Ellet’s and Dr. Hall’s contravention of their social duties, Fern makes her most significant argument for the democratic model through her illustration of Mrs. Hall. She is a “sexagenarian” who is introduced to the audience complaining about her son’s marriage to Ruth (Fern *Ruth* 149). According to Fern, Mrs. Hall is guilty of

breaching the social contract in the same manner as her husband and Mr. Ellet, but her violations are even more pronounced and deliberate than her spouse's and Mr. Ellet's are. Whereas Dr. Hall is merely thoughtless at times, Mrs. Hall is perpetually scheming to cause her daughter-in-law and granddaughters pain. Mrs. Hall fails to either develop emotional attachments or to become a moral and ethical leader for the other female Halls. Rather than embracing her new daughter-in-law as a valuable addition to the household or even being pleased that her son has found a compatible spouse, Mrs. Hall supposes that Ruth is "proud" and "a well-dressed doll," while Mrs. Hall "shall be laid on the shelf now" and "be made perfectly sick with their billing and cooing" (10). Mrs. Hall is wracked with jealousy over her son's attention to his wife and resents Ruth's presence in their home. Even when Ruth gives birth to her first daughter, Daisy, who is also the Hall's first grandchild, Mrs. Hall merely views Daisy "as another barrier between herself and Harry, and another tie to cement his already strong attachment for Ruth" (19). Like her husband, Mrs. Hall entirely lacks any familial feeling towards her daughter-in-law and her granddaughters, later informing Ruth that Daisy "is quite a plain child" while Ruth is still attempting to recover from Daisy's difficult labor (22). And, after Daisy has died from croup as a toddler, Mrs. Hall takes the liberty to tell her neighbors that "It is *my* opinion the child's death was owing to the thriftlessness of the mother. I don't mourn for it, because I believe the poor thing is better off" (50). Mrs. Hall can barely contain her distaste for Daisy, and she revels in her ability to disparage Ruth.<sup>63</sup> Fern clearly

---

<sup>63</sup> Willey notes, "Mrs. Hall is unable to show anyone, even her son or her grandchildren, affection," although she notes that Mrs. Hall's attitude may be partially determined by her husband's domineering demeanor (133). However, Ruth's rejection of Mrs. Hall is ultimately established based on the fact that Mrs. Hall either cannot or will not be affectionate towards anyone.

establishes that this behavior from Mrs. Hall is intentional throughout her association with Ruth, by revealing Mrs. Hall's recognition of Ruth's intelligence; she tells her husband "That girl is no fool, doctor. She knows very well what she is about: but diamond cut diamond, *I say*" (27).

Not only does Mrs. Hall emotionally torment her daughter-in-law, but she also persecutes her granddaughters. After the Halls obtain Katy from Ruth under false pretenses of providing her a healthier situation in the countryside, Mrs. Hall proceeds to mentally and emotionally abuse Katy by commencing a campaign against Katy's love and respect for her mother.<sup>64</sup> Mrs. Hall's dislike of her granddaughter is evidenced by her attempt to force Katy into the flooded basement to retrieve several cured hams. Initially, Mrs. Hall asks her new servant to rescue the hams, but the servant resists. Once the servant asserts her right to dictate her working conditions, Mrs. Hall turns to her granddaughter, who has no independent rights like the servant by virtue of her position as a dependent upon Mrs. Hall. Even though Katy declares that she is "*so afraid*" and pleads, "oh, *don't* make me go down in that dark place, grandma," Mrs. Hall refuses to acknowledge to her granddaughter's fears (*Fern Ruth* 237). In fact, Mrs. Hall physically attempts to force Katy into the cellar, claiming, "don't you belong to me, I'd like to know? And can't I do with you as I like?" (237). Indeed, Mrs. Hall exercises absolute control over Katy by pushing her onto the basement steps and declaring her possession of her granddaughter. The scene is only resolved the timely arrival of Ruth to rescue and reclaim her daughter.

---

<sup>64</sup> Mrs. Hall informs her husband that "the best way to get the child will be to ask her here on a visit, and say we want to cure her up a little with country air. You understand? That will throw dust in Ruth's eyes and then we will take our own time about lettering her go back you know" (*Fern Ruth* 149).

At this juncture, it may appear that Mrs. Hall's treatment of Katy is little different than Mrs. Lindsay's conduct towards Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World*. However, Mrs. Lindsay fulfills half of the social contract; she loves Ellen, but she is not a positive moral or ethical guide because of her possessiveness. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hall has neither love for her granddaughters nor desire to become a moral and ethical role model for the younger generation. It is Mrs. Hall's deliberate decision to neglect both components of the social contract for which Fern judges her and finds her unworthy of respect. Mrs. Hall informs her husband that she is "determined Ruth shan't have [Katy and Nettie], if they fret me to fiddling-strings" (Fern *Ruth* 78). Mrs. Hall cuts Katy's "foolish dangling curls" because Ruth liked them and informs Katy that "it makes no difference what your mother thinks or says about anything" and that both Katy and her mother are "full of faults" (177). Although Mrs. Lindsay initially presented herself as a negative role model when she restricted Ellen's Bible study, she was able to change her attitude when she discovered that fulfilling the social contract would bring both her and Ellen into the close emotional relationship that she desired. Instead, Mrs. Hall enjoys tormenting Katy, even "look[ing] on with a malicious smile" as she burns Katy's shorn curls (178). Katy later reveals the extent to which her grandmother abused her, saying "she was a *dreadful* grandmother" because she

took away a little kitty because I loved it, and burned up a storybook mamma brought me, and tore up a letter which mamma printed in big capitals on a pieces of paper for me to read when I was lonesome, and she wouldn't let me feed the little snowbirds when they came shivering round

the door; and she made me eat turnips when she made me sick . . . She tried to make me stop loving mother . . . and then she said that very likely mamma would go off somewhere without letting me know anything about it, and never see me again. And she always said such things just as I was going to bed. (253)

Katy's simple, honest recounting of her grandmother's conduct displays Mrs. Hall's systematic pattern of abuse intended to alienate Katy from Ruth. However, Mrs. Hall does not attempt to build an emotional bond with Katy either, but would prefer to destroy all of Katy's affectional relationships rather than allow her to have any of which Mrs. Hall would disapprove. Mrs. Hall's motivation is purely selfish as she inflicts physical, emotional, and mental abuse on Katy, which proves Ruth's argument for the democratic social model because an elderly woman who is this vicious is utterly undeserving of respect.

In order to convince her audience that the democratic social model is equitable and beneficial for all generations, Fern personifies the social model debate from the younger generation's perspective in Katy's and Nettie's responses to their grandmother's treatment. While Katy represents the aristocratic social model, Nettie symbolizes the democratic social model. After Ruth rescues Katy from her confinement at the Halls' residence, the two girls discuss Mrs. Hall's treatment of Katy. When Nettie notices a "great, big mark" on Katy's arm and asks her how she obtained it, Katy replies that her grandmother caused it when "she seized me by the arm, and set me down, oh, *so* hard, on a chair" (Fern *Ruth* 245). Katy explains the abuses she has received from Mrs. Hall –

mental, emotional, and physical. Despite her grandmother's cruelty and flagrant breach of the social contract, however, Katy still tries to enact her side of the agreement because she believes that the elderly deserve respect and love, as justified by the aristocratic social model. Although Katy admits that she obeyed her grandmother's orders out of fear, telling Nettie that "she would have killed me," Katy also says, "I suppose we must *forgive* her" (246). Aware that Mrs. Hall's behavior was unseemly for a grandmother, Katy also believes that it is her responsibility to the social contract to pardon her grandmother's conduct. Nettie, however, only sees the viciousness of Mrs. Hall's treatment of her sister and desires physical revenge. She confesses that she "*must* do something to [Mrs. Hall]" in order to avenge her sister's suffering and, when Ruth intervenes and asks Nettie what she is saying, admits, "I wanted to cut grandma's head off" (246). Nettie's response is an extreme version of the democratic model because she does not merely want to marginalize her grandmother, but she wants to cause her the same type of physical, emotional, and mental pain that her sister has experienced.

Ruth's response to her children's discussion represents a more moderate version of the democratic social model, which is the form that Fern advocates in the novel.

Addressing both daughters, Ruth explains:

That is not right Nettie . . . you grandmother is an unhappy, miserable old woman. She has punished herself worse than anybody else could punish her. She is more miserable than ever now because I have earned money to support you and Katy. She *might* have made us all love her, and help to make her old age cheerful; but now, unless she repents, she will live

miserably, and die forsaken, for nobody can love her with such a temper.

This is a dreadful old age. (Fern *Ruth* 246)

Ruth asserts that it is Mrs. Hall's lack of affection and desire to be a role model for her daughter-in-law and granddaughters that has resulted in her alienation. Ruth explains that although she was willing to respect and love her mother-in-law as directed by the social contract, she has withdrawn any affection and attention as a result of Mrs. Hall's breach of the pact. Instead, Ruth intends to detach herself from her mother-in-law, which, in Fern's estimation, is the worst punishment possible, but the one that is the most equitable, for the elderly woman. Ruth's decision conveys additional authority because she has not arrived at this course of action easily or glibly. Rather, as Susan K. Harris explains, Ruth moves through several stages of behavior towards her mother-in-law until she discovers that since Mrs. Hall has broken the social contract, Ruth has no responsibility to uphold her side either: "Ruth's early years are marked by two sanctioned modes of female behavior; first silence, then entreaty. . . . they are not successful. . . . Resistance joins entreaty to become her dominant modes of response during the early period of her widowhood. . . . Again, neither mode is successful. Ruth's over voice – a voice that speaks for her own self-interest" is not heard until she has reached total desperation and destitution (121). Ruth's decision to shun her mother-in-law is only reached once she has evaluated Mrs. Hall against the standards of the intergenerational social contract and determined that Mrs. Hall has failed to meet any of her obligations. Consequently, Ruth is within her rights to break the contract after having attempted unsuccessfully to implement the agreement. Because Fern justifies Ruth's

decision to no longer pursue a social contract with Mrs. Hall, Fern promotes the democratic social model where Mrs. Hall is now marginalized as a result of her failure to uphold the social contract. Ruth, who had tried in good faith to uphold her end of the agreement, is absolved of any further effort to create a pact with her unwilling mother-in-law and she is now free to use her resources to pursue either productive relationships with other seniors who do abide by the social contract, or to contribute to society through her own economic and intellectual production (which is what Ruth chooses to do when she becomes a celebrated author).

Ruth is not the only character to censure the elderly members of her family, which indicates that there is communal agreement on the elements of the social contract and the implementation of the democratic model. Fern constructs several scenes where members of their respective communities comment on Mr. Ellet's and the Halls' improper behavior. When Mrs. Hall criticizes Ruth's departure from her home after Daisy's death, Mrs. Jones, their neighbor, refutes Mrs. Hall's opinions, noting that "young Mrs. Hall was always a pattern mother" and that Ruth and Harry were well known by "everybody in the village" to be "a happy couple" (Fern *Ruth* 50, 52). At the conclusion of their conversation, Dr. Hall informs his wife that "this is the last time that woman ever crosses *my* threshold" simply because he is angry that Mrs. Jones refuses to accept their version of Daisy's death and their son's marriage (52). Mrs. Jones, by noting that "everybody in the village" believes the younger Halls are happily married, reveals that the community at large does not respect the Halls' treatment of their daughter-in-law. During her departure from the Halls' home, Mrs. Jones even soliloquizes, "Sally Jones will tell [Mrs. Hall] the

truth if nobody else will” (52). Even at the end of the novel, the townspeople perceive the Halls’ prejudice against Ruth. After Mrs. Hall has recommended Ruth’s book to one of her neighbors, Mrs. Spear, without realizing Ruth wrote the text since it was published under her pseudonym of ‘Floy,’ her hypocrisy is evident when she attempts to rescind her praise of the work. Mrs. Spear contradicts Mrs. Hall’s disparagement of the book, claiming she “said it was one of the best and most interesting books you ever read” and another neighbor, Mr. Dana is “infinitely amused by the old lady’s sudden change of opinion” (261). Both find Mrs. Hall’s hatred of her daughter-in-law unreasonable, a further sign that the community does not respect Mrs. Hall because they observe her unwillingness to fulfill the social contract. Ruth’s publisher, Mr. Walter, also assumes the role of truth-teller, informing a colleague that Mr. Ellet “once in awhile he threw [Ruth] a dollar, just as one would throw a bone to a hungry dog,” prompting his associate to proclaim Mr. Ellet as “heartless” (231). Even characters who do not overtly intend to expose the hypocrisy of Ruth’s relatives reveal their faults. One of Mr. Ellet’s neighbors, Mr. Jones, uncovers Mr. Ellet’s alienation from his daughter while praising Ruth’s achievements. Upon questioning, Mr. Ellet is incapable of explaining how Ruth began her writing career or naming any of her early articles. His ignorance is further evidence of his lack of desire to execute his social obligations. These characters who expose the repeated breaches of the social pact between Ruth’s elderly relatives and their descendents are respected members of their community from different socio-economic backgrounds and genders, demonstrating the collective accord between Ruth and society in their establishment of criteria for the intergenerational social contract. Furthermore, all

of these characters agree with Ruth's decision to reject her aged relatives, proving that they too support the democratic social model because all three of her senescent family members have failed to fulfill either of the conditions of the social model and therefore are undeserving of any further deference from younger generations.

Published only three years after *The Wide, Wide World*, *Ruth Hall* received mixed reviews. Although the novel was commercially successful, selling over 70,000 copies in the first year and "was surpassed in popularity by only three novels, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Lamplighter* by Maria Susanna Cummins, and, of course . . . *The Wide, Wide World*," critics largely condemned Fern for her embrace of the democratic social model (Willey 106).<sup>65</sup> Claiming she lacked 'filial piety,' reviewers attacked the author for her social advocacy rather than addressing the text.<sup>66</sup> These reviewers discounted Fern's claim that the elderly should be evaluated upon similar criteria as other adults were judged, preferring to embrace the aristocratic model, which results in the reviewers' uncritical acceptance of the seniors' behavior. One anonymous columnist who denounces *Ruth Hall* as "*inspired mediocrity*" later notes that Fern's elderly characters are unusually cruel to Ruth, but justifies their actions due to a "mysterious antipathy, which crabb'd old age, sometimes evinces for suffering youth and beauty ("Art. VI"

---

<sup>65</sup> Fern may have been unfairly singled out by critics for her negative portrayal of the Halls and Mr. Ellet. In their systematic study of nearly 300 stories printed in *Littell's Living Age* from 1845-1882, Jane Range and Maris A. Vinovskis discovered that although "the frequency of negative reactions to the elderly were quite low in comparison to the positive reactions. . . . Frequently the hostility which younger generations expressed toward the elderly was seen as justified by the narrow-mindedness of the elderly in that particular situation" (153, 154).

<sup>66</sup> See the anonymous review of *Ruth Hall* in the June 1855 edition of *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* where the reviewer refers to Fern as "a mean, bad woman" if she is using her text for revenge (197). See also other anonymous reviews: "Notices of New Books." *New York Daily Times*. Dec. 20, 1854. 2; "Literature." *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* Vol. V, Feb. 1855. 212-21.

443, 444). This unnamed reviewer excuse Mr. Ellet's and the Halls' conduct out of a nostalgic universal respect for the elderly. In his or her alacrity to promote the aristocratic social model, the commentator claims that the elderly have the *right* to behave cruelly to the young and beautiful, which completely absolves any senescent person from any negative conduct. Only Elizabeth Cady Stanton's review of the novel in the February 1855 edition of *The Una* lauds Fern for pragmatically evaluating her father and in-laws according to the intergenerational social contract rather than glorifying them simply because they were her elders. She acknowledges the veracity of Fern's claims, noting, "It matters not whether the selfish male monsters so graphically sketched in 'Miss Hall,' that compound of ignorance, formality and cant, are all of her own family, -- enough that plenty of just such people live. This is some woman's experience" (Stanton 297). Stanton warns the elderly that they ought to be aware of their execution of the social contract because they will be assessed according to these principles, cautioning, "If all tyrannical parents . . . knew that the fantastic tricks they play at the hearthstone, would in time be judged by a discerning public, no one can estimate the restraining influence of such a fear" (298-99). Stanton concurs with Fern's avocation of the democratic social model because it benefits society by creating social restrictions on abuse within the domestic sphere. Stanton argues that the threat of marginalization will prevent older generations from mistreating their descendents. Furthermore, the democratic model is a progressive social structure that encourages domestic, economic, and/or intellectual contributions from the elderly who might otherwise choose to rest on their laurels instead

of maintaining their productivity if they knew they would automatically preserve their social position as they do in the aristocratic model.

The majority of reviewers who did condemn Fern's negative depiction of her father and in-laws were worried about Fern's social influence because "although Fern's ideas were controversial, she did not write for a limited audience. In fact, she was one of the most popular writers of her day" (Warren "Domesticity" 73). Nancy Walker further supports Warren's claim, averring Fern's "popularity with mid-nineteenth-century readers would suggest that her attitudes toward marriage, religion, social pretension, and social injustices were widely shared" (*Disobedient* 108-109).<sup>67</sup> One commentator in *The New York Daily Times* implemented Warren's and Walker's notions, openly addressing his or her fears of the ramifications of Fern's treatment of her elderly characters in *Ruth Hall*. The anonymous reviewer frets:

Heaven help the next generation if the doctrines here preached by example are to prevail! It is the doctrine of that specimen of Young America, which deserves a trouncing before he is let out – a doctrine which would readily reconcile to civilized society the Hidou [sic] habit of leaving worn-out and irritable parents to perish by exposure. We cannot think as well of a woman who lets her heroine look upon the gray hairs and wrinkles of her father-in-law without any emotions of reverence. It is bad enough for a man to make a novel in which the whims of people in their dotage are cherished as insults that cannot be forgiven. But for a woman – it would

---

<sup>67</sup> In *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature: Portraits of the Woman Artist*, Deborah Barker also argues Fern "place[s her] faith and . . . fate in the hands of [her] readers and validate[s] the reader as the ultimate judge of [her] work" (63).

be a little different, if we, who now are young, were never to grow old.

(“Notices of New Books” 2)

This reviewer is so afraid that Fern’s avocation of the democratic social model will lead to the breakdown of Western civilization that he or she compares Fern’s treatment of the elderly to “Hindou” practices. By drawing a comparison between Fern’s social contract criteria for senescent behavior to the outrageous practice of abandoning frail seniors to die, the columnist attempts to alarm the column’s readership and turn them against Fern. This reviewer’s comparison implies that the audience’s acceptance of the democratic social model is tantamount to embracing uncivilized or even primitive values that will destroy the fabric of American society. Through equating Fern’s criteria for her social contract to foreign religious practices, the reviewer endeavors to identify Fern as un-American and anti-Christian, two labels that would also apply to any reader who agreed with Fern’s social contract and model. By castigating Fern in this manner, the commentator hopes to frighten readers enough that they will prefer to distance themselves from the democratic social model rather than risk being considered traitors to their country and religion. The mere fact that a reviewer could stoop to the utilization of such heated rhetoric indicates how threatened the conservative proponents of the aristocratic social model felt. For this columnist, the debate over which social model the country should embrace is literally a war for the preservation of Western civilization.

This reviewer couples his or her attack on Fern’s social contract and model with the additional accusation that she is a blatant liar about the aged’s behavior. The commentator flatly refuses to accept Fern’s account of her elderly family members’

willful breach of the social contract and offers, “If the old folks are living, we are so sure that there must be a vein of goodness under the rough surface which Ruth saw in the old Doctor’s character, and we are so confident that the old lady is a better woman than she is described, that we would be happy to-day to engage board with her for the next Summer vacation” (“Notices of New Books” 2). This reviewer from *The New York Daily Times* is not alone in his or her refutation of Fern’s portrayal of her aged family members’ contravention of the social contract. The reviewer for *Putnam’s Monthly* in February of the following year asserted that her characterizations “cannot all be true. We do not believe, for instance, that any parents of the grade and culture of the Ellets and the Halls were ever the deliberate teasing devils whom Fanny Fern has drawn” (“Literature” 216). These reviewers are so eager to defend the aristocratic social model that they are completely blinded to the possibility that aged might not fulfill the social contract, and, as a result, perpetuate a myth about the innate goodness of the old. Ironically, the senescent society that these reviewers imagine is as unrealistic as the one they accuse Fern of creating! So ingrained is the belief in the aristocratic social model in some segments of society that even several twentieth- and twenty-first century critics simplify Fern’s approach to her elderly characters as “revenge” or reduce her agency to “a rather narrow vision of social injustice and possible social reforms” rather than grasping the calculated social contract Fern negotiates in determining that the democratic model better serves society (Brewster 239).<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> For example, see Wendy Ripley’s article, “‘What’s in a name?’: Negotiating the Literary Marketplace with Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publishing” where she asserts that while Fern potentially creates a new model woman for readers, she also “exact[s] a certain amount of revenge” on her father, in-laws, and brother (65).

Fern's attitude toward the elderly however, is more complex than the reviewers of *Ruth Hall* recognize. While these columnists accuse Fern of loathing the aged because of her promotion of the democratic social model, they fail to see that Fern is actually employing the same intergenerational social contract criteria that Warner does. The only difference is that Fern does not apply a nostalgic lens to her elderly characters in order to bring them into compliance with the social contract. Instead, if Fern discovers that seniors are not meeting the criteria, then she believes it is permissible to marginalize them in order to focus on the aged who do contribute to society through their domestic achievements. Fern does not universally condemn the elderly; rather, it is each individual's actions and demeanor that determine whether that person will be rejected or praised for their social contributions. Fern professes that the fault lies with the individual, regardless of age, rather than with the social contract or model. Walker describes Fern's process of judgment as follows:

Rather than making her judgments on the basis of gender or family relationship, Fanny Fern made them according to a set of values in which hypocrisy, greed, and self-interest were to be castigated, and generosity, kindness, and integrity were to be praised – ironically, the same set of values promulgated by the genteel piety that Fanny Fern was supposed to have transgressed. (*Fanny* 51)

Fern challenges the idea that “older people (female and male) who retained economic or any other form of power, along with their faculties, could command, or enforce, respect” (Thane 105). Instead, all elderly characters must earn respect and not simply expect such

reverence from the younger generation based on their aged status. For example, contemporary reviewers who castigate Fern's embrace of the democratic model as detrimental to the elderly's social position entirely overlook Mr. Bond, the mysterious elderly boarder living on the floor above Ruth in the boarding house. Although Fern offers little insight into the man's character – he is an enigma to Ruth even after they have lived in the same house for months – he offers Ruth a homeopathic remedy when Nettie is ill. His behavior stands in direct counterpoint to Dr. Hall, who effectively allows Ruth's first child, Daisy to die from croup and does little to alleviate his own son's suffering from typhoid fever once he determines that Harry's case is incurable. In Fern's social model, Mr. Bond earns respect from Ruth because he has demonstrated a paternal interest in Nettie, which potentially saves her life. By supporting the democratic social model, Fern is not showing hatred for the elderly, but rather she is saying that they must be judged according to their fulfillment of the social contract, and those who do have nothing to fear, but those who do not deserve to be rejected by society.

In "The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment," Lauren Berlant asserts that Fern "aims not to change the lives of her audience; she wants to change their relation to what their minds can do, no longer in retreat from the world, but engaging actively in acute analysis of it" (445-46). As her contemporary reviewers feared, Fern used her writings to reach out to her audiences with her version of the intergenerational social contract that provided the foundation for the democratic social model. Although Fern and Warner both established similar criteria for the basis of the social contract – the old should develop emotional ties and be either economically

productive or positive moral and ethical leaders, while the young should return the affection of their elders, show them respect, and provide physical, emotional, and/or material assistance if needed – the pair reach vastly different conclusions about the type of social model that will benefit the largest proportion of the population. Whereas Warner softens the faults of her elderly characters through the lens of nostalgia in order to bring them into conformity with the social contract, such as allowing Mrs. Lindsay to develop from a possessive, selfish woman into one who cares for the morals of her granddaughter, Fern retains the failures of her aged characters to meet the social contract, no matter how glaring those flaws are. While Fern's decision means people such as the Halls and Mr. Ellet are marginalized by society for their failure to fulfill the social contract, it also results in characters who are praised and respected for their social contributions, such as Mr. Bond or the elderly men and women who appear in Fern's weekly columns. Unlike Warner's avocation for the aristocratic model, which results in all of her elderly characters gaining the respect of younger generations and creating a cohesive, mutually beneficial society, Fern believes that the democratic model is a more constructive social system because it allows society to operate more efficiently according to the social contract and better rewards both the young and old who fulfill their social obligations. In both Fern's and Warner's models, the elderly who are affectionate and/or positive moral and ethical role models are rewarded with love, protection, respect, and nurturing by younger generations in their senescence. However, in Fern's democratic model, the aged who are cruel, miserly, thoughtless, or narcissistic deserve to be isolated in their old age so that social resources can be directed more efficiently to active

participants in the social contract, rather than accepting these badly-behaved elderly simply out of a nostalgic respect for their advanced age, as Warner's aristocratic model does. These two vastly different responses towards the nation's social structure reflect the public's anxiety about the changes in intergenerational relationships and their effect on societal organization prior to the Civil War. And, just as these two novels present conflicting models in the domestic sphere, other novels that explore social contracts in the public workplace will only add to the debate over the most effective social model for the nation.

### Chapter Three:

#### Of the Economy: The Social Contract and the Social Model Debate in the Workplace

Next to the young, I suppose the very old are the most selfish. Alas, the heart hardens as the blood ceases to run. The cold snow strikes down from the head, and checks the glow of feeling. Who wants to survive into old age after abdicating all his faculties one by one, and be sans teeth, sans eyes, sans memory, sans hope, sans sympathy?

-- William Makepeace Thackeray, *The Virginians*

The years between fifty and seventy are the hardest. You are always being asked to do more, and you are not yet decrepit enough to turn them down.

-- T. S. Eliot, *Time Magazine*, Oct. 23, 1950

As seen in Chapter One, the elderly comprised a substantial percentage of workers in the antebellum era. These old men and women labored in a variety of fields, from the physical drudgery of factories and mining, to the intellectual efforts of law and accounting, and the cultural pursuits of literature and theater. The senescent population could be found in every occupational field prior to the Civil War. These men and women worked not only to preserve their autonomy, like we have seen with Susan Warner's Swiss widow, Mrs. Vawse, but also to contribute to their communities' fiscal health through increased economic output, and, in some cases, to the nation's cultural identity through creations in painting, music, and literature.<sup>69</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, two men working on their own literary productions after experiencing setbacks in the workplace, wrote about the laboring elderly. Both men partially blamed their unemployed condition on the employed aged; in "The Custom-House" essay which

---

<sup>69</sup> For example, the American Neoclassical painter, Rembrandt Peale was still painting in his 70s in the 1850s.

precedes the romance of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hawthorne accuses the senescent employees of the Salem Custom-House of benefitting from the political patronage system to secure their own jobs while Hawthorne lost his after a change in the administration. Melville's complaints were less direct than Hawthorne's because he had not been terminated from a position. However, Melville had a difficult time securing any employment; he only became a sailor after failing to get a job as a surveyor for the Erie Canal project, and he spent the majority of his early adulthood moving between various occupations including teaching, sailing, writing, and clerking.<sup>70</sup> Both men therefore had direct knowledge of elderly workers and they drew upon their encounters with them to write their novels.

Despite their negative personal experiences with seniors in the labor force, Hawthorne and Melville arrive at different conclusions about the utility of the elderly in the workplace. Although they both believe that a social contract between old and young workers is necessary for the clear delineation of expectations from employees and the preservation of stability in the workplace, both men have different approaches for how the social contract ought to be created and how the implementation of that contract will affect the social model each one will support. Hawthorne believes that the intergenerational social contract should be based on two aspects for seniors: economic productivity and the ability to maintain one's integrity of personality in old age. In return, younger generations should also be economically productive as well as deferential toward their elders in the workplace. While Hawthorne's ideal senescents would fulfill

---

<sup>70</sup> See Andrew Delbanco's first three chapters in his biography, *Melville: His World and His Work* for a more detailed account of Melville's struggle for employment in his early adulthood.

both criteria, Hawthorne, like Warner, applies the lens of nostalgia to his elderly Custom-House workers who have difficulty in meeting either component so that each aged individual can be brought into compliance with the social contract. As a result, Hawthorne promotes an aristocratic social model in the workplace, where all elderly colleagues deserve respect for fulfilling at least one criterion of the social contract and all younger employees revere their older associates, which creates a harmonious workspace where all employees can work towards a common goal of increasing economic output to enrich both themselves and their communities.

While Hawthorne embraces an aristocratic social model to create an amicable workplace for both young and old employees, Melville supports a democratic model where all workers are judged upon the same criteria and anyone, young or old, who fails to uphold the social contract is rejected by society and terminated from his employment. At the time Melville was writing *Moby-Dick*, he was deeply involved with the Young America movement – a quasi-political organization that stressed the increasing need for younger, non-immigrant white Americans to take leadership roles in the economic and political spheres. Consequently, Melville's views of the elderly acquired an aura of mistrust. Melville believed that an aristocratic model like Hawthorne's was subject to abuse by the elderly because they could exploit their positions of authority for personal gain rather than ensuring the common economic good. Melville, like Hawthorne, believed that the intergenerational social contract should be based on economic productivity and personal integrity in one's senectitude. However, he determined that the elderly should fulfill both benchmarks and he rejected the idea of using nostalgia to

compensate for any senior's failure to accomplish either components of the social contract. Younger workers did not automatically owe respect to any aged colleague; it was only to be granted after a senior had been judged to be successful in implementing both criteria of the social contract. Because Melville believes that the elderly in the workplace had to prove their ability to be productive and their preservation of their character in order to earn respect from younger employees, Melville promotes a democratic social model, where both young and old generations are evaluated for their economic output and their personal integrity. According to this model, only when young and old workers produce equally and younger employees know they can trust the character of their older colleagues, can the workplace become a cohesive space that economically benefits both the workers and their communities.

### **In the House of the Setting Sun: Salem's Custom-House Meets Hawthorne the Younger**

*The Scarlet Letter* was written at a pivotal point in Hawthorne's life; he was both unemployed and grieving over the death of his mother. Although by society's standards, Hawthorne, at forty-five, could be considered old or at least entering the initial stages of senescence, he referred to himself as a younger man and sought to separate himself from the aged men who occupied Salem's Custom-House, the place of his previous employment and subject for the opening essay in *The Scarlet Letter*. Like Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall*, "The Custom-House" essay is a thinly-veiled autobiographical text. Although Hawthorne does not create pseudonyms for his characters, he does not identify them by name, preferring to use only their occupational titles. While Hawthorne rails against the

political patronage system that had secured the positions of his elderly employees but left him vulnerable to termination when the political winds shifted, Hawthorne concedes he developed personal regard for his senescent colleagues. Reflecting on the four years he held the Surveyorship, Hawthorne admits that the social contract between himself and his senior employees was imperfectly upheld for the majority of his tenure. Hawthorne complains about his senescent employees' ineptitude, but he claims that they maintained their personal integrity, which was a trait that he grew to appreciate and respect in the men. Although Hawthorne criticizes the elderly's inefficacy in the workplace, he also comprehends their need to maintain their self-worth and autonomy in a society that valued industriousness and hard work.<sup>71</sup> This duality prompted Hawthorne to embrace a social contract that included two components for the aged – economic productivity and personal integrity. If a senior could demonstrate that he could fulfill at least one criterion, then he proved that he was deserving of respect from younger colleagues, which they would then confer upon that worthy senescent. Furthermore, Hawthorne often applied nostalgia to his evaluations of his aged associates. By assessing his elderly employees on their former capabilities, Hawthorne is able to find a way for every member of his staff to fulfill at least a portion of the social contract, which results in every senescent colleague earning his respect. For his role as a younger individual in the social contract, Hawthorne gives the elderly men respect, but his version of respect is not

---

<sup>71</sup> Early in his career, Hawthorne had read the foundational theoretical texts that informed nineteenth-century sentimentalism – not only Adam Smith, but also lesser luminaries including Dugald Stewart, Hugh Blair, Thomas Brown, Lord Kames, Frances Hutcheson, and Archibald Alison. At Bowdoin College, Hawthorne also studied under the tutelage of Thomas Upham, the leading American theorist of Common Sense psychology. Therefore, by the time Hawthorne was prepared to write *The Scarlet Letter*, he was well-versed in not only the emotion by the psychology of sentiment.

the obsequious type that Warner's younger characters demonstrate as they practically grovel at the feet of their elders. Rather, Hawthorne's version of respect is an overall amicable approach to the men, but he also allows himself to tease the men as well. He may sport with the men's characters, but he ultimately treats them men affably. The two men who become representative of the Custom-House's operations, the Inspector and Collector, demonstrate how Hawthorne's social contract is implemented and how it generates a harmonious workplace for both the old and the young. Through this system, Hawthorne comes to embrace the aristocratic social model where workers of every age feel valued and professional relationships are conducted amicably.

Hawthorne's commentary on his well-publicized termination in "The Custom-House" essay fueled sales of the novel in its initial printings.<sup>72</sup> While the antebellum reading public accepted "The Custom-House" essay as a passionate denouncement of his treatment at the hands of the political machine during his tenure as Salem's surveyor, Hawthorne expressed ambivalence about his dismissal both privately and within the essay.<sup>73</sup> Whereas Hawthorne confided to his longtime friend, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "If they succeed in getting me out of office, I will surely immolate one or two of them. . . . I may perhaps select a victim, and let fall one little drop of venom on his heart, that shall make him wither before the grin of the multitude for a considerable time

---

<sup>72</sup> Advertisements for *The Scarlet Letter*, like those published in the *Boston Transcript* (January 22, 1850) and the *Christian Inquirer* (February 9, 1850) included references to Hawthorne's dismissal and his reaction in "The Custom-House" essay. Frank Mott remarks on the "lively 'press'" that persisted in keeping the controversy over Hawthorne's firing alive in order to stimulate the "good sale[s] for many months" of the novel (131).

<sup>73</sup> See Nina Baym's argument in her essay, "The Major Phase I, 1850: *The Scarlet Letter*" which reflects on the ways in which Hawthorne's ambivalence manifests itself both within "The Custom-House" as well as the romance (148).

to come” in a letter prior his removal, only six months later he claimed to have changed his mind about revenge (Myerson 136). Writing to his editor, James T. Fields in January of 1850, Hawthorne explained, “In the process of writing, all political and official turmoil has subsided within me, so that I have not felt inclined to execute justice on any of my enemies” (141). Thus, Hawthorne was in a much calmer state of mind and less vengeful than most of his readership assumed when he wrote “The Custom-House” essay, which was written around the time that he sent the above letter to Fields. He had had several months since his termination to gain perspective on the event, so he could address his years in the Custom-House more rationally than many readers expected (or perhaps hoped).

The elderly men who inhabit Hawthorne’s Custom-House are only a few of the aged characters he employs in his texts. Throughout his career, Hawthorne evinced a fascination for the elderly. Beginning with the anonymous elderly man who prevents the British army from attacking the Puritans during the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in “The Grey Champion” and concluding with the aged Dr. Dolliver as the protagonist of the unfinished *Dolliver Romance*, Hawthorne includes a multitude of aged characters in his texts. These characters of both genders encompass a variety of socio-economic positions, reflecting the multidimensional hierarchies of class, gender, and age (Hawthorne included few non-white characters in his works). Some are historical figures, such as Governor Bellingham in *The Scarlet Letter* and others are fictional, but regardless of foundation in fact or fiction, Hawthorne “allowed his aged characters to possess a truly individual existence” (Fischer 118). As Marco Portales explains, Hawthorne’s “characters can be

effectively categorized by age; he always makes a specific point of telling readers the age or approximate age of his characters, and usually he does so at the beginning of a work, as if age itself significantly determines why his characters act as they do” (59). This attention to detail in Hawthorne’s texts leads David Hackett Fischer to conclude that Hawthorne “was in the fullest sense sympathetic to old age,” leading him to deliberately and fully delineate the traits of his elderly characters with as much care as his younger characters (118). Hawthorne’s inclusion of so many senescent characters may be a result of his preoccupation with old age, at which he hints in a letter to Longfellow in 1848, where he writes, “Ten years more will go near to make us ‘venerable men’ and I doubt whether it will be so pleasant to meet, when each friend shall be a memento of decay to the other” (Miller *Salem* 271). In the same breath, Hawthorne demonstrates his ambivalence about senescence, referring to elderly both as “venerable” and “decayed”. At the time of writing this letter, Hawthorne had been serving in the Custom-House for two years and had become intimately acquainted with his employees. However, by choosing to use the men surrounding him in the Custom-House as characters in his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* one year later, Hawthorne encountered a situation different from his earlier fictional works that included senescent individuals; he was no longer writing about the deceased American forefathers or creating fictitious elders. Rather, Hawthorne was confronting issues of old age in the workplace using his neighborhood senior Salemites as his literary material. In “The Custom-House” essay, Hawthorne shifts his examination of the elderly to living individuals because he wants to make a deliberate intervention in the social debate about the aged in the workplace.

Hawthorne was uniquely situated to do so at this point in his career because he not only was still young enough to consider the elderly from a distanced perspective, but he had also worked closely with a staff comprised almost exclusively of seniors in the Custom-House. Moreover, Hawthorne already had extensive experience writing about the elderly in his previous works, so he could draw upon his literary knowledge to assist in creating realistic portrayals of his aged characters that would contribute to his promotion of the aristocratic social model in the workplace.

Hawthorne's intergenerational social contract for the workplace develops out of his initial frustration with his position. Appointed as the Surveyor of the Custom-House in 1846, the forty-two year-old Hawthorne suddenly found himself the supervisor of men many decades older. At first, Hawthorne bases his relationship with the men solely on their productivity. With only one criterion to his social contract at the outset, Hawthorne approached his elderly employees with initial disdain given their indolence.<sup>74</sup> He notes, "a row of venerable figures . . . oftentimes they were asleep, but occasionally might be heard talking together, in voices between speech and a snore, and with that lack of energy that distinguishes . . . all other human beings who depend for subsistence on . . . anything

---

<sup>74</sup> In his article, "Hawthorne at the Salem Custom-House," Edwin Miller reveals that he located a copy of a book, *Jottings from Memory, From 1823 to 1901*, published in 1913 and written by Henry B. Hill who was born and lived in Salem in his twenties when Hawthorne worked at the Custom-House. Hill protests Hawthorne's characterization of the elderly men working in the Custom-House. In his privately published memoir, Hill writes: "I was personally acquainted with most of these men and knew how faithfully and conscientiously they performed their duties, and they did it in a manner to shame their critic. They were old shipmasters, most of them, and in their day were the manliest of men, and in their old age no duty ever found them wanting. No man displayed more meanness of character than Hawthorne did in his criticisms on those men. A fully developed man would have tried to help them in the discharge of their duties if they needed help (which they did not); but they were honest, conscientious men, and if they could not have discharged their duties would have resigned. Hawthorne had no conception of men of that character – they were so far above him in all that constituted true manhood (29-30)" (16). Hill was in his mid-seventies when he wrote his reminiscences and in his mid-eighties when he published them.

else but their independent exertions” (Hawthorne 9). The Custom-House, a site that should be vibrant and benefitting from growing trade and industry, continues to function inefficiently with its senescent employees when compared to modernizing ports like Boston and New York. Although Hawthorne is discontent with the Custom-House’s operations since he sees business being lost to other areas that have modernized their workforce by bringing in younger workers and focusing on productivity, he cannot change his employee’s lackadaisical response to the situation. Essentially, because of the antiquated employees’ apathetic reaction to the shifting economy, the Salem port loses business, which affects the entire economy of the city, plunging it into an economic downturn while other areas are thriving. Hawthorne’s justification in his frustration with his languid employees reflects the nation’s shifting social values in the mid-nineteenth century where many intergenerational social contracts in the workplace became increasingly geared solely towards productivity. Andrew Achenbaum reaffirms this shift in occupational relationships between the generations, claiming, “like everyone else, the elderly were expected to remain economically and socially useful as long as they were physically able to work”; simultaneously, “Older Americans were expected to know when it was time to let others assume more and more of their regular duties” (19, 22). At the beginning of his tenure in the Custom-House, Hawthorne echoes Achenbaum’s views on economic productivity and he presumes that the aged associates hold similar views: “They knew, these excellent old persons, that, by all established rule . . . they ought to have given place to younger men” (Hawthorne 15). Clearly Hawthorne is initially irritated by his senescent employees because he only values them according to their

economic output, which, by all accounts, was negligible. Furthermore, Hawthorne believes that his elderly colleagues possess the same expectations for workers, so Hawthorne presumes they are both selfish for retaining their positions and hypocritical for refusing to work industriously while Hawthorne and the few other young associates were laboring vigorously.

Given Hawthorne's initial discontent, readers are left to wonder why he simply did not terminate all underperforming aged employees. Hawthorne does allude to his dismissal of several colleagues, but he retains the vast majority of his indolent workers.<sup>75</sup> The reason why Hawthorne permits so many elderly employees to keep their jobs is because he realizes that his social contract criteria are incomplete. Because Hawthorne does not only value the world in its economic terms, he cannot judge men only on their productivity. Hawthorne recognizes that he finds worthy attributes in his aged associates that cannot be measured in terms of economic output.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, Hawthorne refines his components of the social contract in order to reflect these other qualities that he discovers in his senior retainers. The other criterion that Hawthorne adds to his intergenerational social contract is that of personal integrity. This trait is a comprehensive term for the personality attributes that Hawthorne discovers in his older workers. Hawthorne realizes that many of his senior employees have retained the personalities that they developed when they were younger men and the maintenance of

---

<sup>75</sup> Hawthorne alludes to his firing of several senescent officials in "The Custom-House," which he assumes causes their deaths: "I must plead guilty to the charge of abbreviating the official breath of more than one of these venerable servants of the republic. They were allowed, on my representation to rest from their arduous labors, and soon afterwards – as if their sole principle of life had been zeal for their country's service; as I verily believe it was – withdrew to a better world" (14).

<sup>76</sup> As Marco Portales explains, Hawthorne is "interest[ed] in ferreting out what old men had learned from life, from his desire to learn what certain experiences in life had made of people" (59).

their characters has allowed them to transition into old age without any negative emotions, such as anger, fear, or frustration. Unlike Claudia Johnson's assertion that the Custom-House seniors are "Old men set in their ways, whose youth is far removed in an ancient past and whose harshness or inertia serve to stifle everything young and creative," Hawthorne perceives the men's consistency as a valuable attribute in the workplace (152-53). By preserving a positive attitude in their senectitude, these elderly workers can more easily form amicable relationships with younger associates, which results in a more harmonious workspace. Hawthorne explains his addition of this criterion to his social contract to his audience by asserting, "Unless people are more than commonly disagreeable, it is my foolish habit to contract a kindness for them. . . . As most of these old Custom-House officers had good traits . . . I soon grew to like them all" (15). While the addition of personal integrity to the workplace social contract accounts for Hawthorne's eventual acceptance of his aged colleagues and his promotion of the aristocratic model that encourages mutual respect between the generations in industry, Hawthorne concedes that his version of the social contract might not conciliate individuals who only perceive the workplace in terms of economic output. To those critics he admits, "Much and deservedly to my own discredit, therefore, and considerably to the detriment of my official conscience, [the elderly employees] continued, during my incumbency, to creep about the wharves, and loiter up and down the Custom-House steps" (15). Hawthorne recognizes that his interpretation of the intergenerational social contract will not please entirely economically-minded persons. He is aware that his two criteria might not satisfy all of his readers, but he also understands that the adoption of

both components of the social contract made the Custom-House an agreeable place of employment for both the young and old by promoting positive working relationships between the generations.

Hawthorne is in a position to enact his social contract because he is the supervisor of the Custom-House. Whereas Fern's and Warner's protagonists had little authority over the aged people they encountered, Hawthorne largely controls the occupational fate of the seniors in the Custom-House. As the manager, Hawthorne can implement his evaluative criteria, and his senescent employees recognize his power. As such, "the old fellows dreaded some such discourtesy at my hands. It pained, and at the same time amused me, to behold the terrors that attended by advent; to see a furrowed cheek, weather-beaten by half a century of storms, turn ashy pale at the glance of so harmless an individual as myself" (Hawthorne 14). David Stouck explains how "the narrator takes a curious pleasure in his position of power over them" and even "enjoys their sense of insecurity" (319). However, Gloria Erlich reads Hawthorne's actions as less malicious and sees Hawthorne as attempting to reconcile his conflicting sentiments: "As the master of patriarchal elders, the Surveyor assumes a benign paternalism; he becomes the protector of childish old men as well as the judge of their worth. He experiences himself as a dominant adult by shielding elderly father figures from their own weakness" (24). In the role reversal Hawthorne experiences as the manager of aged employees where he becomes the superior to his elders, Hawthorne sometimes laughs at the discomfiture of the seniors. However, he also acknowledges his responsibility towards these men and in

due course protects their jobs.<sup>77</sup> Although Hawthorne may find amusement in his old workers' reactions to his position, he does not simply mock the men, but he understands that they are suddenly insecure about their employment. Unlike Erlich's claim that he protects these senescent men from their "weaknesses," Hawthorne actually seeks out their positive personality traits in order to build courteous working relationships with his employees. Hawthorne's decision to create amiable relationships with his older colleagues indicates the respect he eventually develops for them, which supersedes his initial derision of their lackluster occupational performance.<sup>78</sup>

Although Hawthorne creates affable relationships with the seniors under his management by developing evaluative criteria that judges the older men by both their economic productivity as well as their personalities, he only gradually cultivates a respect for his elder employees. In this way, Hawthorne's approach toward the elderly differs from Warner, who immediately endorses the positive attributes of the aged and holds younger generations accountable for the elders' physical and emotional needs, and Fern, who clearly delineates a set of rules determining acceptable and unacceptable conduct from seniors and completely disassociates herself from any elders who engage in objectionable behavior. Hawthorne does not always embrace the lethargy and seeming futility of his senescent employees, but he does not hold himself responsible for either

---

<sup>77</sup> As Dan McCall succinctly summarizes in *Citizens of Somewhere Else: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James*, "Hawthorne gently pokes fun at [the seniors'] senility" but "He is fond of them" (38).

<sup>78</sup> As W. R. Moses glibly notes, "As for the superannuated time-servers at the Custom-House, it seems that . . . they participate in the effort of mankind as much as mankind demands that they should; the jobs exist, and must be got through by somebody" (396).

their lack of economic output or their physical or emotional needs.<sup>79</sup> Unlike Warner, who always emphasizes younger generations' responsibility for the physical and emotional care of their elders, Hawthorne only needs to show respect in a working relationship with these men in order to fulfill his side of the social contract. He eventually accepts that the men will not work as efficiently as he desires, but he prefers to preserve an amicable rapport with his elder employees instead of demanding higher productivity or threatening to terminate them. He also does not feel liable for their physical or emotional needs because those issues are not responsibility of the social contract in the workplace according to Hawthorne. This limited social contract that only applied to the workplace allowed Hawthorne to promote the aristocratic social model in industry because the model benefitted both older and younger workers by protecting the positions of the elderly so they would not feel insecure in their work, and it prevented younger employees from resenting their senior colleagues because they could appreciate the personalities of the older men, rather than just their economic output. Hawthorne's reaction to two of his senescent associates – the Inspector and the Collector – shows how Hawthorne implemented his two components of the social contract, which helped him transform from a resentful manager to a man who could enjoy the company of his elderly employees and create amicable working relationships with them.

The Inspector is the archetypal character for the indolent and apathetic seniors peopling the Custom-House. Based on William Lee, a Salem native who had been appointed to his position in 1814, over thirty years before Hawthorne became Surveyor,

---

<sup>79</sup> Robert Berner interprets Hawthorne's frustrations with his apathetic employees in the Custom-House, claiming he "condemns not the mind itself but its misuse" (40).

the character is “a man of four-score years, or thereabouts” (Hawthorne 16). In Hawthorne’s entire account of the Inspector, he is never described as doing any work. Consequently, Hawthorne is frustrated with the Inspector’s occupational underperformance. Had Hawthorne only used his first social contract criterion of economic productivity to evaluate the Inspector, he would have either fired him or would have distanced himself from the elderly man entirely. However, once Hawthorne applies his second element of the social contract, he discovers that the Inspector does have personal integrity; he has preserved his personality and his health and has entered senescence with a positive attitude towards old age. Hawthorne clearly admires the Inspector’s health and physicality, which he describes at length in the following passage:

With his florid cheek, his compact figure, smartly arrayed in a bright-buttoned blue coat, his brisk and vigorous step, and his hale and hearty aspect, altogether he seemed – not young, indeed – but a kind of new contrivance of Mother Nature in the shape of man, whom age and infirmity had no business to touch. His voice and laugh, which perpetually reechoed through the Custom-House, had nothing of the tremulous quaver and cackle of an old man’s utterance. (16)

As a man who had been considered a fragile child by his family and even suffered a debilitating foot injury that took nearly two years from which to recover, Hawthorne appreciates good health in a man nearly twice his own age. However, Hawthorne quickly perceives that health is the single admirable attribute that the Inspector exhibits. His admiration thus shortly veers into mockery, which is not precluded by his version of the

social contract. In order to fulfill his role as a younger individual in the social contract, Hawthorne has to build a positive relationship with his elders, but he is also permitted to tease them for their foibles. He teasingly represents the Inspector “merely as an animal” who “was a most satisfactory object from the thorough healthfulness of his system and his capacity, at that extreme age to enjoy all, or nearly all, the delights which he had ever aimed at” (16). Of course, the joke between Hawthorne and his readers is that as an “animal,” the Inspector is incapable of aspiring to most actions and therefore has lived a happily ignorant but circumscribed life. Hawthorne can mock the Inspector for his lack of intellect, but Hawthorne ultimately builds a working relationship with the elderly man because he admires his maintenance of his health.

The remainder of Hawthorne’s description of the Inspector fixates upon his ability to enjoy a hearty meal. Returning to his playful tone, Hawthorne inventories the Inspector’s dietary habits:

A tender-loin of beef, a hind-quarter of veal, a spare-rib of pork, a particular chicken, or a remarkably praiseworthy turkey, which had perhaps adorned his board in the days of the elder Adams, would be remembered; while all the subsequent experience of our race, and all the events that brightened or darkened his individual career, had gone over him with as little permanent effect as the passing breeze. (18)

The Inspector has such a limited mental capacity that he can only gain enjoyment out of physical pleasures. It as if the Inspector is following Benjamin Rush’s admonition that “The vigor of the mind and stomach in old age, just before death, depend alike upon

those parts being the last retreats of departing excitement” (“Of Animal Life: Lecture I” 109). Notably, Rush’s assertion derives from his first lecture on animal life – the only life Hawthorne claims the Inspector exhibits! Hawthorne determines that the Inspector “possessed no power of thought, no depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities” (17). Despite the Inspector’s lack of intellectual and emotional capabilities, Hawthorne does not completely censure him in the way Fern does her father and in-laws, severing all direct communication with them. If Hawthorne did terminate the Inspector, then he would be embracing a democratic social model similar to Fern’s. Instead, he remains sociable with the Inspector and, although he may laugh at his feeble intellect, he accepts the Inspector’s limited abilities, concluding, “so cunningly had the few materials of his character been put together, that there was no painful perception of deficiency, but, on my part, an entire contentment with what I found in him” (17). Hawthorne may not want to emulate all of the Inspector’s characteristics, but that is not necessary for Hawthorne to build a productive working relationship with his subordinate.<sup>80</sup> Hawthorne’s social contract is limited to the workplace, so he only needs to relate to the men in a professional capacity. As such, Hawthorne rates the Inspector as failing miserably in his economic productivity, but successful in retaining his physical health and positive attitude toward the physical pleasures of life, which makes him an agreeable employee according to Hawthorne’s criteria. Based on this evaluation, Hawthorne teases the

---

<sup>80</sup> See also Dan McCall’s *Citizens of Somewhere Else*, David Stouck’s article, “The Surveyor of the Custom-House: A Narrator for *The Scarlet Letter*” in *The Centennial Review* 15 (1971): 309-29, Clifford Huffman’s article “History in Hawthorne’s Custom-House” in *Clio* 2 (1973): 161-69, and Larzer Ziff’s article, “The Ethical Dimension of ‘The Custom House’” in *Modern Language Notes* 73.5 (May 1958): 338-44 for additional accounts of Hawthorne’s disdain for the Inspector.

Inspector for his shortcomings, but he eventually respects the Inspector enough for his personal integrity to develop an affable connection to his elderly subordinate.

Hawthorne's other senescent example – the Collector – exhibits a much different personality than the Inspector, but he too earns Hawthorne's respect. This character, based on General James Miller, a hero from the War of 1812, "had already numbered, nearly or quite, his threescore years and ten, and was pursuing the remainder of his earthly march" (Hawthorne 18). Like the Inspector, the Collector also accomplishes little work. While the Inspector simply chooses not to exert himself, the Collector is hampered by his physical frailty. Inasmuch as Hawthorne praises the Inspector for his physical vigor, he laments the Collector's ill-health because it "withheld him from the personal administration of his office" (14). Unlike the older employees who refrain from working out of indolence, the Collector is simply physically unable to fulfill the demands of his position. Hawthorne details the man's daily journey to his office: "burdened with infirmities . . . . The step was palsied now, that had been foremost in the charge. It was only with the assistance of a servant, and by leaning his hand heavily on the iron balustrade, that he could slowly and painfully ascend the Custom-House steps" (18). With such a vivid description of the Collector's determination to retain his employment despite his ill-health, Hawthorne clearly respects the former general.

Although Hawthorne cannot commend the Collector for his economic productivity or his physical health, he discovers that the Collector preserves a depth of intellect that earns his praise. Furthermore, the Collector's memories provide Hawthorne with a nostalgic link to the past – in this case, the formative years of the nation when it

was tested in another conflict with Britain in the War of 1812. Hawthorne reverently refers to the Collector as “Our gallant old General” and “New England’s most distinguished soldier” (18,13). The Collector’s mind is not engaged with contemporary issues, but is rather focused upon the past. The General remembers his life and can reflect on its incidents, which makes him an elderly man worthy of deference because he is a living connection to the nation’s history that Hawthorne, a man fascinated with the country’s past, can only imagine. Hawthorne notes the “light within” the General, as evidence “that it was only the outward medium of the intellectual lamp that obstructed the rays in their passage” (19). Hawthorne envisions the Collector’s thoughts when he is lost in reverie:

The evolutions of the parade; the tumult of the battle; the flourish of old, heroic music, heard thirty years before; -- such scenes and sounds, perhaps, were all alive before his intellectual sense. Meanwhile, the merchants and ship-masters, the spruce clerks and uncouth sailors, entered and departed; the bustle of this commercial and Custom-House life kept up its little murmur about him; and neither with the men nor their affairs did the General appear to sustain the most distant relation. (20)

Hawthorne admits that the Collector does not perform his job proficiently, but he respects the General’s intellect and his former achievements in battle. While Carlanda Green regrets the General’s lack of “rational faculty . . . in his response to men with whom he appears to sustain no relationship” (189), Joseph Dunne notes that the General “at least avoided the mental deterioration of his fellow patriarchs” (41). Hawthorne can disregard

the Collector's underperformance because he discovers his connection to the past and his deep intellect, which Hawthorne undoubtedly admired.<sup>81</sup> Hawthorne asserts that the General has retained the traits of "solidity, firmness," "stubborn and ponderous endurance," "integrity," "innate kindness," and "benevolence," all of which attest to the Collector's intellect and his personal integrity (19-20). Given all of these positive attributes, Hawthorne easily constructs an amicable relationship with the Collector in the Custom-House, and so great is his respect for the former general, that he even continues his relationship with the Collector outside the workplace.

Hawthorne's relationships with both the Collector and the Inspector develop over the course of his tenure as surveyor. Even though his respect for his senescent employees is only gradually cultivated, Hawthorne ultimately respects the men with whom he works, which indicates his support for the aristocratic social model where the elderly deserve the esteem of their younger colleagues. However, Hawthorne's social contract upon which his support for the aristocratic model is founded differs from Susan Warner's contract. This difference is based on the exigencies of the spheres in which both are advocating their models; Warner, who focuses on the domestic sphere, must create a social contract that applies to both family and community members because both will interact in the space of the home. Hawthorne, however, only needs his social contract to apply to the workplace, where employees do not have to worry about familial or personal bonds, but only need to focus on professional relationships. By taking such a limited view of the

---

<sup>81</sup> During the battle over his termination, Hawthorne employed General Miller as a character witness and, after leaving the Surveyorship, privately visited him in the autumn of 1849. In a letter to George S. Hillard dated June 12, 1849, Hawthorne wrote, "All my official conduct has been under the supervision and sanction of colonel Miller, a Whig, the Deputy Collector, and now the Collector, of the port. He is now in Washington. I refer to him" (Myerson 138).

social contract, Hawthorne is able to develop positive working relationships with the vast majority of his elderly employees because he does not need to physically or emotionally support any of the men. Instead, Hawthorne only has to work with the men in the confines of the office, where the contact between Hawthorne and his elderly subordinates is much narrower and more clearly defined by office regulations than the conventions of the domestic sphere are. As a result, Hawthorne's two social contract criteria accommodate a variety of elder behavior that Hawthorne may not personally desire to emulate, which he makes evident when he teases the Inspector, but he finds that it is acceptable within a workplace social contract. By determining to build professional relationships with his senior employees, Hawthorne supports the aristocratic social model because he discovers that it is more productive for both younger and older generations to encourage each other in the workplace because it creates an amicable atmosphere. Had Hawthorne only judged his older workers on their economic productivity, he would have not only incited fear in his employees, but he would have resented their economic inefficiency, which would have brought the Custom-House's operations to a standstill because there would be little to no communication among the workers. Instead, Hawthorne's decision to seek out the personal integrity in his senescent employees helped him build positive relationships with his colleagues so the Custom-House could at least continue its operations, however imperfect they were.

Within one week of *The Scarlet Letter*'s publication, the first editorials appeared. *The Salem Register* issued its initial review on March 21, 1850, which although published

anonymously, has been attributed to the *Register*'s editor, John Chapman.<sup>82</sup> The review was as damning of Hawthorne's depiction of the Custom-House officers as any that would later be written about Fern's portrayal of her elderly family members. Chapman writes, "We are almost induced to throw down the book in disgust, without venturing on the *Scarlet Letter*, so atrocious, so heartless, so undisguised, so utterly inexcusable seemed his calumnious caricatures of inoffensive men, who would not possibly have given occasion for such wanton insults" (Clark, C. E. 416). What Chapman missed in his assessment of the introductory essay was Hawthorne's version of the social contract, which permitted him to tease the elderly while still promoting an aristocratic social model because he developed positive working relationships with the very men that he wryly mocked. Chapman viewed the essay as a direct attack on the aged retainers of the Custom-House because he envisions younger people demonstrating an obsequious respect to older generations, such as Warner's contract demands, as the only form of a social contract that can honor the elderly. Chapman accuses Hawthorne of "vilifying some of his former associates, to a degree of which we should have supposed any gentleman, to say nothing of a man of ordinary feeling, refinement, and kindness of heart, incapable" (415). According to Chapman, Hawthorne cannot both censure his aged employees and eventually evince a respect for them; the two attitudes are incompatible for this reviewer. Chapman inquires, "What can be more heartless and irreverent" than "ridiculing the infirmities of aged men" (417). For this editor,

---

<sup>82</sup> Chapman was also likely the anonymous writer of the second review that appeared in *The Salem Register* four days later on March 25, 1850 that continued to attack Hawthorne's introduction as "unmanly, illiberal and censurable" (Clark, C. E. 412).

Hawthorne is only an ungrateful man embittered by his ouster who attacks the vulnerable elderly for his revenge.

Chapman indicates his failure to grasp Hawthorne's version of the social contract when he rewrites the description of Inspector's character to reflect his own form of the social contract. He claims:

the most venomous, malignant and unaccountable assault is made upon a venerable gentleman, whose chief crime seems to be that he loves a good dinner, has preserved a youthful flow of cheerfulness, and can tell a graphic story. Why this officer of fourscore years – the son of a Revolutionary colonel – a perfect gentleman of the old school in his manners, and a rare specimen of vivacious age – courteous and polite to everybody – ready to join in genial mirth, but never obtruding himself or his opinions upon any one's notice, unless invited – intelligent, benevolent, and of business capacities infinitely above any the Ex-Surveyor ever displayed – having children in this community, heads of families, respectable and respected – why this gentleman should be dragged so rudely and abusively before the public, and his and his children's feelings lacerated and outraged so unjustifiably, is a mystery beyond our power to fathom. (Clark, C. E. 418)

Taking the same traits that Hawthorne wryly praised in the Inspector – his physical health, jollity, and Epicureanism – Chapman creates an homage to the “venerable” man based upon his respected position in the community based on his achievements in the

domestic sphere, as well as his health and financial independence. In fact, according to Chapman, the Inspector is practically the ideal senescent man: he has reputable ancestors involved in the nation's founding, his has contributed to increasing the nation's population with his children (who are of Anglo-Saxon lineage rather than the new immigrant lower classes), and he is not a burden to his community or family because he maintains his independence and contributes to the welfare of Salem through his public service. Chapman's version of the social contract as evidenced by his characterization of the Inspector is more like Warner's where it encompasses the relationship of the Inspector to the community. Instead, Hawthorne is advocating a limited social contract to be enacted only in the workplace. According to Hawthorne's version of the Inspector's character, the elderly man is unproductive, but he is also an exemplar of good health and humor despite his limited intellect. Based on these traits, Hawthorne teases the Inspector for his failings, but he also respects him on a professional level within the confines of the Custom-House to build an amiable working relationship with the senior. Chapman, however, believes the only intergenerational social contract that is acceptable is one where the younger generation automatically grants all seniors unreserved respect.

Hawthorne was clearly frustrated by reviewers' misinterpretation of his version of the workplace social contract. In a letter to his friend, Horatio Bridge, written on April 13, 1850, Hawthorne expresses disbelief at the indignation generated by "The Custom-House" essay, "As to the Salem people, I really thought that I had been exceedingly good natured in my treatment of them" (Myerson 144). Hawthorne also publicly defended his introductory essay and the attitudes towards his employees he therein expressed. In the

second edition to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne attached a preface addressing the criticism he had received. He declared:

the only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good-humor, and the general accuracy with which he has conveyed his sincere impressions of the characters therein described. As to enmity, or ill-feeling of any kind, personal or political, he utterly disclaims such motives. The sketch might, perhaps, have been wholly omitted, without loss to the public, or detriment to the book; but, having undertaken to write it, he conceives that it could not have been done in a better or a kindlier spirit, nor, so far as his abilities availed, with a livelier effect of truth. The author is constrained, therefore, to republish his introductory sketch without the change of a word. (qtd. in Scharnhorst 23)

Hawthorne argues that his essay has been misunderstood. He not only defends his depictions of his elderly employees, but he also claims that he had developed amicable professional relationships with his senior colleagues. In Hawthorne's opinion, he had upheld his side of the intergenerational social contract just as much as his elders had.

Despite the scathing reviews that several papers gave "The Custom-House" introduction, most reviewers tended to find no conflicting messages in Hawthorne's wry characterizations of his elderly employees and his avocation of the aristocratic social model. Instead of viewing the essay as a dire attack on elderly men, they regarded it as a good-natured sketch of relationships in the workplace. In the April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1850 edition of the *New York Daily Tribune*, Edwin Percy Whipple described Hawthorne's portrayals as

“a piquant daguerreotype of his ancient colleagues in office” (“The Gothic” 27). And, one month later Whipple continued his praise of “The Custom-House” essay in *Graham’s Magazine*, claiming, “These pages, instinct with the vital spirit of humor, show how rich and exhaustless a fountain of mirth Hawthorne has at his command” and proclaiming Hawthorne, “the poet” to be a “humorist” (“A True” 28). The *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* averred, “These pages are full of wit and humor of the richest description” (“New Romance” 4). Other newspapers, like the *Portland Transcript* compared Hawthorne’s humor to Oliver Goldsmith and George Bailey Loring, declaring, “The humor here is inimitable” (“Book” 135). These reviewers see only the amicable side of Hawthorne’s descriptions of his aged colleagues, and so they do not believe that Hawthorne was being disrespectful towards the men, but rather that he was using his literary talents to further promote an aristocratic social model for the workplace in a light-hearted way that would engage readers with its humor.<sup>83</sup>

Other reviews, however took a more circumspect position on Hawthorne’s introduction. This third group of commentators neither misinterpreted Hawthorne’s version of the social contract as ridicule of his aged associates nor overly praised him for his powers of characterization. Rather, they understood that Hawthorne’s social contract was limited to the workplace, but they also questioned his decision to tease elderly men because it impeded his promotion of an aristocratic social model. These reviewers felt that Hawthorne’s sly mockery of some of his senior colleagues while he was professing respect for them confused readers as to his true demeanor towards his elderly associates.

---

<sup>83</sup> Henry James later claimed, “This sketch of the Custom-house is, as simple writing, one of the most perfect of Hawthorne’s compositions, and one of the most gracefully and humorously autobiographic” (103).

Many columnists expressed restrained praise for the novel's introduction, agreeing with Charles Hazewell of the *Boston Daily Times* that "It has a little quiet malice, we admit, but that man must be as skinless as St. Bartholomew after he was flayed who can be deeply offended at it" (123). Other reviewers concluded that the emotions the introduction inspired in the audience depended upon the readers' perspectives.<sup>84</sup> George Ripley, in his *New York Tribune* review of *The Scarlet Letter* declared "The Custom-House" essay "will furnish an agreeable amusement to those who are so far from the scene of action, as to feel no wound in their personal relations, by the occasional too sharp touches of the caustic acid, of which the 'gentle author' keeps some phials on his shelf for convenience and use" (9). Two months later, in June 1850, the *New York Evening Post* echoed Ripley's sentiments, declaring the introduction:

is one of the cleverest portions of the book, and parts of it show infinite comic power, but the sketches of character are understood to have been drawn from real life, and to have given great offence to those for whom they were intended. There does not appear to have been any malignant intention in the writer; but the fact that they have given pain to unoffending people, is enough to show that it was a great error to publish them. ("Untitled" 34)

The press is torn between praising Hawthorne for the veracity of his characterizations and reproaching Hawthorne for creating a potentially confusing social contract. On the one hand, the vast majority of reviewers shared in the joke Hawthorne perpetuates in his

---

<sup>84</sup> See Lewis Gaylord Clark's review, "The Scarlet Letter" in *Knickerbocker* 35.5 (May 1850): 451-52, reproduced in John L. Idol Jr. and Buford Jones's collection, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews*.

satiric rendering of his elderly colleagues. However, these commentators also were concerned that Hawthorne's version of the social contract in the workplace would be misinterpreted by readers. They feared that the audience would not understand either the complexity of the younger generations where they could tease the elderly yet still work productively with them, or the limited nature of the contract that made it only applicable in the workplace.<sup>85</sup> This group of reviewers was the most perceptive of all commentators because they grasped not only Hawthorne's intention to promote an aristocratic social model for the economic sphere, but also how the readership could misconstrue the limited application of the social model. Although Hawthorne's objective to promote an intergenerational social contract in the workplace that would allow older and younger generations to develop productive professional relationships was occasionally misinterpreted by his readers just as these reviewers predicted, Hawthorne's vision was much more positively received than the one his literary colleague and brief friend, Herman Melville proposed only one year later.

### **Stormy Seas Ahead: Captain Ahab's Violation of the Social Contract**

As Hawthorne was promoting his workplace social contract, Herman Melville was extensively revising *Moby-Dick* after striking up a brief but stimulating friendship

---

<sup>85</sup> For a concise example of the ambivalence of the media towards Hawthorne's depiction of the elderly, see the review of *The Scarlet Letter* in the *Christian Register*. The commentator states, "were it not for the little touch of bitterness which mars the effect and leads us to doubt the perfect good faith of the writer, the sketch would be perfect" and "There are also a few sentences relating to the author which constrain us to think less well of his kindness of nature than we should, if they had been omitted" (58).

with him.<sup>86</sup> Even though Hawthorne gradually developed respect for his senescent employees through his social contract that emphasized both economic productivity and personal integrity, Melville used *Moby-Dick* to advocate a democratic social model that would be founded on a distrust of the older generation as a result of their abuse of power and irrelevancy in a rapidly industrializing nation. Already somewhat famous for such nautical works as *Omoo*, *Typee*, and *Redburn*, Melville published *Moby-Dick* on November 14, 1851.<sup>87</sup> Like Hawthorne's *Custom-House*, Melville created a homosocial landscape in *Moby-Dick*, using the sailing vessel, the Pequod as the primary setting for the novel. Although *Moby-Dick* is ostensibly concerned with the ill-fated voyage of the Pequod captained by Ahab in his mad quest to avenge the loss of his leg to the eponymously named white whale, the novel also focuses on the social contract between Ahab and his crew. Tyrus Hillway explains that Melville came to view the novel as a "framework of narrative within which he could raise vital moral, social, religious, and philosophical questions" (23). Particularly in *Moby-Dick* "Melville was intensely interested in at least one problem which involves 'society' as we understand it – the problem of alienation, of disturbance in the relation between the individual and the community" (Smith, Henry 63). This issue of social relationships that Henry Nash Smith recognizes is more than simply a matter of alienation. Rather, the novel explores the economic social contract – how a manager (Ahab) relates to his subordinates (the crew).

---

<sup>86</sup> Hawthorne's and Melville's friendship was most intense during the latter half of 1850 through 1851, when the Hawthornes abruptly left the vicinity of Pittsfield. Both Nathaniel and his wife, Sophia read and praised *Moby-Dick* after its publication. See Randall Stewart's essay, "Melville and Hawthorne" (153-64) in *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays* and Melville's letter to the Hawthornes in *The Letters of Herman Melville*.

<sup>87</sup> The British edition of *Moby-Dick* was actually printed one month prior to the American edition on October 18, 1851.

Melville, like Hawthorne, believes that both economic productivity and personal integrity are essential components of the social contract for the elderly. In return, younger generations are obligated to respect their aged associates. However, for Melville, the implementation of the social contract has greater consequences than it does for Hawthorne. While both men investigate the application of the social contract in the workplace, the two men's industries are vastly different and the subsequent formation of professional relationships varies accordingly. Hawthorne, a member of the emerging middle-class, works at a white collar job with regular business hours. Essentially, at the end of the work-day, he can lock up the Custom-House and walk the few blocks back to his home where his wife, mother, and children are waiting for him. In this type of profession, Hawthorne can maintain two distinct spheres – a domestic and an economic realm. However, for Melville's characters, work *is* home, at least for the length of the voyage. Individuals on board the Pequod must labor and live with their colleagues, so their need to develop amicable working relationships with their associates is more urgent than Hawthorne's is. Consequently, any breach of the social contract has larger ramifications for Melville's characters. And when the contract fails, as it does aboard the Pequod, the entire community suffers.

Melville believed that the social contract carries such importance for the workplace that he embraced a democratic social model. As a champion of the Young America movement at the time he was writing *Moby-Dick*, Melville professed an acute distrust of the elderly who were revered simply because of their advanced age. Melville thought that this unquestioned deference towards the elderly was dangerous for society

because it did not protect younger generations from abuses of the economic, political, or legal systems by the elderly. Melville worried that the unchecked authority granted to the aged, which was a central component of the aristocratic social model, would result in exploitation of their positions for personal gain. In effect, Melville anticipated Baron Acton's famous 1887 adage, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Instead, Melville believed that younger generations were more trustworthy because they had to earn society's respect rather than have it automatically granted to them. Melville advocated a democratic social model because he felt it protected the interests of both older and younger generations because it would remove the potential for abuse or exploitation of social systems for personal gain. Using Ahab's exploitation of the aristocratic social model aboard the Pequod to fulfill his selfish objective of hunting Moby-Dick, Melville argued that a democratic social model would protect younger generations from the tyranny of the elderly. Melville believed that if all individuals were judged according to their economic productivity and their personal integrity in the workplace, then those persons, young or old, who fulfilled the social contract earned their respect and would be more responsive to safeguarding their colleagues from exploitation and would be more invested in upholding the standards of the social system to ensure its proper and equitable implementation.

Melville positions Ahab as the consummate self-centered old man. Ahab accepts the offer of a whaling voyage because he has one purpose for the trip – to kill Moby-Dick. Ahab is fixated on the whale because it is through his encounter with the leviathan and the subsequent loss of his leg to the jaws of Moby-Dick that Ahab has come to the

realization that he is old. By nineteenth-century standards, Ahab is an elderly man of fifty-eight. Not only do other characters call him “old,” but Ahab also refers to himself as such throughout the novel. However, in “Old Man Ahab,” Sanford Marovitz has astutely observed that few critics have recognized Ahab’s age. In fact, Marovitz argues, “the image of Ahab as an aging man, already old and growing older, should qualify any vision we have of him, and yet how easily and often this aspect of his portrait is overlooked because of the glaring nature of his monomaniacal defiance” (145). It is only his unfortunate “dismasting” that has resulted in even Ahab’s awareness of his own age (178). Even though “he still possesses considerable stamina and strength, and his mental faculties are, if anything, all too sharp,” Ahab begins to dwell upon his injury, which forces him to face his mortality for possibly the first time in his life (McSweeney 69). Ahab also links this injury to ill-health. In his senescence, he believes he will become increasing frail. For Ahab, old age and infirmity are inextricably linked. Failing physical faculties frighten Ahab because he is dependent upon his wellbeing for his profession. Even though he has enjoyed good health until his accident and no one else views his loss of leg as anything other than the normal risks that are associated with whaling, Ahab sees it as a sign of his senectitude and increasing irrelevancy in an occupation that requires vitality and mobility. No longer a ‘complete’ being, Ahab believes that the loss of his leg is only the harbinger of the greater, total loss of life that he will face in the indeterminate future. Closing in upon his seventh decade, Ahab must confront the reality that he has entered the twilight of his lifetime.

After forty years of active whaling, Ahab has seen most of his colleagues relegated to the margins of the business – Bildad and Peleg are now simply ship owners who control and contribute little more to voyages than provisions and felicitous wishes. Father Mapple, too, has assumed a landed position as a pastor of a small Nantucket church where the majority of his parish consists of those people who are left behind by sailors – wives, widows, children, and those too old or infirm to join the vigorous and lengthy sea-journeys. While these men are healthy, engaged with their community, and content in their new roles, Ahab only sees them as marginalized members of the Nantucket community because they are no longer actively whaling. After all, the term ‘land-lubber’ is used derisively by sailors to refer to those men too afraid or too young or old to be at sea. Whaling is an occupation only for the young, hearty, and brave, and former sailors like Bildad, Peleg, and Father Mapple are no longer members of that cohort. Only those few elderly who are too impoverished, such as the carpenter, or a member of a socially disadvantaged class, such as the cook, continue to labor on active whaling vessels, but these men do so only with a bevy of complaints that they are unfit for their tasks. With the possibility of the Pequod’s current voyage extending three or four years, Ahab knows that this may very well be his final excursion as commander. Upon the Pequod’s return to Nantucket, Ahab may be forced to resign from his position and face retirement, thereby ending the occupation in which he has been employed since adolescence. Thus, in the span of a few years, Ahab could be transformed from a hearty sea captain to a superannuated, crippled gentleman relegated to the hearthside next to his much-younger wife and child. His age and infirmity will cause him to join the ranks of

Bildad, Peleg, and Mapple – marginalized members of active whaling communities. This sea-change, if the pun may be excused, daunts Ahab as it would any old man facing the loss of his employment and subsequent economic and social dispossession.

Ahab believes that the only way to prove his continued relevancy in his occupation is to kill Moby-Dick because the whale is emblematic of nature's immortality. As a human, Ahab is angered by the recognition of his own mortality and so he seeks to destroy nature in order to deprive it from the immortality that is denied to him. Ahab protests, "All visible objects, men, are but as pasteboard masks. . . . How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me" (Melville 236). Ahab can only regain his vitality and relevancy by destroying the animal that has taken it away from him and who appears to be unassailable. By striking at the whale, Ahab feels he can defeat nature and cease aging. As Richard Slotkin explains, Ahab "has been wounded by the whale as by time, and his response to both wounds, both diminutions of his vigor, is violence, hatred, and repudiation rather than love" (22-23). After spending nearly four decades in an industry founded on violence and killing, Ahab only knows how to react in kind. Despite his injury, Ahab rails against nature and his senescence. David Leverenz sees Ahab's "monstrous need to dominate" Moby-Dick because his "ideology designed to manage and master fear becomes, paradoxically, a way of intensifying and burying fear" (73). Since Ahab equates senectitude with deterioration, he becomes afraid of old age and attempts to thwart time's advancement by striking out at the metonymic whale, the only physical embodiment of nature Ahab can defeat. Richard Brodhead evaluates Ahab's

motivation for hunting Moby-Dick, claiming, “Ahab would assert his unconditional mastery over nature because he knows so unrelievedly that nature is our master: that it creates and uncreates (and mutilates) us without our will, that we are at best deposed heirs of the kingdom we feel we ought to rule” (*School* 37). Ultimately, Ahab fails to kill Moby-Dick because he can no more change nature than he can prevent his own senescence. Ahab’s battle with the whale ends as any man’s confrontation with nature inevitably ends – with his eventual death and the relentless progression of nature. However, Ahab’s selfish determination to pursue Moby-Dick affects not only his life, but that of his crew’s as well because, in the aristocratic, hierarchical social model aboard the Pequod, Ahab control the destiny of his subordinates.

Captain Ahab, as the superior on the Pequod, both by virtue of his age and his captaincy, is the linchpin of the ship’s community. Because the captain was the most important single individual on a whaling ship, he was carefully selected for his skills. His position is one that the whaling tradition had endowed with implicit trust; a captain was trusted to act in the best economic interest of his crew and the ship’s stakeholders. By returning safely to port, not only with his ship and crew, but also with saleable whale byproducts, the captain would enrich his entire community. In return, the community placed their confidence in the captain to sustain their economy. Captain Bildad, one of the majority owners of the Pequod comments on this economic relationship, noting, “thou must consider the duty thou owest to the other owners of this ship – widows and orphans, many of them . . . we may be taking the bread from [them]” (Melville 112-13). Since captains were such essential components of society, they were not chosen lightly. Rather,

men who had demonstrated their knowledge of the ocean, a capacity for intelligent decision-making, an ability to inspire their crew, and a capacity for fearlessness when facing a mammalian adversary many times larger than their own gear and tackle were granted these positions. These men were typically in their green old age – still vigorous and physically capable yet experienced on the seas and vetted by their peers.<sup>88</sup>

Ahab is an aged man who fills the essential requirements of a whaling captain. Ishmael physically describes the fifty-eight year-old captain at the outset of the voyage:

His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus. Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. . . . Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship's ever-pitching prow. There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsunderable willfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance. (Melville 177)

Ahab has been chosen to lead this voyage because he has proven that he is a successful captain capable of returning to port with the profits of his cruise stowed below deck. According to Bildad and Peleg, Ahab's previous accomplishments in the industry provide some insurance against the normal investment risks in undertaking a voyage. Peleg informs Ishmael, "I know Captain Ahab well; I've sailed with him as mate years ago . . . it's better to sail with a moody good captain than a laughing bad one" (116). By all accounts, Ahab appears to be the captain most likely to make an economic success out of

---

<sup>88</sup> See Chapter 1 for an antebellum definition of green old age.

any voyage he agrees to lead, which is why Peleg and Bildad, and by extension of their economic investment, many members of the community place their trust in Ahab's ability to lead the mission.

However, Melville makes it clear that Ahab violates the social contract component of economic productivity. With most of Nantucket economically invested in the Pequod's voyage, Ahab has a duty to pursue and kill the greatest number of whales possible in order to increase his ship's profits. Ahab does permit the crew to chase some whales, but his main objective is to track Moby-Dick, the whale who took off his leg and jolted him into the realization that he had become an old man. Ahab's motivation in pursuing these other whales, however, is not to benefit the crew or the Nantucketers who were financially dependent on the voyage's profits. Instead, Ahab used the whale hunts as a way to distract the crew from his true aim. Ahab muses on his crew's mentality, asserting, "all sailors of all sorts are more or less capricious and unreliable . . . when retained for any object remote and blank in the pursuit . . . it is above all things requisite that temporary interests and employments should intervene and hold them healthily suspended for the final dash" (Melville 306-07). Ahab understands the social contract and his role; he is supposed to supervise an economically productive voyage. However, Ahab uses both his knowledge of the social contract and his authoritative position as captain to manipulate his crew into following his selfish desires. Ahab decides, "I will not strip these men . . . of all hopes of cash – aye, cash. They may scorn cash now; but let some months go by, and no perspective promise of it to them, and then this same quiescent cash all at once mutinying in them, and then this same cash would soon cashier

Ahab” (308). Ahab is acutely aware that the men under his command expect him to fulfill the social contract of the workplace, so he proceeds to appear publicly to uphold his role as a profit-driven captain, but privately he has no interest in launching a lucrative voyage. His sole interest is a selfish one.

Ahab is also chosen to lead the voyage because of his character. Peleg and Bildad mistakenly believe that Ahab has personal integrity – he is the same man that he always has been. Unlike Hawthorne’s robust but inane Inspector and the intelligent but infirm Collector, Ahab had maintained both health and intellect until his most recent voyage when he lost a portion of his leg while battling Moby-Dick. From Peleg, we learn that after Ahab lost his leg “he was a little out of his mind for a spell” (Melville 116). When pressed by Ishmael, Peleg asserts, “I know what he is – a good man – something like me . . . Aye, aye I know that he was never very jolly . . . I know, too, that ever since he lost his leg last voyage by that accursed whale, he’s been a kind of moody – desperate moody, and savage sometimes; but that will all pass off” (116). Out of Peleg’s own mouth comes the warning that Ahab has transformed since he lost his leg, yet neither Peleg nor Bildad recognize that this change is permanent, or else they would not have chosen him to captain their ship. Peleg is blinded by his personal relationship with Ahab. Not only has he sailed under Ahab’s command in the past, but he also favorably compares himself to Ahab. Melville is making a point here about the danger of nostalgia when evaluating seniors. Peleg is oblivious to Ahab’s change because he only sees Ahab as the man he remembers from their past relationship and not the man that he has become since he realized he was old. Moreover, Peleg is awed by Ahab’s previous achievements, which

further blinds him to Ahab's shifting personality. Peleg reverently recalls, "Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales. . . . Oh! . . . *he's Ahab*" (115). All of Ahab's former successes have made Peleg insensible to Ahab's personal transformation. Peleg is so fixated upon this glorious past that he fails to see the danger of placing a monomaniacal senior in charge of a ship and crew, and this is precisely the danger that Melville warns against in the aristocratic social model. Blinded by nostalgia for the man that was, Peleg forfeits his crew's life, his ship, and his community's profits because he cannot accurately judge Ahab's loss of personal integrity. Peleg faults Moby-Dick for Ahab's current moroseness, but he is convinced that once the physical injury heals fully, Ahab will return to his former self; he will regain his integrity that has only been temporarily disrupted. Peleg dismisses Ahab's insanity as only a result of "the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump . . . as anyone might see," but the reader soon ascertains that this period of psychosis forms Ahab's subsequent personality (116).

Ahab's loss of personal integrity is precipitated by two events that make him recognize his senescence. One is the initial loss of his leg to Moby-Dick and the other is a groin injury suffered when he slips on his wooden prosthesis. These two events fundamentally change Ahab from the accomplished man that Peleg has known to the selfish, monomaniacal captain of the Pequod. As we have already seen, Ahab has not been forced to confront his senescence until he loses his leg to Moby-Dick. Only when he is wounded does he suddenly realize that he is old. Therefore, while critics have

viewed the loss of the leg as rationale for Ahab's anger at Moby-Dick, the leg is only the catalyst for Ahab's rage at his inability to prevent his senescence. Although he is reported to have struggled mightily with his emotions, "after losing his leg, Ahab cannot face life as the future proffers it. This does not mean that he is cowardly, that it takes more courage to live as a crippled person. It is, however, to say that to live thusly requires a courage that Ahab does not have" (Portales 107). Rather than seeing the potential in life as an elderly man, Ahab sees only irrelevancy, illness, and mortality. Instead of taking joy in his young wife and child who await his return from his incessant journeying, Ahab perceives only a loss of physical mobility perhaps leading to senility and lack of utility, which will ultimately and only end in death. Or, as Robert Zoellner claims, "Life for Ahab is not a process of regeneration or renewal or rebirth. It is instead a steady declension into nothingness and annihilation" ("Ahab's" 105). The loss of the leg is only the harbinger of the other losses Ahab will experience in his old age – his health, his occupation, and his intellect. For Ahab, "living is only dying" and his senectitude has only brought him closer to his death (106).

The second event that solidifies Ahab's transformed personality is the groin injury he incurs after slipping on his prosthetic leg shortly before the Pequod is due to sail. One night, Ahab was found "lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin" (Melville 667). Although Freudian scholars have had a veritable field day with this incident, the injury is more than physical or linked to sexual impotency. While it is entirely possible

that Ahab has been rendered sexually impotent by the groin injury, the accident has also further reinforced his nihilistic psychological state. Zoellner avows, “The loss of his leg has threatened Ahab’s *life*; the subsequent groin wound has threatened his *life-source*” (*Sea-Salt* 92). Although Zoellner is referring to a sexual “life-source,” his assertion also reflects Ahab’s senescence. Ahab has been buoyed by his vitality and capability in commanding a whaling ship. His position as captain, which accords him the respect of not only his crew, but also the entire community of Nantucket, has required stamina, agility, intelligence, and determination. He has spent nearly his entire life honing his craft and earning the communal respect that is reflected in Bildad and Peleg’s approbation of his skills. The fall and subsequent injury has only reinforced his perception of his age, fragility, and irrelevancy.

Found alone on the ground, Ahab could have been lying injured for hours. By himself, Ahab broods over his sense of abandonment, which he links to his senectitude. This second injury has occurred when Ahab is alone, which causes him to feel that he is slowly becoming irrelevant to his community because of his age, which he continually associates with infirmity. He must suffer in solitary silence until he is later discovered and brought home to heal. However, the mental injuries incurred from his abandonment will not be healed as easily as his physical wound. At the time of his near-impalement, Ahab comes to believe “that all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe; and he too plainly seemed to see . . . all miserable events do naturally beget their like” (Melville 667). Now that he has entered his senior years, Ahab believes he will only continue to experience further degradation. Ahab links this

recognition of his senescence to Moby-Dick because the whale “has not only deprived Ahab of his leg, but also indirectly struck at the most vital point of a relationship which is the primary humanizing influence of his old age. Ahab regards this second and psychologically much more profound violation as the direct consequence of the first” (Zoellner *Sea-Salt* 92). Since Ahab views life as a progressive degeneration, he assumes that this fall is only the first of many such injuries and embarrassments. This fear of humiliation comes to fruition aboard the Pequod when Ahab has to be hoisted in and out of the whaling boats via a rigging system rather than climbing aboard of his own power and when he fractures his prosthetic leg again at sea. Because Ahab “is well aware of his increasing age, of his graying hair and his weakening limbs . . . he begins to realize that death may overtake him before he learns what he must, and the unsatisfied quest makes him frantic as time inexorably moves on” (Marovitz 140). Since Ahab considers senescence synonymous to loss, Ahab concludes that he must prove his vigor and intellect yet again in order to preclude additional losses or embarrassments, which is why he determines to kill Moby-Dick. If Ahab can slaughter the most feared and storied whale of his era, he will not only prove that he can defeat the immortality of nature, but he will also prove that he is still a dynamic figure in his industry worthy of respect.

Critics, including Sanford Marovitz, fail to see that Ahab confronts the same challenges and fears that any elderly man in the nineteenth century faces – the possibility of becoming obsolete in his society – a loss of utility and place in the rapidly shifting socioeconomic and political climate of the antebellum era. This thought frightens Ahab so much that he loses the personality that had made him so respected in his occupation

because his fear causes him to act selfishly, which he had not done and could not do as a successful whaling captain. His trepidation over becoming irrelevant to his profession in his senescence causes Ahab to lose the personality that had earned him respect from his previous crews. Through political patronage, Hawthorne's senescent Custom-House employees have ensured their economic stability, but Ahab has no political machine on which to rely. Instead, he is dependent upon the approbation of his employers, Bildad and Peleg, who may at any time withdraw their support. Ahab must continue to perform his job competently, which means returning to port with a ship bursting with casks of commodified sperm oil and ambergris and bales of baleen. Henry Myers recognizes this affiliation between Ahab and other elderly antebellum men, acknowledging, "Although Melville has made Ahab different in degree from other men, he has not made him different in kind" (25). Ahab's age-cohort is the first American generation of men who face the possibility of outliving their economic utility, so Ahab's fears represent what many men his age were confronting simultaneously.

Ahab's loss of personal integrity and his lack of economic productivity on his final voyage signal his breach of the social contract. Since Ahab operates in an aristocratic system where a clear hierarchy of power is instituted, his violation of the social contract in the workplace would permit his subordinates to cease to uphold their portion of the agreement. However, the Pequod's crew maintains its slavish obedience to Ahab. According to Melville, the Pequod's crew submits too readily to their commander. Harry Slochower believes Ahab succeeds in inducing his crew to fulfill their side of the social contract while he violates his obligations:

because at this stage of American development, there is as yet no cohesive commune. . . . Ahab's crew are somewhere between individual differentiation and 'the melting pot'. They are unable to act jointly in their common interests and are not sufficiently ego-centered to rebel anarchically. They are the raw, eclectic (sexless) form of the American lower depths toward the middle of the nineteenth century. (263-64)

Those shipmates who possessed an ethical character grounded in family and religion, such as Starbuck, "had given up their liberty" to a leader with "no sense of moral responsibility, no respect for human dignity" (Stubbings 86). Others of a more mercenary stamp choose not to interfere with Ahab's plans "out of the fear that they may lose their profits (the owners) or their pay (the men)" (Martin 87). Whether they were motivated by their own avaricious desires or a belief in the ethics of hierarchy matters little; ultimately their unquestioning deference towards Ahab leads to the loss of the Pequod and their lives. Out of the entire crew, only Ishmael questions Ahab's motives and methods. Consequently, he is the only member of the crew to survive the voyage to return to civilization and promote a democratic vision for society that will prevent such abuses of authority. Ahab is able to retain the respect of the remainder of his crew through intimidation, which Melville condemns as an abuse of Ahab's privileged position. As Christopher Sten explains, "Ahab is a ruler who forsakes his public duty for his private need and is thus transformed into a tyrant. Rather than serve the group he has been entrusted to lead, he uses his position to force the group to serve him" (29). It is Ahab's misuse of his rank and the unquestioning compliance of the crew, which causes

Melville to fault the aristocratic system as one fraught with the potential for corruption and instead embrace a democratic social model.

Melville uses Ahab's manipulation of Starbuck as the most powerful example of both the captain's exploitation of his subordinates and a crewmember's acquiescence to his superior to make his claim about the possibility of abuse inherent in the aristocratic social model. Many critics have noted Starbuck's complex relationship with Ahab; both reverential and revolted by turns, Starbuck struggles to understand why he continues to obey and respect Ahab when he knows that Ahab has broken the economic social contract. In a soliloquy, Starbuck reveals his conflicting emotions respecting Ahab: "Horrible old man! . . . I plainly see my miserable office, – to obey, rebelling; and worse yet, to hate with touch of pity! For in his eyes I read some lurid woe would shrivel me up, had I it. Yet is there hope. Time and tide flow wide" (Melville 244). Starbuck appreciates Ahab's position as master and commander of the Pequod.<sup>89</sup> He is also moved by Ahab's pathos since Starbuck sees Ahab's struggle with his age and infirmity. Because he is touched by the older man's condition, he sympathizes with him, realizing that he too would feel similarly if he were older. However, Starbuck also recognizes the danger inherent in Ahab's mad quest. As a man with a wife and child waiting for his return, Starbuck must think beyond the bonds of the social contract in the workplace because he has responsibilities other than those to his captain. Shortly before the final battle with Moby-Dick, Starbuck has the opportunity to kill or capture Ahab. He stands

---

<sup>89</sup> In his essay, "The Fate of the Ungodly God-like Man," F. O. Matthiessen notes Starbuck's admiration of Ahab as "he moves besides Ahab as he leans over the rail, the mate of thirty beside the captain of twice his age," insinuating that Ahab's advanced age influences their relationship (74). However, Matthiessen does not pursue this line or reasoning any further.

outside Ahab's cabin holding a loaded musket, and contemplates, "Is heaven a murderer when its lightning strikes a would-be murderer in his bed, tinding sheets and skin together? – And would I be a murderer then, if," but Starbuck cannot finish his train of thought or carry out the course of action the musket suggests (737-38). He is torn between respecting an elder who is also his superior and honoring his domestic responsibility to his family in Nantucket. As a man who has been indoctrinated with loyalty to his older leader, Starbuck attempts a milder course of persuasion instead.

Ahab, as an astute leader, understands Starbuck's disposition and uses this knowledge to retain control of his subordinate. In fact, Ahab is acutely aware once he has secured Starbuck's compliance. When Ahab first announces his intention to pursue Moby-Dick despite Starbuck's reluctance, Ahab taunts him, saying "Stand up amid the general hurricane, thy one tost [sic] sapling cannot, Starbuck! . . . From this poor hunt, then, the best lance out of all Nantucket, surely he will not hang back, when every foremasthand has clutched a whetstone" (Melville 237). And, observing the effect of these words upon Starbuck in front of the entire crew, Ahab observes, "Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion" (237). Ahab thus perverts the social contract of the workplace between himself and Starbuck in order to achieve his selfish ends. Or, as Stein claims, "Ahab holds Starbuck and the crew in a spell of fusion vitalized by a 'calculating attention' that involves both guilt and flattery, theater and the rawest need" (38). Ahab leverages his age and position to ensure that Starbuck as well as the rest of the crew comply with his selfish intentions on the voyage.

The most direct confrontation between the two men that reveals Ahab's calculating behavior occurs on the day before Moby-Dick has been sighted for the final chase. Ahab recounts the hardscrabble life he has known after forty years upon the seas and pleads with Starbuck, "But do I look very old, so very, very old, Starbuck? I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise. . . . let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God" (Melville 777). While Ahab is only thinking about his selfish goal, he understands that Starbuck is a man motivated by duty. By playing on Starbuck's notion of responsibility to the economic social contract, Ahab reminds Starbuck of his obligations as a young subordinate to him. Ahab exaggerates his sense of his own age, comparing himself to the oldest man in the world. Through this reinforcement of his age, Ahab impresses upon Starbuck his responsibility to respect and submit to not just any old man, but perhaps the oldest man in the world. By claiming that he is the most ancient man alive, Ahab intimates that Starbuck owes him an even greater level of obedience because Ahab is no ordinary elderly man, but the most extraordinary one living. Although Ahab has no qualms about breaching the social contract, he demands an elevated compliance from his subordinates, which he emphasizes in this discussion with Starbuck.

Along with his plea, Ahab allows one tear drop to fall into the ocean. Only after Ahab sheds his tear "is it clear that he is worthy of our attention and sympathy, that he is fully human, capable of appreciating the common life, and that he feels as we feel" (Sten 79). Unfortunately, Christopher Sten is deceived by Ahab's plea just as the entire

community of the Pequod is duped. Starbuck responds to what he perceives as humanity in Ahab, the very “humanities” that Bildad and Peleg assert Ahab possesses, by attempting to save Ahab from his plan, but ultimately following Ahab’s commands until his death. The first mate is further disarmed by Ahab’s “acknowledg[ment of] his own frail human nature weighted down by problems he cannot endure” (Pachmuss 28). This sense of inadequacy in his old age that Ahab presents to Starbuck is one of Ahab’s fears, but he reveals it because he can use these feelings to engender Starbuck’s sense of duty to the social contract, not because he wants to confide in another individual. Although Starbuck believes that his conversation with Ahab leads to “Romantic and sentimental masculinities v[ying] for the tottering soul” of Ahab, Ahab has predetermined that Starbuck will submit to his demands and he will use any means of influence possible to persuade Starbuck to comply (Penry 234). Unwilling to rejoin the Nantucket community as a superannuated commander and remain at home with his family, Ahab rebuffs Starbuck’s plea because failing to kill Moby-Dick and returning home without proving his physicality and dominance is precisely what Ahab fears.<sup>90</sup>At the conclusion of their conversation, Starbuck is left with a face “blanched to a corpse’s hue with despair” because he realizes the pointlessness in trying to sway Ahab from his purpose (Melville 779). Instead, he complies with his commander’s orders because he must prove to himself that above all, he is a man of duty. Despite his own better judgment, Starbuck

---

<sup>90</sup> Ahab’s behavior may also be motivated by what Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry identify as the disengagement model of aging, where “aging is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social systems he belongs to. The process may be initiated by the individual or by others in the situation. The aging person may withdraw more markedly from some classes of people while remaining relatively close to others. His withdrawal may be accompanied from the outset by an increased preoccupation with himself; certain institutions in society may make the withdrawal easy for him” (14).

can neither kill Ahab nor disobey his orders because his own personal integrity requires that he uphold his responsibility to the economic social contract and his role within the aristocratic hierarchy that demands respect for his elderly superiors.

Although Starbuck is only one of the Pequod's few dozen men, Melville ensures that "the ship is carefully developed as a perfect microcosm of the world as a whole. It thus becomes not *a* world, but *the* world" (Cook 113). By placing such primacy on the whaling vessel's assemblage, Melville extrapolates the lessons of Ahab's abuse of power and the crew's unquestioning submission to him to critique the aristocratic social model where the elderly automatically receive respect from younger generations. As Henry Nash Smith notes, Melville's

book forces us to recognize that for him, at least, American society of the mid-nineteenth century represented not the benign present and hopeful future proclaimed by official spokesmen, but an environment threatening the individual with a disintegration of personality which he could avoid only by the half-miraculous achievement of a sense of community, of brotherhood, unattainable within the official culture. (75)

If senescent men such as Ahab are allowed to govern communities, and if societies so readily accede their power like the Pequod's crew, then the American civilization could be destroyed by the unhindered power granted to heedless or egocentric aged rulers.<sup>91</sup> By making both commander and crew liable for the eventual loss of the Pequod, Melville illustrates how the system of a hierarchical community based on age is broken. As

---

<sup>91</sup> To Ahab, "the crew of the *Pequod* are much like the other parts of his ship, and he sees them much as he sees other tools and objects. They are in service to his needs. No more than the sail that captures the wind is the man who fixes the canvas" (Cahir 128).

captain, “Ahab is presented as having a rightful, dictatorial authority. . . . This authority, nonetheless, is subject to the demands of the rational system to which the commercial enterprise is dedicated. Insofar as Ahab represents the rational covenant, absolute authority is rightfully his” (Radloff 33). Once Ahab breaks the economic social contract, however, he should lose his authority, but through his exploitation of the aristocratic social model, he retains it, which eventually costs everyone but Ishmael their lives. Because the crew failed to dispute Ahab, “The novel pictures the ship, finally, as a ship of fools deceived by Ahab’s inspiration. . . . They are merely puppets” (Thomson 175). Ahab exploits the knowledge that his crew already has been instilled with admiration for their capable, famed captain and exposes the weakness of their society as he single-handedly alters their mission and leads the men to their demise.<sup>92</sup> Melville uses the Pequod’s dysfunctional community to argue for Young America – embracing the current young generation rather than the older ones and dispensing with an age-based hierarchical system. Even though Melville may not be advocating “a pastoral vision of a restored harmony that might be achieved if only men would learn to love each other (individually and socially),” as Robert Martin suggests, Melville outlines a reciprocal relationship for the workplace that provides both the elderly and the young with defined expectations and incentives (94). This economic social contract would require the elderly to earn the respect of their younger colleagues through their demonstration of economic productivity and personal integrity. The democratic model that would use this contract as its foundation would then judge everyone in the workplace, both young and old on their

---

<sup>92</sup> Leo Simmons explains, “respect for old age has, as a rule, been accorded to persons on the basis of some particular asset which they possessed” (51).

economic output as well as personal character. In such a model, the elderly who upheld their portion of the social contract would retain their occupational positions and societal respect, while younger generations would have the ability to work with older associates who would be laboring towards the common economic objectives of increased profit that would benefit the individuals in the industrial marketplace as well as society as a whole through improved economic conditions.

The public reaction to Melville's novel was mixed. Unlike *The Scarlet Letter*, which presented two clearly defined sections for the reader, *Moby-Dick* appeared to be a blend of various topics and styles that baffled readers accustomed to more traditional, linear narrative styles. Although most critics ultimately praised *Moby-Dick*, many were at a loss as to how to categorize the novel. The confusion over the novel's genre can most succinctly be summarized by Evert Duyckink's review in the November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1851 issue of the *Literary World*, where he determined "this volume of Moby Dick may be pronounced a most remarkable sea-dish – an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feeling, bad sayings" (19). In fact, a large number of reviewers failed to move beyond a discussion of the novel's variety to even cursorily address the plot, much less the characters. However, a few commentators noted Ahab's recurring presence and his management of his younger, subordinate crew. An anonymous reviewer for the January 1852 issue of the *Southern Quarterly Review* complained that Ahab:

who pursues his personal revenges against the fish who has taken off his leg, at the expense of ship, crew and owners, is a monstrous bore, whom

Mr. Melville has no way helped, by enveloping him in a sort of mystery. His ravings, and the ravings of some of the tributary characters, and the ravings of Mr. Melville himself, meant for eloquent declamation, are such as would justify a writ *de lunatico* against all parties. (“Prose” 412)

If we read beyond the reviewer’s dislike of the madness that Melville infuses throughout the novel, we find a condemnation of Ahab’s decision to hunt Moby-Dick not because it leads to Ahab’s death, but rather because it has an adverse effect on the community surrounding Ahab. The writer does not censure Ahab for his fear of senescence, but rather because he allows his feelings to interfere with his responsibility to his community through perversion of the economic social contract. No man, either young or old, should ignore his responsibilities to the social contract because the breakdown in the covenant can destroy the mutual beneficence of community by focusing on one’s own selfish agenda. By choosing to pursue Moby-Dick rather than follow the Pequod’s usual mission of returning to Nantucket with a profitable cargo of whale byproducts, Ahab has broken the trust established not only between himself and his employers, but also the crew with whom he is entrusted, and by extension, the families of the crewmembers. In effect, Ahab has violated the faith that the entire whaling community has invested in him, which to this reviewer, is Ahab’s ultimate crime. An anonymous columnist from the *Albion* corroborates this indignation that Ahab’s breach with his crew generates in some readers. He writes, “At times the subordinates murmur at [Ahab’s] palpable neglect of their interests; but his undaunted courage and authoritative air, and their own superstitious fears of him, prevail over every other consideration” (“Vile” 13). Here,

Ahab has become a manipulator who uses his position and knowledge of his crew's obedience to the social contract to derail the Pequod's assignment for his own selfish motives. The shipmates recognize that Ahab is risking both their livelihoods and their lives by hunting the whale, but they are so cowed by his abuse of authority that they cannot effectively object. Both these reviewers thus indirectly realize the problem with the aristocratic social model established in this community – the respect automatically granted to Ahab based on his position and age by the community coupled with Ahab's understanding of this power dynamic results in Ahab's ability to manipulate his colleagues for his own egotistical ends. Or, as Hilda Stubbings would claim nearly 150 years later, Ahab's exploitation of his community is “representative of human beings who, because they have power granted by society, endeavor to usurp the thoughts and volition of others for a vainglorious undertaking” (4). In short, those reviewers who perceived the social commentary Melville infused in his novel understood the danger inherent in a society that unquestioningly privileged people based upon age and readily conceded its authority to them. As Hume and Smith indicated, only societies that work toward the common good, whether in the domestic or the economic sphere, are sustainable.

Melville, a man already disappointed with his own lack of economic success at the age of thirty-two, created a whaling community devastated by its deceptive and egotistical leader. However, Melville leaves Ishmael as the sole survivor to return not only to tell Ahab's story but also as a sign of hope that society can learn from others' mistakes and embrace a democratic model. In this new societal organization, all

individuals, young and old, would have more incentive to participate in the social contract in the workplace because they would be assessed on their productivity and their personal integrity without the ameliorating effects of nostalgia that men such as Hawthorne applied to their elderly colleagues. While Hawthorne creates these two social contract criteria to support the aristocratic model in the workplace, he believes that they are broad enough and the workplace narrow enough for these components to foster productive professional relationships in industry. Melville, on the other hand, sees the potential for the exploitation of the aristocratic system that these social contract criteria create if the elderly being evaluated are viewed through the rose-colored glasses (spectacles?) of nostalgia. Instead, Melville wants all workers assessed on their current economic productivity and maintenance of personal integrity in order for the most equitable community to be generated in the industrial sphere. Perhaps no one better captures the dilemma that senescence creates in the economic social contract than Melville, who, in an 1849 letter to Evert Duyckink, writes, “Ah, this sovereign virtue of age – how can we living men attain unto it. . . . My Dear Sir, the two great things yet to be discovered are these – The Art of rejuvenating old age in men, & oldageifying youth in books” (Davis 82-83). Both Melville and Hawthorne think that they have solved this predicament, but both do so in radically different ways, leaving us with two competing social models and perhaps no nearer to the answer than either author really was.

## Chapter Four:

### The Southland: The Social Contract from the African-American Perspective

The surest sign of age is loneliness.

-- Amos Bronson Alcott

In the preceding chapters, I have concentrated on the formation of the intergenerational social contract and the two types of social models which it informs in both the domestic and economic spheres. However, these previous chapters only focus on Northern white communities. In fact, Susan Warner's text is the only one based outside of Massachusetts, unless the actual voyage of Herman Melville's *Pequod* is considered. Therefore, these chapters provide a limited perspective on the various forms that the social contract could take in the antebellum era and how it could be used as the foundation for either a hierarchical, aristocratic organization of society or an equitable, democratic structuring of the social order. In both cases, white individuals are the only participants in these pacts so we need to consider what happens to the social contract and subsequent societal configuration when African-Americans are brought into this dialogue in the 1850s. How does the added issue of race affect the ways in which both blacks and whites construct the intergenerational social contract? Also, how does race complicate the construction of a social model when the political issues of slavery intervene in the discourse at this time?

These questions were highly relevant and politicized in the 1850s in both the northern and southern regions of the country. The abolitionist movement, led by William Lloyd Garrison since the early 1830s, was heightening its rhetoric against slavery after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which demanded the repatriation of any escaped slaves to their owners. As abolitionists cited this law in their argument that slaveholders mistreated their slaves, pro-slavery apologists insisted that their paternalistic system actually prevented slaves from becoming burdens to society and protected them from exploitation and abuse in a western civilization with which they were unacculturated.<sup>93</sup> One of the primary accusations against slaveholders was that they deliberately maltreated or abandoned their elderly slaves because they were no longer productive. Sojourner Truth, for example, accused New York slaveowner Charles Hardenbergh of evicting her parents, James and Elizabeth Baumfree, in their old age, forcing them to find accommodations and independent employment despite their physical infirmities. However, apologists argued that their paternal system sheltered elderly slaves through the implementation of a cross-racial social contract whereby aged slaves were provided rest, shelter, and material sustenance by their owners in return for their previous labor. In this paternalistic system, a modified aristocratic contract arose where senescent slaves were honored and respected by their younger, white owners for their prior work, yet these elderly men and women were not liberated. Instead, proponents of paternalism argued that old slaves would be better protected within the slave system so

---

<sup>93</sup> See Leslie Howard Owen's book, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* and Richard H. Steckel's chapter, "Women, Work, and Health under Plantation Slavery in the United States" in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas* for a thorough discussion of the status of elderly slaves.

their physical needs could be met by their grateful owners rather of granting them freedom, for which they were unprepared and where they would be subject to prejudice and/or hard labor in order to maintain their self-sufficiency.

Both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs objected to this promotion of paternalism as a beneficial intergenerational, interracial social model. Douglass and Jacobs offered their own resolutions to the injustices and hypocrisies that they perceived in the paternalistic model, but their solutions radically differed. Douglass's proposition simply adapts the white aristocratic model for a black society. He claims that the problem with the paternalistic system is that it operates in a cross-racial environment. White slaveholders, who spent their lives professing their superiority to the black race, Douglass argues, would never adopt an inherent respect for slaves no matter how old they were or how industriously they had labored for their white owners. Instead of expecting white slaveholders to demonstrate respect for their aged slaves, Douglass contends that the responsibility should be transferred to the younger black generation because they could properly revere their seniors without the issue of racial intolerance complicating their relationship. Douglass's social model is thus a transference of the aristocratic social model that was practiced in the white domestic sphere to the black home. Like Warner's social contract, Douglass claims that older generations should be creating emotional bonds with their families, working for the economic benefit of their families, and imparting moral or ethical guidance to their descendents. In return, younger generations should grant the elderly respect and provide for their physical, emotional, and mental needs as dictated by each senior's situation. This social contract would create the

foundation for an aristocratic social model whereby aged blacks would be privileged by virtue of the respect given to them by younger generations. Douglass believes this model would provide real security for aged blacks rather than the feigned protection offered by paternalistic proponents and it would allow younger blacks to have sustained contact with their forebearers, which was so often denied in the slave system.

Douglass proposes his social contract and model in all three of his autobiographies – *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1882). In his first two autobiographies, he claims that his maternal grandmother, Betsey Bailey, was abandoned by her owners and left to die alone.<sup>94</sup> Douglass uses Betsey’s dramatic death scene to advocate for his black version of the aristocratic social model and he argues that he would have better protected his grandmother from the exposure and loneliness she suffers prior to her death.<sup>95</sup> However, in Douglass’s third autobiography, he admits that he was misinformed about the circumstances surrounding his grandmother’s death; she was actually cared for by Thomas Auld, the brother-in-law of her owner in the last few years of her life. Douglass’s confession reveals two problems with his intergenerational social contract and model. First, Douglass is forced to acknowledge that paternalism is a viable system, even

---

<sup>94</sup> There are several variant spellings for Douglass’s maternal grandmother’s name. I will use Douglass’s version throughout the chapter unless a direct quotation from a secondary source employs one of the variants. For the remainder of the chapter, I will refer to Douglass’s first autobiography as *Narrative*, his second as *My Bondage*, and his third as *Life and Times*

<sup>95</sup> According to Leslie J. Pollard, “If age earned respect among the slaves, it was one of the ironies of slavery that its accompanying infirmities jeopardized the slave’s very existence in a system that valued only and individual’s productive capacity, and no doubt contributed to the ambivalence and anxiety characteristic of the aging process” (230).

if only in isolated cases. Second, Douglass must concede that his decision to escape from slavery deprived him of the opportunity to attend to his grandmother. Even though Douglass's circumstances as a slave may have prevented him from physically supporting his grandmother, his choice to escape meant that he irrevocably severed contact with Betsey and thus he was in breach of the very social contract that he advocated in his previous texts.

Harriet Jacobs, unlike Douglass, does not attempt to adapt white social models for the black experience. Instead, she develops a broader view of the social model debate in order to recommend some guidelines for the entire social system. Rather than advocate any specific criteria for intergenerational social contracts, Jacobs claims that it is more important that the pact is founded on stable principles and is mutually negotiated by both the young and the old, regardless of the components of the agreement. This social contract can also exist in a multiracial environment, where blacks and whites can form covenants with one another. Moreover, Jacobs contends that entire social model conflict has been specious because participants have presumed that the aristocratic and democratic models are mutually exclusive. Jacobs declares that not only can the democratic and aristocratic social models coexist, but also that whatever version society approves is inconsequential. Although society can function in both models simultaneously, Jacobs warns that two problems may occur, but that they can be remedied. First, Jacobs states that one hazard with the coexistence of multiple social models is the potential for an individual to misread the social model in which he/she is participating. This difficulty can be solved by a careful delineation of social model

expectations based on stable intergenerational social contract criteria. Second, not all social contracts and models will result in the elderly gaining respect from younger generations. However, Jacobs asserts that as long as the aged receive respect from at least one social model in their community, then they will maintain a privileged position in some of their relationships, which will allow them to endure marginalization in others.

Jacobs employs her maternal grandmother, Aunt Martha as the figure upon which she develops her larger rationale for social contracts and models.<sup>96</sup> In her 1861 autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs recounts her grandmother's struggles to obtain her freedom and that of her descendents.<sup>97</sup> Martha encounters difficulties in achieving her objectives because her former owners, the Flints, continually alter the social contract criteria, which causes Martha to misread their attitude towards her. Jacobs claims that Martha would be more successful in obtaining her liberation as well as her children's and grandchildren's if she could rely on a stable social contract with the Flints. In fact, once Martha does develop a firm social contract with other white members of her community, she is capable of gaining her freedom and she has partial success in emancipating her family. Furthermore, through her domestic achievements, economic productivity, and her strong moral and ethical leadership, Martha earns the regard of many white and black citizens in her hometown of Edenton, North Carolina, which enables her to tolerate the disrespect she occasionally receives from other members of the community. By negotiating multiple social models and developing stable social contracts with both white and black individuals, Martha is able to carve out a space in her

---

<sup>96</sup> Jacobs uses pseudonyms to protect the identities of characters in her autobiography. Aunt Martha was really Jacobs's grandmother, Molly Horniblow.

<sup>97</sup> For the remainder of the chapter, I will refer to Jacobs's autobiography as *Incidents*.

community where she is physically comfortable and secure enough in her position that she chooses to remain a free black in a slave state rather than migrate to the free states. Because Martha finds fulfillment in her community, Jacobs's avocation of multiple social models is more effective than Douglass's transference of a white domestic, aristocratic model onto a black community because Jacobs has not broken her social contract with her grandmother after the two arrive at an agreement where Jacobs may flee the South yet be considered as abandoning Martha. Jacobs's guidelines for the formation of intergenerational social contracts and the mutual coexistence of aristocratic and democratic models is much more inclusive than any other author's proposal, which suggests a possible solution to the antebellum social model debate and a return to the principles established by David Hume and Adam Smith.<sup>98</sup>

### **Separate but Equal?: Frederick Douglass and the Transference of the Aristocratic Social Model**

As perhaps the most famous American fugitive slave, Frederick Douglass was capable of capitalizing on the tide of popularity of slave narratives in the North, but his work also transcended the simple retelling of his experiences in Tuckahoe and Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>99</sup> Writing for a white Northern audience, Douglass sought to appeal to his

---

<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, Adam Smith and David Hume disagreed over the morality of slavery. While Adam Smith opposed slavery "because slavery forced persons to disavow the intrinsic well-being and humanity of those enslaved and, therefore could not be approved for any benevolence of motive or for any tendency toward beneficent consequences," Hume "denied the humanity of people of African descent and supported their enslavement" (Kirkland 258).

<sup>99</sup> The publication of slave narratives markedly increased after 1830 with the suppression of Nat Turner's rebellion and the rapid increase of slavery in the Deep South. Charles Nichols concludes, "the very timeliness of the narratives was, perhaps, the largest factor in their popularity. Slavery was the most widely discussed and crucial problem of the age. No American could regard the matter with indifference, even if he were not a slaveholder or an abolitionist" (152).

readers with the concept “that Negroes were not unlike themselves” (Nichols 156). Because Douglass was denied equality within American antebellum society as a black man and former slave, he needed to convince readers that blacks and whites were similar in every respect and so should be treated equally. In order to make this comparison in the *Narrative*, Douglass fixated on two themes that would resonate with a white audience – domesticity and freedom.<sup>100</sup> Because Douglass desired to portray himself as an independent man, he was unable to directly engage issues of the family. However, depictions of his elderly grandmother provided Douglass an opportunity to discuss domestic matters. Betsey, who had labored for both the Anthony and Auld families as well as raised numerous children and grandchildren, was the ideal figure for Douglass to employ as an elderly black woman who was betrayed by the paternalistic system. Having demonstrated her loyalty to white and black families, Betsey is left to die alone, Douglass claims, which proves that cross-racial intergenerational social contracts are not honored by the younger white members. Instead, Douglass asserts that his family would have been able to properly respect and care for their matriarch if only they had been permitted to do so by their owners. By insisting that his own family could offer Betsey the respect she deserved after having nurtured her descendents, Douglass replicates the aristocratic social model where the elderly maintain a privileged position because younger generations revere them for their previous domestic contributions and their moral and ethical guidance. Douglass simply relocates this organizational structure to the black community.

---

<sup>100</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. identifies the slave narrative genre as “a ‘countergenre,’ a mediation between the novel of sentiment and the picaresque, oscillating somewhere between the two in a bipolar moment, set in motion by the mode of Confession” (214).

Much of what we know about Betsey Bailey other than the clues Douglass provides in his autobiographies comes from Dickson J. Preston's 1980 groundbreaking biography, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years*.<sup>101</sup> According to Preston's research, Betsey was born in May 1774 and was originally known as Bets. In 1797, when Betsey was twenty-three, Aaron Anthony married Ann Skinner, who was Betsey's owner, and moved her to his farm. Sometime after her removal to the Anthony farm, Betsey married Isaac, a freeman who had been manumitted several years prior to their union. Preston claims, that "although technically a slave, [Betsey] neither lived nor behaved like one from 1797 on" (17). In an unusual living arrangement, Betsey lived with Isaac on an independent parcel of land close to, but not on the Anthony's property. She was highly regarded in her community for her agricultural skills and her hand-woven fishing nets were in demand in several Maryland counties. All these facts are evidence that "Betsey Bailey, was a strong, self-reliant woman who, although a slave, lived a comparatively independent life and was considered a community leader" (Sundquist 5). Anthony family records indicate that Betsey gave birth to nine daughters, three sons, and had at least twenty-five grandchildren. While her children worked for both the Anthonies and other local whites, Betsey remained in her cabin raising her grandchildren, including Frederick, until they were old enough to be dutifully employed on the Anthony farm. Even though Betsey's occupation was not unusual for elderly slave women, it appears

---

<sup>101</sup> Much of Preston's information for the biography comes from the Anthony family papers. The Anthonies inherited the Bailey family from the Skinner family through marriage. These records include "a tabulation of the names, ages, and maternal parentage of all the blacks in [Anthony's] possession, carrying it back in some cases as far as the third generation. . . . The table was continued by Anthony descendents, who kept it up to date almost to the time of the Civil War. . . . The table contains the only written record of [Douglass's] birth, which it dates as February 1818" (Preston 8).

that caring for her grandchildren was the only task to which she was assigned.<sup>102</sup> Why Betsey was granted such independence remains unclear; Nathan Huggins suggests that it was due to her “privileged status, not only among slaves, but with Aaron Anthony” while Douglass’s biographer William McFeely believes Anthony may have had more mercenary motives (4). He suspects that she may have “bought her independence by agreeing to rear her grandchildren without any assistance, such as rations of corn” (9).<sup>103</sup> Regardless of the reason, Betsey maintained her independence even after the death of Isaac, and continued living in their cabin until her own health failed. She was taken in by Thomas Auld, the brother-in-law of her owner until she died in November 1849.

Douglass commences his assault on the paternalism by recounting Betsey’s fulfillment of the intergenerational social contract with both her black and white families. Douglass’s version of the social contract requires the elderly to contribute to both of their families through the creation of emotional bonds, the establishment of a productive work ethic, and the communication of moral and ethical wisdom. In return, younger generations, black and white, should grant the aged black individual respect and provide physical and emotional support if needed. Douglass depicts Betsey as the quintessence of a senescent black person upholding the social contract with both her black and white

---

<sup>102</sup> In her article, “My Mother Was Much of a Woman: Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery,” Jacqueline Jones describes the role of aged slave women: “an elderly woman, with the help of children too young to work in the fields, often was assigned charge of a nursery in the quarters, where mothers left their babies during the day. To keep any number of little ones happy and out of trouble for up to twelve to fourteen hours at a time taxed the patience of most kindly souls. Slave children grew up with a mixture of affection and fear for the ‘grandmothers’ who had dished out the licks along with the cornbread and clabber” (250).

<sup>103</sup> Whether Betsey gained nominal independence by foregoing material assistance from her owner may be a moot point, however, because as Leslie Howard Owens indicates, “planters often classified [elderly slaves] as half hands (most slaves were full hands) or as the equivalent to no hand when they were unable to work, and cut the rations they received” (47).

families. In the *Narrative*, Douglass introduces Betsey as a formative influence on his childhood. As William Ramsey notes, Betsey was “The first source of Douglass’ nurturing sensibility” (31). During Douglass’s youth, Betsey became both his protector and instructor. Douglass acknowledges that the first years spent in the care of his grandmother had shielded him from much of the brutality of the slave system. Upon witnessing the beating of his Aunt (H)ester, Douglass informs his audience that because “I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation . . . I had therefore been, until now, out of the way of the bloody scenes that often occurred on the plantation” (*Narrative* 5).<sup>104</sup> Viewed in such light, Betsey becomes the guardian of her grandchildren, safeguarding them from the physical cruelties of slavery. Having raised Douglass for nearly six years, Betsey was a seminal force in shaping Douglass’s persona, imparting moral and ethical guidance to him that he would utilize for the rest of his life. Even as a slave, Betsey “could help to lay the foundation for some degree of autonomy, both for herself and her men,” like other enslaved women did, according to Angela Davis (87). Furthermore, the skills with which she provided her grandchildren would assist them in surviving slavery, which not only was a form of “resistance” to the system, but also “was the prerequisite of all higher levels of struggle,” which Douglass would come to epitomize in his lecturing against slavery and publication of his autobiographies (87).

While Betsey was occupied with the care of her children and grandchildren, she was enslaved to Aaron Anthony and later, Andrew Auld. Douglass succinctly recounts Betsey’s fulfillment of the social contract to her white owners:

---

<sup>104</sup> In his *Narrative*, Douglass refers to his aunt as Hester, but in the subsequent two autobiographies, he identifies her as Ester.

She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever. (*Narrative* 28)

According to Douglass, Betsey spent her entire life not only emotionally bonding with the Anthony family, but also being a productive member of their domestic staff. As the “source of all his wealth,” Betsey establishes her economic output in the Anthony family. However, she was more than a creator of capital; she also revealed affection for her master as she cared for him during his vulnerable moments of infancy and old age. Furthermore, Douglass insinuates that she was so devoted to Anthony that she was present during the final moments of his life. In the case of Betsey’s ties to her white owners, Douglass confirms that his grandmother upheld her social contract with her white owners as faithfully and as thoroughly as she did with her own family.

Because Betsey is dedicated to the discharge of her duties to the Anthonies, Douglass is outraged when she is not freed upon Aaron’s death, but is divided up along with her master’s other personal property according to his will. Douglass claims that Aaron’s refusal to free Betsey is a breach of the social contract and the reason why paternalism is an ineffective social model for the protection and reverence of the black elderly. Since Betsey was not emancipated upon Anthony’s death, Douglass writes that he is “fill[ed] . . . with unutterable loathing of slaveholders” due to “their base ingratitude

to my poor old grandmother” (*Narrative* 28).<sup>105</sup> Douglass channels his ire into his construction of Betsey’s death scene in the *Narrative* in order to contrast Betsey’s death with that of her master and demonstrate the failure of the paternalistic system. Unlike the typical “beautiful” death scene that Philip Ariès claims is a central trope of sentimental novels, Douglass inverts the concept to create a tragic scene, but one equally imbued with emotion (473). Although Douglass was unaware of the condition of his grandmother at the time he published the *Narrative* (Betsey was in fact still alive at this time), Douglass fabricates a death scene that accentuates his grandmother’s isolation and frailty, which reveals the deliberate cruelty and complete disregard for the interracial, intergenerational social contract that her owners observe. The Anthonys’ and the Aulds’ breach of their social contract with Betsey underlies Douglass’s denunciation of paternalism and his promotion of a *black* aristocratic social model. Due to its complexity, this passage deserves an extended excerpt:

she saw her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren, divided, like so many sheep . . . her present owners finding she was of but little value, her frame already racked with the pains of old age, and complete helplessness fast stealing over her once active limbs, they took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die! . . . The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and

---

<sup>105</sup> Sterling Stuckey concurs that “More than anything else that fueled [Douglass’s] hatred of slaveholders was their treatment of [Betsey]” (39).

danced in her presence are gone. She gropes her way, in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. . . All is gloom. The grave is at the door. And now, when weighed down by the pains and aches of old age, . . . at this time, this most needful time, the time of the exercise of that tenderness and affection which children only can exercise towards a declining parent – my poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a few dim embers. She stands – she sits – she staggers – she falls – she groans – she dies – and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains.

*(Narrative 28-29)*

By choosing language that reflects the Aulds' denial of domesticity and family to their aged slave, Douglass presents Betsey as a woman who is deprived of the respect and physical protection she was promised under paternalism. Douglass avers that Betsey upheld her portion of the social contract in faithful service to the Anthonies as well as to her own family, but her new owner, Andrew Auld, the son-in-law of Aaron Anthony, violates the social contract by refusing to support Betsey in her senescence. After having raised both families, she sees her white family reject her and divide her black descendents, preventing her from maintaining a family circle. In effect, one family destroys the other, leaving Betsey with neither a black nor a white family. Now utterly bereft of any family, Betsey is exiled to a 'hut' that is only the shell of a home with the heart exhumed – no family is there to care for her in her dotage, to repay her with all the

affection they received when they were unable to provide for themselves as children. The 'hut' given to her by her new owners is merely a mockery of a home because she is separated from her family. Although she is provided with a nominal shelter (not a home), Betsey is expected to obtain her own material support or else perish. Age becomes a burden rather than a reward; instead of 'golden years,' Betsey is beset by the "darkness of age." By creating the specific image of a helpless old woman, Douglass challenges his readership to overcome either their ignorance or their prejudice against the enslaved black community and condemn the hypocrisy of the paternalistic system. For Douglass, Betsey dies alone literally on the hearth of her hut, a veritable sacrificial altar, where her body becomes a mute witness to the breach of the intergenerational social contract by her white owners and the subsequent failure of paternalism.

In this death scene, Douglass implies that he or another member of his family would have better respected and cared for Betsey's physical and emotional needs than her white owners did. Douglass believes in respect for the elderly, just as proponents of paternalism do, but Douglass claims that white slaveholders are incapable of honoring the intergenerational social contract in a cross-racial relationship. Using Anthony's refusal to free Betsey upon his death and his descendants' abandonment of Betsey to illustrate their violation of the social contract with her, Douglass suggests that her black family would have fulfilled their contract with their (grand)mother had they been permitted to by their owners. Douglass repeatedly mentions the absence of Betsey's children and grandchildren in this scene, but they are not missing from Betsey's final years because of their desire to avoid or reject their matriarch. Rather, they have been denied access to

Betsey by their white owners. Douglass indicates that this situation is further proof that paternalism doesn't protect elderly blacks. In her old age, Betsey requires "tenderness and affection which children only can exercise towards a declining parent," as Douglass reminds readers. The only social contract then that is viable according to Douglass is the one established between elderly blacks and their descendents. This intraracial relationship leads to the adoption of the aristocratic model from the white community, because only black children are capable of giving their forebearers the respect, physical protection, and emotional support that they deserve after having dutifully raised their children and grandchildren despite the destruction of the family unit that frequently occurred within the slave system.

Douglass further emphasizes his transference of the white aristocratic social model to the black community in an open letter to his grandmother's owner, which he printed in his abolitionist paper, the *North Star*, three years after the publication of his *Narrative*. On September 8, 1848, Douglass queried:

And my dear old grandmother, whom you turned out like an old horse, to die in the woods – is she still alive? Write and let me know all about them. If my grandmother be still alive, she is of no service to you, for by this time she must be nearly eighty years old – too old to be cared for by one to whom she has ceased to be of service, send her to me at Rochester, or bring her to Philadelphia, and it shall be the crowning happiness of my life to take care of her in her old age. Oh! She was to me a mother, and a father, so far as hard toil for my comfort could make her such. Send me

my grandmother! That I may watch over and take care of her in her old age. (McKivigan 315)

In this passage, Douglass indicates the failures of paternalism and specifies the rationale for his intraracial, intergenerational social pact that will supply the foundations of a black aristocratic social system. Betsey “has ceased to be of service” to Auld, according to Douglass, so Auld will not shelter or respect her because she is no longer economically productive. Douglass compares Auld’s relationship with Betsey to one he would have with “an old horse,” which demonstrates Auld’s lack of an authentic emotional bond with his aged slave. Without an affective attachment, one of the principles of the domestic social contract, Auld is more likely to disregard Betsey’s physical and emotional needs, which results in his violation of his portion of the social pact. This contravention concludes with the breakdown of the paternalistic system that was intended to ensure the protection of elderly slaves, when they could no longer be economically productive, by their owners out of their emotional attachment to and respect for their senescent laborers.

Instead, Douglass contends that he is the ideal caregiver for his grandmother because of his position as her biological descendent. Douglass reaffirms his social contract criteria for black individuals; his grandmother was “a mother, and a father” to Douglass, providing a nurturing home life as well as moral and ethical guidance. Also, Betsey engaged in “hard toil” for Douglass’s “comfort,” proving her economic productivity. In turn, Douglass wants to honor his grandmother for her previous achievements by “watch[ing] over and tak[ing] care of her in her old age.” Douglass claims that protecting his grandmother and supplying her material needs “shall be the

crowning happiness of my life.” By replicating a domestic social contract similar to Susan Warner’s, but locating it in black society, Douglass reaffirms his equality with white society and criticizes the failure of the interracial social contract and paternalism.<sup>106</sup> Douglass also transfers the aristocratic social model where younger generations honor their seniors for their domestic contributions, economic productivity, and moral and ethical leadership from the white sphere to the black community.

In his 1855 revision of his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass expands on his grandmother’s fulfillment of the intergenerational social contract by providing additional details that were omitted in the *Narrative*. To this end, Douglass significantly revises his depiction of his grandmother, developing her role much more fully as the Bailey family matriarch, respected community figure, and preserver of the only home Douglass ever experienced. By enlarging her role, Douglass adds further information on Betsey’s functionality not only as his grandmother, but also as an elderly adult in her Tuckahoe community. Eric Sundquist observes these changes as necessary “to accentuate Douglass’s overarching examination of slaveholding paternalism” (7). Betsey was in charge of raising her grandchildren and was able to instill “the notions of family, and the reciprocal duties and benefits of this relation” into her descendents (*My Bondage* 42). Not only did Betsey raise her grandchildren with a sense of duty and family, but she also “took delight in having them around her and in attending to their few wants” (42). Douglass warmly responds to his grandmother’s affection. He avers,

---

<sup>106</sup> As Peter A. Dorsey claims, “Douglass emphasizes that resistance to oppression requires a degree of imitation: to change their position, the oppressed must at some level copy the metaphors, the behaviors, and even the thought processes of the oppressor. By imagining oneself as the other and then materially producing rhetorically effective images of this imaginative process, one gains access to political exchanges that can alter social structures” (436).

“Grandmother and grandfather were the greatest people in the world to me” and “Grand-mammy was, indeed, at that time, all the world to me” (42, 43). The early world of Douglass, then, according to his 1855 narrative, was one of intense familial nurturing by his powerful and respected grandmother.

Beyond her domestic role, Douglass also emphasizes Betsey’s activity in her community, where she also develops intergenerational social contracts with both blacks and whites. Douglass says his grandmother was a woman “held in high esteem” for her fishing and agricultural skills (*My Bondage* 41). Betsey was an expert on weaving fishing nets and planting local crops – knowledge which she shared with her neighbors. She was also a skilled midwife and assisted in births throughout her county. Because she was willing to share her extensive knowledge with her community, she was rewarded by her neighbors with “a full share . . . of the good things of life . . . in the way of presents” (41). Age is no hindrance to Betsey in *My Bondage*, but instead a mark that distinguished her for her ability to survive the severity of slavery and even command respect within both the white and black communities for her skills.

Curiously, Douglass determined to preserve the entirety of Betsey’s supposed death scene that he first presented in the *Narrative*. By the time Douglass began writing *My Bondage*, he was aware that Betsey had not died alone and abandoned, but rather that she had been sheltered by Thomas Auld. According to John McKivigan, who edited a collection of Douglass’s correspondence, “In 1840 Thomas Auld, John Anthony’s uncle, learned of [Betsey] Bailey’s condition and sent for her, caring for her in his home until her death” (318). Douglass did not learn about this development until after the

publication of his *Narrative*, but well before he began work on *My Bondage*. After publishing his open letter to Thomas Auld in the *North Star* in 1848, Douglass received information about the condition of his grandmother. Although no response from Auld has been recorded, Douglass published another open letter, nearly a year to the day of his inquiry concerning the fate of Betsey on September 7, 1849.<sup>107</sup> Douglass explains:

Of the past, therefore, I have nothing to take back; but information concerning you and your household, lately received, makes it unjust and unkind for me to continue the style of remark, in regard to your character, which I primarily adopted. I have been told by a person intimately acquainted with your affairs, and upon whose word I can rely, that you have ceased to be a slaveholder, and have emancipated all your slaves, except my poor old grandmother, who is now too old to sustain herself in freedom; and that you have taken her from the desolate hut in which she formerly lived, into your own kitchen, and are now providing for her in a manner becoming a man and a Christian. This, sir, is indeed good news.

(McKivigan 391)

By 1849, Douglass knew that his grandmother had not died alone in her “hut,” but that she had been sheltered by the brother-in-law of her owner. In his newspaper, Douglass does not outright apologize to Thomas Auld for the criticisms he levied against him, but instead he claims that it is cruel to continue to defame Auld. However, Douglass does not pledge to discontinue the attacks upon Auld; he only states that they are “unkind.”

---

<sup>107</sup> Douglass’s source has never been identified and Betsey died only two months later in November 1849 in Thomas Auld’s home.

Moreover, Douglass refuses to recant any past deprecations he has made against Auld and never admits that he is wrong in any of his previous statements. Douglass briefly acknowledges the correct circumstances surrounding Betsey's senescence, but he will not admit any error in his judgment for his denunciation of Auld in the *Narrative*. Douglass cannot bring himself to apologize because any admission of error would validate the interracial, intergenerational social contract between Auld and Betsey, and, by extension, the paternalistic system.

Since Douglass had recognized Auld's protection of Betsey six years prior to publishing *My Bondage*, it appears incongruous for Douglass to incorporate the entire death scene from the *Narrative* in this revision, including her isolation and betrayal by her owners. However, William L. Andrews explains this anomaly, claiming Douglass "allowed nothing he had learned since 1845 to mitigate the potent melodrama of blighted domesticity that had served him so well in the *Narrative*" (*To Tell* 280-81). Because *My Bondage* is issued in 1855, at the height of slavery prior to the Civil War, Douglass is more concerned with his sociopolitical motives of condemning paternalism and promoting his transference of an aristocratic social model into the black community rather than the precise details of his grandmother's death and her owners' actions. For Douglass to admit that Thomas Auld sheltered Betsey would be to undermine the entire foundation of his argument that cross-racial social contracts are ineffective and that paternalism is a hypocritical system used by Southern apologists as a disguise for their cruelty and abuse toward their elderly slaves. Douglass needs to support his assertion that only black descendents, even if they are enslaved, can properly maintain and respect

their elders. Douglass would also have to admit that his escape from slavery prevented him from having any opportunity to care for his grandmother, although given the circumstances of Douglass's enslavement, it is debatable whether he would have been in a position to care for Betsey anyway. Whereas Douglass spends much of the text explaining his desire for freedom and the additional chapters in *My Bondage* relate his achievements and rise to fame as an abolitionist speaker and newspaper owner and editor, Douglass never acknowledges that his escape was a conscious act that severed him from his relatives, although he does profess regret from leaving his friends. If Douglass were to confess to relinquishing any potential contact with his family as a result of his choice to flee to the North, Douglass would have to concede that he knowingly breached the social contract with his grandmother – the very pact that he so adamantly advocates in both the *Narrative* and *My Bondage*. Douglass's decision to escape also undermines his support of an aristocratic model for the black community because opponents would be able to argue that young blacks cannot be trusted not to abandon their elders in the 'selfish' act of gaining freedom. Proponents of paternalism could link Douglass's escape and Auld's subsequent protection of Betsey as a causal relationship (even though there is no evidence that this was the case), showing that paternalism is *necessary* for the safety and respect of aged slaves whose descendents abandon them. Paternalistic supporters could claim that Auld's actions indicate his willingness to tend for and honor Betsey when her own grandson voluntarily deserted her.

Douglass's decision to pursue his argument against paternalism and his promotion of an aristocratic social model for the black community rather than

acknowledge the truth about his grandmother's final years would also affect the second revision of his autobiography. Published in 1882, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, revisits Douglass's youth as a slave and his early years of freedom. Once again, Douglass was faced with the same decision he encountered when preparing *My Bondage* – how to present Betsey's death. By the 1880s, Douglass was not only aware of his grandmother's removal to the Auld's home prior to her death, but he had also visited the ailing Thomas Auld during a speaking engagement in 1878. During their discussion, Auld explained to Douglass that "he had not inherited Douglass's grandmother, Betsy Bailey; his brother-in-law had, but he had brought her in her old age to St. Michaels to be cared for until she died" and accordingly Douglass apologized for accusing him of mistreating Betsey (McFeely 294). Clearly, Douglass privately acknowledged the truth about Betsey's death. However, if he were to publicly admit his fault in his autobiography, he could potentially undermine his credibility because it would be an easy mathematical calculation for readers to realize that Douglass had also fabricated the facts around Betsey's death in his previous autobiography. If Douglass lost his authority with his audience, then it was possible that they might disregard his entire attack against paternalism and his endorsement of a black intergenerational social contract and hierarchical aristocratic social model. Douglass attempts to evade the issue by again quoting wholesale from the initial passage he used in the *Narrative* to describe Betsey's death. However, he simply omits the final lines from the passage that included her death. By concluding the scene with an abandoned, elderly Betsey "all alone, in

yonder little hut, before a few dim embers,” Douglass could practice a half-truth on his audience (*Life* 67).

Nearly three hundred pages later, buried toward the end of the autobiography Douglass finally admits, “I had made a mistake in my narrative . . . in attributing to [Thomas Auld] ungrateful and cruel treatment of my grandmother” (*Life* 364-65). Douglass then goes on to claim, “this mistake of mine was corrected as soon as I discovered it, and that I had at no time any wish to do him injustice; that I regarded both of us as victims of a system” (365). Douglass does not explain how he amended his error; the only evidence that supports his statement is the 1849 letter he printed in the *North Star*. Douglass’s assertion that “both of us” were victims applies to Thomas Auld and Douglass, not Douglass and his grandmother because both of them were pitted against each other over the issue of paternalism. Douglass had to attack the paternalistic system in order to expose its duplicity, and, in the majority of cases, Douglass was correct to say that white owners did not actually protect or respect their elderly slaves. However, the collateral damage of this statement was Auld’s reputation. Douglass was forced to condemn Auld even when he knew the true circumstances of Betsey’s final years because it was the only direct and personal manner in which Douglass could criticize paternalism for its mistreatment of elderly slaves since Douglass’s other aged relative, his grandfather Isaac, had been a free man. Douglass needed to argue for an intraracial, intergenerational social contract because he wanted to emphasize the value of the black community and their ability to properly respect and protect their elders even under the slave system. Douglass feels victimized because he had been forced into a

position of falsehood. Once he had created Betsey's death scene in the *Narrative*, which he indicated was factual, he was obligated to perpetuate this moment, even when he knew it was false, or else risk losing his credibility to his audience. By 1882, paternalism was a moot issue due to the defeat of slavery, but Douglass still has trouble admitting his past error because Betsey's story had become part of his existence and identity for nearly four decades. In a way, Douglass's earlier decision to attack paternalism and promote his aristocratic social model based on respect for older blacks by younger blacks, continues to haunt his writing because he built the foundation for his entire argument on the falsehood of Betsey's supposed isolated senescence and death.

As expected, reviewers of Douglass's autobiographies were divided in their assessment. Both radical proponents of abolition, such as the Garrisonians, and more moderate critics of the slave system applauded Douglass's scathing critique of paternalism and his promotion of a black social contract and aristocratic societal model, while advocates of slavery accused Douglass of exaggeration and duplicity in his accounts (and if they had read Douglass's letters in the *North Star* and his description of his grandmother's death in *My Bondage*, they would be correct). Both supporters and detractors of Douglass raised the issue of Betsey's death scene in their reviews, indicating how critical the interpretation of this scene was for readers. Both sides understood the power that images of the elderly had on the conflict over paternalism and fought for control of those images in Douglass's autobiographies. Reviewers wanted to influence their readership's reception of the death scene because they understood how the audience could be affected by the power of the sentimental images of a frail, elderly woman dying

abandoned and destitute. Critics wanted to mediate their readership's interpretation of the scene based on their embrace of paternalism. They either questioned Douglass's veracity in the treatment of his grandmother or doubted blacks' ability to demonstrate respect and provide material care for their elderly, which was the crux of Douglass's intergenerational social contract and his foundation for a black aristocratic social model.

Reviewers who opposed slavery found Douglass a credible witness. In an article for the *Christian Reflector*, a pseudonymous columnist asserted, "we see nothing to cast even a shade of doubt over the authenticity of the narrative, even in respect to its minutest details" (Rel. Spectator 125). Many reviews touted the sympathetic power of Douglass's affection for his grandmother and the respect he evinced for her. Garrison's paper, the *Liberator*, which published several excerpts from the *Narrative*, included one which depicted Betsey's death scene. The writer foregrounds the passage, claiming, "The following picture of the brutal treatment and forlorn situation of the author's 'poor old grandmother' is so vividly drawn, that he whose eye does not moisten in contemplating it must possess extraordinary command over his feelings" ("Selections" 1). Even letters from readers praised Douglass's ability to persuade them in support of his intraracial social contract and aristocratic social model. The *Liberator* published a letter from a woman identified only as A. M. in which she writes, "never before have I been brought so completely in sympathy with the slave – never before have I felt myself so completely bound with them" (1). Douglass's narrative, more than a mere recounting of facts, moves readers to empathize with his promotion of a social contract and societal model that will, in Douglass's opinion, better ensure the protection and care of elderly blacks as well as

help to educate and nurture younger blacks within their own families. Supporters of Douglass responded to these portraits of Betsey and acknowledged their efficacy in sustaining his arguments against paternalism.

While most Northern supporters of Douglass rushed to embrace his portrayal of Betsey, one astute reviewer for *Putnam's Monthly* was capable of effecting a partial separation of literary technique and antebellum social issues in Douglass's writing. In a review of *My Bondage*, the anonymous commentator observed that Douglass may have heightened the rhetoric of his reminiscences in the revised text, noting, "Of course, it is impossible to say how far the author's prejudices, and remembrances of wrong, may have deepened the color of his pictures, but the general tone of them is truthful" ("American" 547). Even though this reviewer does not discredit Douglass's authority, he or she is also cautious about unconditionally accepting Douglass's statements. Regrettably, the reviewer does not engage in a more specific examination of the veracity of the details that Douglass employs in *My Bondage*. However, his or her recognition of the autobiography's potential prioritization of social arguments over biographical authenticity suggests that the conflict over paternalism may have overshadowed a more objective assessment of Douglass's autobiographies at this historical moment.

As sanguine as most Northern reviews were towards Douglass, supporters of Southern slavery were adamantly opposed to Douglass's argument against paternalism and his promotion of a black intergenerational social contract and aristocratic social model based on similar white models in his autobiographies. Their incensed response to the *Narrative* especially exposes their fear that Douglass may have effectively channeled

Betsey's experiences into a sympathetic form that would resonate with readers, who would also reject the paternalistic system. In an 1848 letter to Douglass, John Jacobus Flourney (justly) accused Douglass of fabricating Betsey's death scene.<sup>108</sup> In the letter, which Douglass republished in the *North Star*, Flourney writes:

the idea of [your sisters'] violation and that of turning your Grandmama out into the woods, evidently without house or shelter, as your Northern hearers may suppose, is one of your invented fictions calculated to stir up the strife of the North and South – by the belief of the former in the utter mendacity and cruelty of the latter! Now, there is not a slaveholder at the South or in Maryland, that drives old negro men or women into the woods shelterless. (McKivigan 327)

Flourney, who accuses Douglass of inventing barbaric scenes and embellishing the callousness of slaveholders in order to criticize paternalism, then engages in exaggeration of his own. He claims that the practice of abandoning the elderly is not a Southern practice, but “an African one, where also they devour the aged, and idolize the slimy snake – and from which custom for rescuing your fathers and bringing the race to the light of truth, you never cease maligning our American name” (327-28). Flourney attacks Douglass's racial heritage in an attempt to discredit completely Douglass's avocation of a black social model contract and aristocratic model. Flourney asserts that Douglass, as well as all other blacks, breach the social contract with the elderly by mistreating them. By

---

<sup>108</sup> Flourney was the son of a Georgian slaveholder and was considered an eccentric personality by the public. Flourney disliked slavery, not on moral grounds, but because he feared that African-Americans were inferior to whites, and not only created a host of social ills, but also were unfair to poor white laborers. He favored expulsion of all blacks to Africa. See McKivigan's *Frederick Douglass Papers* for further information.

claiming that not only does Douglass lie about slaveholders' treatment of their elderly slaves, but that all blacks are incapable of respecting their seniors because they "devour the aged," Flourney contends that Douglass's intraracial social contract cannot exist. Through his accusation that it is an African cultural practice to desert the elderly, Flourney attempts to show that Douglass's aristocratic social model, where blacks are the only individuals capable of properly caring for their seniors, is untenable. Just as Douglass says whites are unfit to protect their elderly slaves because they do not hold them in esteem, Flourney accuses blacks of disrespecting their aged enough to actually cannibalize them! Flourney's method of attack in equating enslaved blacks, many of whom had been born in America and had little or no connection to their racial heritage with isolated, primitive African practices recalls another columnist's assault on Fanny Fern for her "Hindou practices." Like Fern, who was being criticized for challenging traditional notions of universal respect for the elderly, Douglass is being assailed for his disputation of the Southern tradition of paternalism. Flourney is so fearful that Douglass's arguments against paternalism will resonate with readers that the only tactic remaining for him is to attempt to link the entire black race to foreign practices that are mysterious and sub-human, in the same way that Fern was portrayed as un-American and un-Christian. Even though Flourney's contention that blacks would cannibalize their elderly instead of respect them is just as incorrect as Douglass's claim that Betsey died alone and unprotected, Flourney's letter crosses into hyperbole and unintentionally subverts any credibility in his argument which is undoubtedly why Douglass publishes the letter in his newspaper.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Flourney was not the only Southerner to dispute Douglass's characterization of paternalism. Shortly

Flournoy encounters the same problem that other Southerners who were critical of Douglass's attacks on paternalism and his promotion of a black social contract and aristocratic social model did. Even though Douglass altered some facts of Betsey's old age to further his support of a black aristocratic social model, the majority of her portrayal was indisputable, which provided enough credibility for readers to believe in Douglass even when they discovered he was not always as truthful as he appeared to be. What was more important for readers was that Douglass could effectively argue that paternalism was a hypocritical system and the only way to ensure safety and care for elderly blacks was to see that attention come from within the younger black community. As Donald Gibson elaborates, "The result of such commitment in the autobiography is a dual focus; one, public and social, setting for him to correct the moral and political ills arising from the fact of slavery; the other, personal and private, expressing Douglass' own thoughts, feeling, reactions, and emotions" ("Reconciling" 549). Douglass, attempting to present a public argument based on a private life, had to choose whether to prioritize the larger social case against paternalism or the more personal facts of his and his family's life. Douglass chose the former, but because of his choice, the social message of his autobiographies transcends the compromises Douglass had to make with his personal details.

---

after the *Narrative* was published, A.C.C. Thompson, a Maryland lawyer collected several affidavits from gentlemen affiliated with the Anthonies and Auld claiming that they never treated their slaves unkindly. Thompson mailed these documents to Garrison, who published the in the *Liberator* as proof of the duplicity of slaveowners.

## **A 'Loophole' with a Broad View: Harriet Jacobs and the Social Model Debate**

Whereas Douglass adapts the white aristocratic social model for the black community in his attack on paternalism, Harriet Jacobs chooses to reexamine the entire social model conflict rather than attempt to transpose white systems onto the black experience. Unlike Douglass, Jacobs determines that separate social models based on race are unnecessary. More importantly, Jacobs contends that the entire social model debate is spurious because both a hierarchical, aristocratic system and an equalizing, democratic structure can coexist. Although Jacobs notes two problems that can arise when these models exist side-by-side, she claims that they can be easily remedied with clear delineation of expectations for both the elderly and the young. One potential concern is that an individual could misread the model in which he/she is operating. If this occurs, it can cause embarrassment or pain to that person. However, if the principles each person was expected to follow were precisely explained, then this confusion would be less likely to arise. Another possible problem is that the elderly might be accidentally marginalized or overlooked in this complex of overlapping social systems. Jacobs concludes that although the elderly might not receive respect from some individuals as a result of these multiple social models, as long as they receive respect from one or more persons, they will be able to tolerate the lack of respect they may encounter in other areas of society. Like all of the other authors in this study have noted, social models must be founded on social contracts. Jacobs agrees with this construction, but she refuses to definitively identify the criteria that should construct the intergenerational social contract. Instead, Jacobs takes a more comprehensive view of the social contract and claims that

the particular components of the pact are not especially important; a variety of attributes can work equally well in developing agreements between generations. What is critically important for all social contracts, however, is that the components are mutually agreed upon by the older and younger members and that the contracts remain stable throughout their existence. If contracts are fixed and mutual, then both the old and young will clearly understand their expectations and they will be able to easily navigate the network of aristocratic and democratic social models.

Before Jacobs engages in her critique of the social model conflict, she first establishes the broad guidelines that comprise all intergenerational social contracts. Jacobs's two requirements for any pact are that they are mutually agreed upon by both parties and that they are stable. Using Martha as her senescent model because, like Douglass, Jacobs's maternal grandmother was her only living elderly relative who, for the majority of her life, had been enslaved, Jacobs demonstrates the inequity that unstable unilaterally-determined social contracts inflict upon aged blacks. In the opening pages of her narrative, Jacobs illustrates one of several incidents where Martha is negatively impacted by an unstable social contract. Prior to gaining her freedom, Martha had an agreement whereby "she asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done; and she obtained leave to do it, provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits" (Jacobs 12). With this mutual agreement in place between Martha and her white mistress, Martha began saving proceeds from her baking business to buy her children's freedom. After Martha "had laid up three hundred dollars . . . her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon" (12).

Because Martha and her owner had openly negotiated their social contract, Martha had no reason to be suspicious of her mistress's motives or intentions. Instead, Martha "trusted solely to her [mistress's] honor" (12). However, Martha's mistress never repays the money, which she uses to buy silver candelabra for her home. When Martha attempts to reclaim the money, she is told that there are no funds to pay her, but her owner still retains the candlesticks, which Jacobs cynically notes, "will probably be handed down in the family, from generation to generation" (17). Martha's money that she had been saving to buy her children's freedom not only was knowingly taken from her by her mistress, but was also spent on a frivolous and decadent household furnishing, which makes Martha's owner's shift of the social contract even more egregious because it was for an utterly trivial reason. Martha's implicit trust in her mistress was thus shattered by this callous and selfish act, and consequently Martha's children remained enslaved and no closer to gaining their freedom.

While Martha's loss of funds is serious and shows the negative impact of a shifting social contract, her owner's refusal to free Martha is much more nefarious in Jacobs's estimation. Once again, Martha is betrayed by her mistress who alters their social contract without informing her. Martha's "mistress had always promised her that, at her death, she should be free; and it was said that in her will she made good the promise" (17). Consequently, Martha endures her labor and even the loss of her savings with the knowledge that she is guaranteed her freedom and will no longer be subject to the caprices of an owner where the social contract can be violated or altered at will by the white participant. Upon her mistress's death, however, Martha discovers that she has not

been liberated and that she will be sold. Like she did with the candelabra, Martha could either accept the fact that once again the social contract had been shifted and she was the individual who would be disadvantaged by the alteration, or she could contest this change and assert her right to freedom as stated in the original agreement between herself and her mistress. Martha chooses the latter option because she is determined to gain her freedom in accordance with the previously-established pact. Martha proves she is “not submissive” by challenging her mistress’s son-in-law’s right to sell her, but she is only able to challenge this modification of the social contract because she has stable contracts with other white members of the Edenton community (Foster 104). Martha gambles that the social contracts she has created with other white Edentonians based on her industrious and generous reputation will remain constant. Martha is aware that “every body who knew her respected her intelligence and good character. Her long and faithful service in the family was also well known, and the intention of her mistress to leave her free” (Jacobs 17). Martha utilizes these other social contracts where she possessed respect from white members of the community in order to gain her freedom because no one was willing to purchase her when they understood that Dr. Flint was trying to underhandedly profit from Martha's faithful service in the Flint family.<sup>110</sup>

The results of the auction prove that Martha could rely on the stability of some of her social contracts with whites. When Martha is standing for sale, “Many voices called out, ‘Shame! Shame! Who is going to sell *you*, Aunt Marthy? Don’t stand there! That is no place for *you*’” (Jacobs 18). Martha is bought by “a maiden lady, seventy years old, the sister of my grandmother’s deceased mistress. She had lived forty years under the

---

<sup>110</sup> The Flints were actually Dr. James Norcom and his wife, Mary.

same roof with my grandmother; she knew how faithfully she had served her owners, and how cruelly she had been defrauded of her rights; and she resolved to protect her” (18). No one else bids for Martha because they agree that her social contract with her mistress had been altered unfairly. The woman who purchases Martha then immediately grants her the freedom that she had been promised in the original social pact with her mistress. Recent research by Jean Fagan Yellin appears to support Jacobs’s account and reinforces the stability of the social contracts that Martha had forged with white community members, both young and old. According to Yellin, “When Molly was auctioned, “The voice of Hannah Pritchard, the dead woman’s sister, quietly offered \$52.25, and later she bid \$406.00 for Uncle Mark [Molly’s son] – the second highest price of the day. She was buying them with Grandmother’s money . . . and before the sale, she apparently enlisted the help of old Miss Pritchard and the attorney Alfred M. Gatlin” (*Harriet* 21). Yellin’s research indicates that Martha was able to entrust Pritchard with the funds she had continued to raise from her baking notwithstanding the loss of the three hundred dollars to purchase herself and one of her children. Local attorney Alfred Gatlin was apprised of Martha’s plans and assisted in writing the emancipation documents. Gatlin had such respect for Martha that he even offered her a home after her liberation and he later sold her the house for \$1 (21). The stability of these two cross-racial social contracts in particular, as well as the other pacts she had forged with other members of the white Edenton community, secured Martha’s freedom despite the danger of continued enslavement that she had confronted after she discovered her relationship with her

mistress was actually unstable. Since Martha could rely on the constancy of her accord with Pritchard and Gatlin, Martha is able to free not only herself, but also her son.

Beyond the stability of social contracts, Jacobs contends that these pacts must be mutually agreed upon by both young and old members. In order for both parties to enter the contract, the individuals must agree to the criteria of the accord in whatever form they assume. While Jacobs does not advocate for any particular set of principles, she emphasizes that the conditions must be approved by both the younger and the older person in order for the contract to be equitable for both entities. Because the individuals must come to a mutual agreement on the pact, it may take a significant amount of time to negotiate terms that the two sides believe are equitable. This agreement is critically important and more difficult to achieve when the generations have different perceptions of each other. Jacobs uses the example of her own relationship with her grandmother to illustrate how problematic establishing mutual concurrence between the generations can be when both members fail to agree to the contract's criteria, but how vital that agreement is for both sides to be able to fulfill their roles appropriately.

Jacobs and Martha do not agree on Jacobs's responsibilities toward her family when she reaches adulthood. While "Aunt Martha locates Linda in sole relation to motherhood: as both good mother and good 'daughter,'" Jacobs perceives herself as an autonomous adult as well as a mother and granddaughter (Foreman 37). Because Jacobs does not agree with her grandmother's vision of her, she cannot settle on a social contract with Martha, which leads to much friction between the pair.<sup>111</sup> Although Jacobs

---

<sup>111</sup> Also see Jennifer Fleischner's argument in *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives* where she argues that Jacobs "revolts" against Martha's self-sacrificial ideology and

repeatedly expresses her desire to participate in the "culturally embedded veneration of the elderly" towards her grandmother, she cannot accept Martha's limited perception of her character (Jimenez 526). Jacobs wishes to please her grandmother out of both a sense of duty and gratitude for the affection and protection that Martha has always provided for her family and the strong female example she has created for Jacobs, but she also wants to be able to make her own decisions without her grandmother's criticism. In other words, Jacobs wants her grandmother to recognize her as an independent adult as well as a granddaughter and mother in their relationship. Gloria Randle views Martha as Jacobs's "ideal and her nemesis – on the one hand, an exemplary model whom she can never hope to emulate; on the other, and unrealistic, disempowering model from whom she wants to break free" (46). However, Jacobs does not want so much to escape from her grandmother as she wants to establish mutually agreed-upon social contract criteria because she does not want Martha to have sole discretion to determine what her appropriate conduct is. Two of the crucial disagreements between Jacobs and her grandmother revolve around Jacobs's decision to enter into a sexual relationship with her white neighbor, Mr. Sands and her temporary abandonment of her two children when she goes into hiding in Martha's attic.<sup>112</sup> While Jacobs presents a pragmatic stance to her readers in defense of her actions, Martha refuses to accept Jacobs's justifications for her decisions because she has violated Martha's expectations of chastity. "Pious and domestic, Aunt Martha counsels contentment, submissiveness, and purity" to her

---

instead "follow[s] her father's outraged desire and the examples of her brother and young uncle – when she takes flight" (63-64).

<sup>112</sup> Mr. Sands was actually Molly Horniblow's white neighbor, Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a lawyer who also served one term as a North Carolina representative in Congress.

granddaughter, but Jacobs cannot conform to these expectations because she is sexually harassed by the Flints to whom she is enslaved (36). And while Jacobs fears her grandmother's reaction to her first pregnancy conceived with Sands because she has violated all the characteristics that Martha espouses and has inculcated in Jacobs throughout her childhood, Jacobs also believes that her grandmother will eventually pardon her because Jacobs has acted independently in what she believes was the best option to protect herself from the Flints' sexual advances. As Hazel Carby explains, Jacobs's "love for her grandmother was seen to be tempered by fear; she had been brought up to regard her with a respect that bordered on awe" (57). Now that Jacobs is no longer a child, she must renegotiate her social contract with her grandmother, which includes having Martha acknowledge her granddaughter's autonomy. Martha, however, does not agree to accept Jacobs as an independent adult with her own value system. Her initial response is to dispossess Jacobs of her mother's thimble and ring – seemingly the only articles that Jacobs has by which to remember her mother. Randle views Martha's action as "sever[ing] her granddaughter from the threads of female kinship and the security of domestic asylum," but it also shows that Martha does not yet accept Jacobs as an autonomous woman (51). Although Martha cannot fully reconcile Jacobs's conduct with her own principles at this point, Martha does allow her granddaughter to return to her home, where she will live for the majority of the next twelve years.

The second instance that exhibits the difficulty that Martha and Jacobs have in agreeing on the criteria of their social contract occurs when Jacobs decides to escape after Dr. Flint's sexual attentions begin to adversely affect the lives of her children. When

Jacobs first considers escape, Martha surmises Jacobs's intentions and questions her, asking, "do you want to kill your old grandmother? Do you mean to leave your little, helpless children?" (Jacobs 103). Martha views Jacobs's decision to escape as disrespectful because she perceives it as abandonment rather than Jacobs's seizure of freedom, which has been repeatedly denied to her. Martha expresses her concern for Jacobs's responsibilities as a mother and granddaughter, the only two roles that she recognizes Jacobs occupying, ending with the sentimental advice to "Stand by your own children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children" (104).<sup>113</sup> Martha cannot yet accept that Jacobs can respect her grandmother while choosing to act out of self-preservation, even though these decisions often contradict Martha's advice.

Martha slowly moderates her stance towards Jacobs's conduct and the two eventually agree upon a social contract whereby Jacobs gives her grandmother respect while making her own decisions to achieve freedom. In return, Martha ceases to interfere with Jacobs's escape plans and actually assists her granddaughter in her flight. Martha begins to expand her view of Jacobs's role as an adult member of the social contract when she agrees to actively hide Jacobs for nearly seven years in her attic, thereby breaking one of the most fundamental laws in slave society and placing herself at great personal risk of losing her own hard-won freedom. Every single day of the six years and eleven months that Jacobs spends in her attic and even after Jacobs reaches the North, Martha is a criminal for aiding and abetting in the escape of a slave and withholding

---

<sup>113</sup> Carolyn Soriso describes Martha as "symboliz[ing] the woman who would forfeit freedom for family" (6).

knowledge of the location of a fugitive slave according to North Carolina law. Martha finally reconciles Jacobs's need for freedom and her respect towards her grandmother when she has to encourage Jacobs to escape from the attic where she has been in hiding for nearly seven years. Jacobs rejects an opportunity to escape because Martha is not in favor of the plan. However, when another slave who is known to curry favor with the white population of Edenton by spying on her fellow slaves suddenly appears near Jacobs's 'loophole of retreat' shortly thereafter, Martha fears that she accidentally betrays Jacobs and tells her, "Poor child! . . . my carelessness has ruined you. The boat ain't gone yet. Get ready immediately, and go with Fanny. I ain't got another word to say against it now" (Jacobs 168). Martha finally concedes that Jacobs can demonstrate respect for her while still gaining her freedom. The pair reach an understanding over their mutual responsibilities in the social contract in their final scene together where the two women pray. Jacobs explains this mute acknowledgement of a resolution to their negotiations of the social contract, saying "On no other occasion has it ever been my lot to listen to so fervent a supplication for mercy and protection. It thrilled through my heart, and inspired me with trust in God" (171). It is only by arriving at this mutually agreed upon social contract that Martha can relinquish control of Jacobs's character and recognize her as an independent adult, and Jacobs can finally attain her freedom without feeling guilty about leaving her grandmother behind in Edenton. The pair take many years to settle their pact, but after reaching this agreement, both women feel that they have fulfilled their duties to each other. This agreement allows both to preserve their integrity while still achieving their goals. Jacobs feels that she has evinced respect for

her grandmother through her emotional support after the death of Martha's only daughter Nancy and demonstrated her duty by being reluctant to flee to the North. Martha believes she has shown her love for Jacobs by protecting her for seven years and encouraging her to escape when she can no longer ensure her safety. Only by agreeing to this social contract can the women part from each other for the final time and feel satisfied that they have upheld their social obligations to one another. This sense of fulfillment, Jacobs indicates, is vital to any intergenerational social contract and can only be achieved through mutual concurrence on the pact's criteria.

While persuading the audience that the stability of and communal agreement to all intergenerational social contracts are critical for their equitable formation and implementation, Jacobs also articulates her stance on the social models that will be generated out of these pacts. Unlike her predecessors in the decade prior to the Civil War, Jacobs does not advocate a specific social model. Instead, Jacobs accepts that both an aristocratic model, where the elderly are automatically respected by their younger counterparts, and a democratic model, where the aged are judged equally alongside younger generations for their domestic, economic, political, cultural, religious, or moral and ethical contributions to society can coexist. Jacobs sees both models operating in Edenton and neither promotes nor disparages them because her purpose is not to narrowly endorse a particular form of social organization. Rather, it is to provide broader guidelines for the operation of both types of intergenerational social models. Jacobs identifies two problems that can occur within a community where more than one social system is observed, but she also claims that these difficulties can be remedied by a clear

delineation of each model by their practitioners. The first trouble that may be encountered by individuals is the misreading of the social model in which they are participating. If an elderly person believes he/she is acting in an aristocratic model, he/she will automatically expect respect from younger members. However, if that same person is actually operating in a democratic model, he/she may misunderstand his/her expectations as well as the response that younger generations might give to the aged. This misreading of the system may cause the elderly pain or embarrassment and may prevent them from achieving their objectives, which is precisely what occurs when Martha occasionally misinterprets the social models in which she is acting. Jacobs concludes that this problem could be remedied if the younger actors in each system clarified their expectations of the elderly in accordance with either an aristocratic or democratic model.

The second difficulty that the elderly may encounter in this complex of social models is a lack of respect. Because some seniors may align themselves with an aristocratic model, they may expect to be treated deferentially by all younger people. However, if these members of the younger generation are adherents to the democratic social model, then they may evaluate the elderly on their current accomplishments. If the aged do not satisfy these requirements, they may discover that they are not respected by their younger associates. Conversely, if seniors labor under the impression that they are being judged in a democratic model by their younger colleagues, they may be surprised to learn that they have already garnered the respect of their more youthful companions. Jacobs asserts that seniors do need respect, but she disagrees with proponents of the

aristocratic model who claim that the senescent require continual, unquestioned admiration. Rather, Jacobs maintains that the aged need to perceive that they hold the respect of at least a portion of the younger community in order to tolerate the disregard that they experience from other sectors of society. As long as the elderly find respect in some of their intergenerational social contracts, they will possess enough self-worth to endure any marginalization by other members of society. Jacobs supports her claim by showing how Martha chose to remain in Edenton even though she could have left for the North once she gained her emancipation. Although it would appear that life as a black individual in the South prior to the Civil War (and for many decades afterwards) would be undesirable and even dangerous, Martha opts to continue her residence in Edenton because she discovers that she has enough respect from both black and white residents to ensure her relative comfort in her old age. Thus, at a time when many Northern blacks were advocating flight from the South, Jacobs demonstrates that life in a community that may appear hostile can still be a fulfilling experience for the elderly providing they experience respect from some of their neighbors.

Jacobs illustrates the difficulty that can arise when the elderly misunderstand the social model in which they are participating when Martha attempts to purchase her descendents' freedom. When Martha tries to free her son Benjamin and her granddaughter Harriet, Martha operates under the misconception that she is acting in an aristocratic social model.<sup>114</sup> However, Martha soon discovers that she is in fact working within a democratic model when she contacts Benjamin's owner and the Flints. This revelation both shocks her and causes her emotional anguish because she is upset that her

---

<sup>114</sup> Benjamin is the pseudonym for Joseph Horniblow.

respectability and industriousness is not acknowledged by these parties and is she ultimately thwarted in achieving her objective of legally obtaining her son's and granddaughter's freedom. When Martha's youngest son Benjamin is recaptured after attempting to escape from his owner to avoid a public whipping, Martha tells him not to escape and to "Put your trust in God. Be humble, my child, and your master will forgive you" (Jacobs 28). Martha mistakenly believes that she can gain her son's freedom because she has the respect of several influential white Edentonians and she intends to financially compensate Benjamin's master in an equitable purchase. For Martha, it is merely a matter of time before she can raise the funds necessary to buy her son. In her zealotry, she fails to perceive that her age and social standing are no match against a slaveowner's ego. In fact, Martha is unable to sway Benjamin's owner to sell him outright to her and she cannot purchase her son from the slave trader to whom he is eventually sold either. Martha thinks that her reputation and age will convince Benjamin's young master to sell him to her, but she soon learns that he has no regard for her and is determined to have revenge on his slave for his presumption to escape. Martha's anguish at her inability to use her status to free her son is evident when he is sent to New Orleans. Jacobs informs her audience of Martha's "heart-rending groans, and . . . bloodshot eyes wander[ing] wildly from face to face, vainly pleading for mercy" (30). Martha assumes that she is operating in an aristocratic model with Benjamin's owner, who, out of respect for Martha, should have consented to Benjamin's sale. However, she only realizes that she is acting in a democratic model once the slaveholder refuses to sell Benjamin under any conditions to his mother and even prevents the slave

trader from selling him before arriving in New Orleans. Martha is heartbroken that her intentions to free her child are stymied by a man who has no respect for Martha and that all the deference she possesses from other members of her community are useless in her attempts to liberate Benjamin.

Unfortunately, Martha's tribulations continue when she also misreads her relationship with the Flints. Once again, Martha presumes that she is operating in an aristocratic system. In fact, Martha, who had faithfully served members of the Flint family, including Dr. Flint's wife for nearly five decades, has even greater reason to believe that she is participating in an aristocratic system with the family than she did with Benjamin's owner, to whom she had no personal ties. As Jon Hauss explains:

Martha is self-sacrificing mother to four slave-children, but her mothering extends to members of her slave-master's family as well. . . . this encompassingly intimate physical and emotional relation of the slave-mother, to both blacks and whites, produces in her a deeply felt sense of connection with a whole network of others in positions quite different from her own. (157)

Martha works tirelessly to attempt to convince the Flints to sell Jacobs to her because she believes that her former service to the family has earned their respect. For nearly fifty years, she was allowed to labor under the assumption that her toil would be rewarded in her old age. Now that Martha is old, she believes that the Flints will honor their social contract with her and will grant Jacobs's freedom as a sign of the respect that they have for Martha's loyalty and advanced age. Martha informs Jacobs that "she would go to the

doctor, and remind him how long and how faithfully she had served in the family, and how she had taken her own baby from her breast to nourish his wife” (Jacobs 96).

Martha thinks that she is operating in an aristocratic system with the Flints where her previous service and fidelity will be respected. Jacobs, however, understands that the Flints operate in a democratic model, claiming he “cared more for revenge” than honoring his former elderly slave and begs Martha not to intercede for her because she realizes that pain that Martha will experience once she discovers that Dr. Flint will not respect her (114). As in Benjamin’s case, Martha believes her social status will be well-regarded by the Flints and she asserts, “He will listen to *me*, Linda” (96). Although Holly Blackford reads Jacobs’s reluctance towards Martha’s intentions as a sign that “Aunt Marthy’s passive hopefulness is problematic for” her, Jacobs is actually angry at the way in which the Flints exploit Martha’s trust, love, and previous service and cause her great personal anguish when she tries to intercede her granddaughter’s behalf (325). Jacobs knows that Martha will be meanly treated by her former owners because they do not operate in an aristocratic model where they respect their former elderly slaves; they function in a democratic model where only current contributions by the old are considered. As a free woman, Martha is no longer productive for the Flints and so they marginalize her.

Sadly, Jacobs’s conjectures about her grandmother’s misinterpretation of her relationship with the Flints are confirmed. Jacobs summarizes, “She went, and was treated as I expected. He coolly listened to what she said, but denied her request. . . . My grandmother was much cast down” (Jacobs 96). Once again, Martha is inconsolable at

the revelation that she has misinterpreted her bond with the Flints. For nearly her entire life, Martha had supposed that she was earning their respect as she labored for the family. Once Martha liberates herself from the Flints' control, however, they no longer acknowledge her service and treat her with utter disregard. Mrs. Flint, who Martha had nursed as an infant, even refuses to greet her anymore even though "There had been a time when Dr. Flint's wife came to take tea with us" (101). Once Martha is no longer useful to the Flints, Mrs. Flint, "would not even speak to [Martha] in the street. This wounded my grandmother's feelings" (101). Martha feels betrayed by the realization that all of her hard work and loyalty is no longer respected by the Flints. However, "Martha's love for Mrs. Flint was, and remains, unconditional; she is indeed a dove. In a better world such goodness would confer moral authority" (Sherman 180). Martha does not need a 'better world' so much as a clear delineation of social model in which the Flints are operating.

Even though Martha has experienced personal grief when she is snubbed by the Flints and Benjamin's owner, Jacobs explains that her grandmother's misery could have been avoided if these individuals had only been truthful about the nature of their connection to Martha once she had achieved her freedom. Had the Flints simply informed Martha that the respect they had given to her as a slave was no longer applicable once she obtained her freedom, she may have been pained to learn of their shifting allegiance to social models, but at least she would not be laboring under the misconception that they still honored her under the auspices of the aristocratic social model where she automatically earned their respect because of her previous service and

loyalty. As Cal Logue indicates, Martha's belief that "when persons of unequal power contend face to face, good character can outweigh high legal or social standing" is not necessarily valid in a democratic social model (187). If Martha had been notified that her freedom negated the respect she expected in the aristocratic form of paternalism that the Flints profess to practice, then she would not be struggling under the false pretence that her age was equated with influence in their relationship. Instead, Martha could have avoided these scenes of intense embarrassment and anguish and deployed her influence more strategically amongst people who did respect her. Whether this group of people who respect Martha operate in aristocratic or democratic social models is irrelevant to Jacobs because she views the entire social system through the lens of expediency – if Martha could secure the freedom of her descendents using her influence with white Edentonians, just as she had done to liberate herself, it mattered little how Martha achieved the respect of these individuals. Jacobs merely wants to mitigate the pain that Martha endures when misreading the complex of social models in her community and help her become more effective in achieving her objectives.

The second difficulty that Jacobs sees arising from the coexistence of aristocratic and democratic social models is the potential for the elderly to feel marginalized by society. However, Jacobs contends that as long as the aged can gain the respect of at least one segment of society, then they will be able to endure the disregard that they encounter from other individuals. Martha is the epitome of an elderly woman who experiences both deference and defamation in her community. Despite the mistreatment she undergoes, especially at the hands of her former owners as previously noted, Martha

determines to remain in Edenton rather than relocate to the North. Even though Martha has the financial resources necessary to leave the South and many of her descendents make their way, legally or illegally, to the North, Martha chooses to stay in her North Carolinian town. Jacobs declares that Martha's decision, which may appear surprising given the precarious legal position of any black in the South during the nineteenth century, is based on her ability to carve out a space in her community where she attains respect from many of her black and white neighbors. Martha's social status, which "lay on the margins of the power wielded by the white patriarchy of the South," permits her to "maintain an independence . . . the quality that gave this psychosocial space its special significance and value" (Andrews *To Tell* 240). Because she finds fulfillment in some of her social contracts with younger members of her community, she decides to reside in Edenton until her death, even after the majority of her family has left the town.

Martha has the respect of many white members of her community. Other than Hannah Pritchard, the woman who purchased Martha's freedom and Alfred Gatlin, the young lawyer who drafted her emancipation papers and provided her a home, Martha builds numerous relationships with the community. Some of these relationships develop in a democratic social model because whites respect her industriousness in her baking business and enjoy the domestic comforts that Martha provides them when visiting. Other bonds form in the aristocratic system because people recognize her lengthy service to the Flints and honor her loyalty to a family that subsequently mistreats her. For example, Martha has a circle of white female friends who hold a sewing circle at her house. Another white woman, who knows how the Flints have persecuted Martha's

family, agrees to shelter Jacobs because she respects Martha's fortitude and continued loyalty to the Flints despite their recent deprecation of her. Also, the respectability that Martha has cultivated with her customers is evident when she becomes ill. Jacobs, who is hiding in Martha's attic at this time, notes, "When my grandmother's illness became known, many ladies, who were her customers, called to bring her some little comforts and to inquire whether she had every thing that she wanted" (Jacobs 136). These women have developed respect for Martha because she is both a diligent worker and because she is courteous to all of her patrons. In Martha's time of need, as she lies ill and has no family member who can nurse her (Harriet is in hiding and Martha's daughter, Nancy is forbidden by her owner to visit her mother), these white women arrive and provide the physical attention that her own family cannot. Martha can depend on their attention and respect even in her illness. Martha also builds relationships with white men in her community who believe in the democratic model of evaluating the elderly. One Christmas when Harriet is in hiding, Martha invites the town constable and "a free colored man, who tried to pass himself off for white" to dinner (132). The constable, who, considered whipping blacks as "a privilege to be coveted," and the free black who is 'passing,' and "was always ready to do any mean work for the sake of currying favor with the white people" are not guests that one might imagine Martha inviting to a holiday dinner (133, 132). However, Martha is able to gain the respect of these men because she provides them with domestic niceties, such as the holiday dinner and, "when the guests were to depart, [she] gave each of them some of her nice pudding, as a present for their wives" (133). Although these men would not respect Martha if she were simply an

anonymous black inhabitant of Edenton, they regard her because she deliberately seeks to cultivate a relationship with them according to the principles of the democratic social model where she is judged for her contributions and services to them.

The respect that many members of the white community bestow on Martha, either in an aristocratic or democratic social model, help her endure the mistreatment she occasionally experiences and the eventual loss of the majority of her family. Because she is secure in her bonds with other neighbors, Martha can confront the disparagement she receives with fortitude and the knowledge that she is privileged by other people in Edenton. When a white patrol forms after Nat Turner's insurrection to search the homes of the town's black population, Martha, unlike many blacks, enslaved or free, is unafraid. Instead, she "entertain[s] no positive fears . . . because, as Jacobs explains, "we were in the midst of white families who would protect us" (Jacobs 75). While other blacks are beaten or raped, Martha's family only loses "some wearing apparel" (77). An event that seriously affects the lives of many black Edentonians is only a minor inconvenience in comparison for Martha because she has cultivated respect with many of the town's whites. This respect prevents her from experiencing the fear that many other blacks, both enslaved and free, feel while residing in the South and provide her with enough security to remain in Edenton. Martha is also confident enough in these relationships to even berate Dr. Flint for his maltreatment of Jacobs. She repeatedly forces him from her home when he attempts to harass Jacobs, telling him "Get out of my house! . . . Go home, and take care of your wife and children, and you will have enough to do, without watching my family" (93). Seemingly, Martha imperils her freedom by verbally accosting a white

man, but she recognizes that many white neighbors respect her and so she is protected from any direct revenge that Flint might wish to inflict upon her. Donald Gibson admits:

Whereas Linda's grandmother comes close to having what she most desires – freedom and a home for her family – she does not achieve all; slavery will not allow that, will not allow her to live unfettered with her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren in one domestic space. She acquires the space, even within the confines of the institution of slavery, yet she is never allowed to fill the space with all its proper occupants. (“Harriet” 169)

However, Martha discovers that the bonds she has built within the white and black community fulfill her need for respect and outweigh the uncertainties of relocating to the North to live closer to her family. While Martha exclaims, “it seems as if I shouldn't have any of my children or grandchildren left to hand me a drink when I'm dying, and lay my old body in the ground” when she discovers that her grandson William has escaped while visiting the North, she does not follow her family there (Jacobs 148).<sup>115</sup> Whereas Douglass portrays his grandmother dying alone in the manner that Martha suggests she will end her days, Jacobs shows Martha as surrounded by white and black neighbors, as well as a few relatives who respect her in her old age. This deference, while by no means absolutely professed by the entire community, is significant enough that it allows Martha to feel fulfilled even after losing most of her family to death, sale, or escape. Martha thus can die in the comfort of her respectability, embraced by younger whites and blacks alike, which satisfies her after a life of toil.

---

<sup>115</sup> William is the pseudonym for Harriet's older brother, John S. Jacobs.

Jacobs's text was favorably reviewed in both the United States and Great Britain. However, *Incidents* was viewed solely as an anti-slavery work in the United States rather than a complex assessment of the intergenerational social contract and the social model conflict. The American press praised Jacobs's depictions of women's experiences within the institution of slavery, but they largely focused on Jacobs's role as a mother and the resulting call to action for white women readers. The *Anti-Slavery Bugle* of Salem, Ohio announced the forthcoming printing in November 1860, declaring the narrative "present[s] a new phase of the peculiar institution, of especial interest to every woman, and to all who love virtue" (Yellin *The Harriet Jacobs Family* 284). Reviewers perceived the book's appeal to a female audience; in a subsequent review from February 1861, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* noted, Jacobs's "revelations of the *domestic* character of the domestic institution unfolds a fearful sum of infamy, that demands the active opposition of every wife and mother in our land" (327). Despite the extensive focus on women's roles as readers and characters in the narrative, only one American review chose to focus on Martha's role in *Incidents*. The *Weekly Anglo-African's* review of the narrative quotes extensively from Jacobs's concealment in her grandmother's attic and Jacobs's favorable references to Martha's assistance during these seven years.<sup>116</sup> However, the only review in either the United States or Great Britain to provide analysis of Martha's character was printed in the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle and Northern Counties Advertiser*. On March 13, 1862, after the narrative was published in Great Britain, the review commenced with a lengthy paragraph concerning Martha's history and role in Jacobs's life before beginning its examination of Jacobs. For the most part, commentators relegated Martha

---

<sup>116</sup> See the *Weekly Anglo-African's* review from March 30, 1861, "The Loophole of Retreat."

to the status of a minor female character, rather than as the central figure who Jacobs uses to evaluate the intergenerational social contract and the social model system.

When Jacobs discovered that her grandmother had died in 1853, twelve years after Jacobs had last seen her upon escaping from her garret, she wrote to her confidant, Amy Post, "I have lost that Dear old Grandmother . . . that I so dearly loved oh her life has been one of sorrow and trial but he in whom she trusted has never forsaken her her death was beautiful may my last end be like hers" (Yellin *Harriet Jacobs Family* 206).<sup>117</sup> Despite the hardships that Martha encountered both as a slave and a free woman, Jacobs recognizes that Martha was able to find respectability and comfort in her old age, which allowed her to feel relevant within her community prior to her death. This is the goal that Jacobs intends for all persons, black or white, to achieve in their senescence. Although proponents of the hierarchical, aristocratic model such as Susan Warner and Nathaniel Hawthorne also propose respect for the elderly as a basis for the intergenerational social contract, they limit the latitude of their arrangement to either the domestic sphere, in Warner's case, or the economic realm, as in Hawthorne's *Custom-House*. Moreover, Warner and Hawthorne believe that a mutually beneficial social accord can only exist within the aristocratic social model, where all seniors are automatically granted respect out of deference to their advanced age, regardless of their contributions to their communities. Douglass, another advocate for the aristocratic social model only disagrees with Warner and Hawthorne insofar as they do not recognize the role of race in the formation of intergenerational social contracts and models. Douglass demonstrates that

---

<sup>117</sup> Jacobs did not use punctuation with any regularity in her personal correspondence and I have preserved her writing as published in Yellin's collection.

the application of hierarchical, aristocratic social values to the cross-racial social contract, known as paternalism, creates a hypocritical social system in the South. Instead of implementing an interracial aristocratic model whereby white owners revere their elderly slaves for their loyalty and service to their family, Douglass adopts the aristocratic model for the black community. In this version of societal organization, younger blacks are the only individuals capable of adequately respecting and providing for the material and emotional needs of their elders. Douglass, while he concurs with Warner and Hawthorne that the aristocratic model is the most beneficial for the elderly and the young, believes that the white population will never grant appropriate respect to aged blacks as long as the inherent racial inequality created by slavery persists.

Warner's, Hawthorne's, and Douglass's stipulation for involuntary respect by younger generations for their elders, while well-intentioned, curtails any objective evaluation of the aged and may result in the elderly's abuse of their power, which democratic social model proponents, including Fanny Fern and Herman Melville prove can occur. While Fern and Melville do not advocate disregard for the senescent, they also wish to implement safeguards for the nation's younger population in the social system. They conclude that the only equitable social system for all members of society is one that is based on the equal judgment of the both the young and old and their current domestic, economic, cultural, religious, or moral and ethical contributions to their community. Supporters of this democratic social organization avoid the use of nostalgia, which they claim is used by aristocratic model adherents to compensate for the lack of productivity in some elderly individuals. Instead, democratic social model advocates

insist that evaluating the current output of the old and the young prevents society from becoming inefficient, overly burdened with the care of unproductive elders, or even exploited by the absolute authority that the aged would have in an aristocratically-based culture. However, the promotion of an exclusive democratic social model risks marginalizing the elderly simply on the basis that they are no longer productive, effectively ignoring their prior contributions to society.

Jacobs is the only author who questions the entire construction of the social model debate. She resists the practice of advocating one specific model as the panacea for the difficulties in intergenerational social relations. Instead, she reassesses the conflict in order to propose solutions to the general problems related to the formation of intergenerational social contracts and the societal systems that they generate. Jacobs returns to David Hume and Adam Smith's original conception of society as a mutually beneficial construction for all members in all areas of life in order to establish comprehensive guidelines for equitable affiliations between the young and old that are applicable throughout the nation. Rather than only focus on the domestic or the economic sphere, Jacobs acknowledges their interconnection and subsequently addresses the social model holistically. Jacobs avers that the particular criteria of the social contract are less important than the stability and mutual agreement of both older and younger constituents to the contract. In this manner, components of the intergenerational contract can be negotiated on an individual basis, rather than applying an all-inclusive contract to society that may not suit the needs of every member affected by such a comprehensive action. These contracts then form the basis of either a democratic or an

aristocratic social model because, according to Jacobs, both social systems can coexist. Even though problems may arise with the existence of more than one social model, such as the misreading of models by their participants, Jacobs asserts that these obstacles can be remedied with a clear delineation of the expectations of each actor in both the aristocratic and democratic systems. As long as the elderly receive respect from some segment of society, they can tolerate any marginalization they experience from other sectors of their community. In this way, Jacobs not only provides guidelines for social contracts and models that will secure the position of the elderly, but she also envisions a society where everyone, old and young, black or white, can have their intergenerational needs met in a mutually beneficial and individual manner. Only through Jacobs is the social contract and model debate resolved in a manner that accomplishes the fullest realization of Hume's and Smith's intentions to create both a just and a benevolent society based on reason and sympathy – a lofty and idealistic goal never truly achieved beyond the pale of literature and philosophy.

## WORKS CITED

- “Accidents.” *The Boston Daily Atlas* 11 Feb. 1851: 2. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Achenbaum, Andrew W. *Old Age in the New Land: The American Experience since 1790*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. Print.
- Alwin, Duane F. “Social Structure and Cognitive Change.” *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 418-44. Print.
- A. M. “Narrative of Douglass.” Rev. of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, by Frederick Douglass. *Liberator* 6 June 1845: 1. Web. 8 May 2011.
- “American Literature and Reprints.” Rev. of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, by Frederick Douglass. *Putman’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art* Nov. 1855: 547. Web. 20 May 2011.
- Andrews, William L. “*My Bondage and My Freedom* and the American Literary Renaissance of the 1850s.” *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991. 133-47. Print. *Critical Essays on American Literature Ser.*
- . *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1986. Print.
- Ariès, Philip. *The Hour of Our Death*. New York: Knopf, 1981. Print.
- “Art. VI – Ruth Hall; A Domestic Tale of the Present Time.” Rev. of *Ruth Hall*, by Fanny Fern. *Southern Quarterly Review* (1855): 438-50. Web. 21 Nov. 2010.
- “Art. X – Notices of New Publications.” Rev. of *The Wide, Wide World*, by Susan Warner. *The Christian Review*. 1 Jan 1851: 137. Web. 26 Sept. 2010.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- “Attempt to Blow up an Office in Merchants’ Exchange.” *The Weekly Wisconsin Exchange* 29 Aug 1857: 3. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.
- Baltes, Margaret M. and Laura L. Carstensen. “Socio-Psychological Theories and Their Applications to Aging: From Individual to Collective.” *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. Eds. Vern L. Bengtson and K. Warner Schaie. New York: Springer, 1999. 209-26. Print.

- Barker, Deborah. *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature: Portraits of the Woman Artist*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2000. Print.
- Barnes, Elizabeth. "Affecting Relations: Pedagogy, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Sympathy." *American Literary History* 8.4 (1996): 597-614. Web. 6 June 2010.
- . "Fraternal Melancholies: Manhood and the Limits of Sympathy in Douglass and Melville." *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville: Essays in Relation*. Eds. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2008. 233-56. Print.
- . Introduction. *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*. By Barnes. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. ii-xxiii. Print.
- . *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. Print.
- Baym, Nina. Introduction. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America 1820-1870*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. ix-xlii. Print.
- . "The Major Phase I, 1850: *The Scarlet Letter*." *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter*. Ed. David B. Kesterson. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988. 132-50. Print. Critical Essays on American Literature Ser.
- . *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984. Print.
- "Bear and Forbear." *The Southern Patriot* 21 Mar. 1838: 2. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Beardslee, Karen E. "Through Slave Culture's Lens Comes the Abundant Source: Harriet A. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *MELUS* 24.1 (1999): 37-58. Web. 18 July 2011.
- Bell, Michael. *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*. New York: Palgrave, 2000. Print.
- Bellis, Peter J. *No Mysteries Out of Ourselves: Identity and Textual Form in the Novels of Herman Melville*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. Print.

- Berlant, Lauren. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- . "The Female Woman: Fanny Fern and the Form of Sentiment" *American Literary History* 3.3 (1991): 429-54. Web. 6 Nov. 2010.
- Berner, Robert L. "A Key to 'The Custom-House.'" *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 41 (1979): 33-43. Web. 23 Jan. 2011.
- Blackford, Holly. "Figures of Orality: The Master, The Mistress, The Slave Mother in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*." *Papers on Language and Literature* 37.3 (2001). 314-36. Web. 15 July 2011.
- "Book Notices." Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Portland Transcript* 30 Mar 1850: 3. Web. 20 Jan 2011.
- The Boston Daily Atlas*. 19 Nov 1856: 2. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- "Bowne, The Forger, Reconvicted – An Interesting Case." *The New York Herald* 21 Jan. 1860: 5. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.
- B.P. "The Wide, Wide World." Rev. of *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner. *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal*. 27 Aug 1851: 138. Web. 24 Sept. 2010.
- Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989. Print.
- Brewster, Cori. "Trading on the Exploited: Fanny Fern and the Marketplace Rhetoric of Social Justice." *Popular Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Literary Marketplace*. Eds. Earl Yarrington and Mary De Jong. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. 236-49. Print.
- Brodhead, Richard H. *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976. Print.
- . *The School of Hawthorne*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Print.
- Brown, Herbert Ross. *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860*. Durham: Duke UP, 1940. Print.
- Brusky, Sarah. "Beyond the Ending of Maternal Absence in *A New-England Tale*, *The Wide, Wide World*, and *St. Elmo*." *ESQ* 46.3 (2000): 149-76. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.

- “Brutal Assault.” *Weekly San Joaquin Republican* 31 July 1858: 1. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- Burgett, Bruce. *Sentimental Bodies: Sex, Gender, and Citizenship in the Early Republic*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- Cahir, Linda Costanzo. *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton*. Westport: Greenwood, 1999. Print. Contributions to the Study of American Literature Ser. 3.
- Caldwell, Charles. *Thoughts on the Effects of Age on the Human Constitution. A Special Introductory*. Louisville: John C. Noble, 1846. Print.
- Carlisle, Anthony. *An Essay on the Disorders of Old Age, and on the Means for Prolonging Human Life*. Ed. Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Arno, 1979. Print. Aging and Old Age Ser. Rpt. of *An Essay on the Disorders of Old Age, and on the Means for Prolonging Human Life*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818.
- Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.
- Chapman, Mary and Glenn Hendler. Introduction. *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*. Eds. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999. 1-16. Print.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. *Cato Major, Or His Discourse of Old Age*. Trans. James Logan. Ed. Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Arno, 1979. Print. Aging and Old Age Ser. Rpt. of *Cato Major, Or His Discourse of Old Age*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1744.
- Clark, C. E. Frazer Jr. “Posthumous Papers of a Decapitated Surveyor: *The Scarlet Letter* in the Salem Press.” *Studies in the Novel* 2.4 (1970): 395-419. Print.
- Clark, Lewis Gaylord. “*The Scarlet Letter*.” Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews*. Eds. John L. Idol Jr. and Buford Jones. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. 125. Print. The American Critical Archives Ser.
- Cohen, Patricia. *In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age*. New York: Scribner, 2012.

- Cole, Thomas. "‘Putting Off the Old’: Middle-Class Morality, Antebellum Protestantism, and the Origins of Ageism." *Old Age in A Bureaucratic Society: The Elderly, the Experts, and the State in American History*. Eds. David Van Tassel and Peter N. Stearns. New York: Greenwood, 1986. 49-65. Print. Contributions to the Study of Aging Ser. 4.
- Coleman, Peter G. and Andrew W. McCulloch. "The Study of Psychosocial Change in Late Life: Some Conceptual and Methodological Issues." *Life-Span and Change in a Gerontological Perspective*. Eds. Joep M. A. Munnichs et al. New York: Academic Press. 1985. 239-55. Print.
- Colen, John N. and R. L. McNeely. "Minority Aging and Knowledge in the Social Professions: Overview of a Problem." *Aging in Minority Groups*. Eds. R. L. McNeely and John L. Colen. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983. 15-27. Print.
- Colson, Dan. "A Novel Idea: The Influence of the Literary Marketplace on Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*." Eds. Earl Yarrington and Mary De Jong. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007. 275-96. Print.
- Cook, Dayton G. "Displaced Archetypes: Captain Ahab and Adrian Leverkühn." *College Literature* 9.2 (1982): 112-22. Web. 24 Mar. 2011.
- Cumming, Elaine and William E. Henry. *Growing Old: the Process of Disengagement*. New York: Basic Books, 1961. Print.
- Dannefer, Dale and Robin Shura Patterson. "The Missing Person: Some Limitations in the Contemporary Study of Cognitive Aging." *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 105-19. Print.
- Davis, Angela. "Reflections of the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Massachusetts Review* 13.1-2 (1972): 81-100. Web. 20 May 2011.
- Day, George E. *A Practical Treatise on the Domestic Management and Most Important Diseases of Advanced Life*. Ed. Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Arno, 1979. Print. Aging and Old Age Ser. Rpt. of *A Practical Treatise on the Domestic Management and Most Important Diseases of Advanced Life*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1849.
- Delbanco, Andrew. *Melville: His World and Work*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. Print.
- "Distressing Occurrence." *The New York Herald* 8 Sept 1848: 4. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.

- Dobson, Joanne. "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature." *American Literature* 69.2 (1997): 263-88. Web. 7 Sept. 2010.
- Donaldson, Scott. "Damned Dollars and a Blessed Company: Financial Imagery in *Moby-Dick*." *The New England Quarterly* 46.2 (1973): 279-83. Web. 16 Mar. 2011.
- Dorsey, Peter A. "Becoming the Other: The Mimesis of Metaphor in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*." *PMLA* 111.3 (1996): 435-50. Web. 22 May 2011.
- Douglas, Ann. *The Feminization of American Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1996. Print.
- . *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Ed. George Stade. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005. Print. Barnes and Noble Classics Ser.
- . *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Philip Smith. New York: Dover, 1995. Print.
- Drake, Kimberly. "Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs." *MELUS* 22.4 (1997): 91-108. Web. 17 May 2011.
- "Dreadful Murder." *The Daily True Delta* 26 Feb. 1858: 3. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Dunne, Joseph. "The 'Custom House': An Interpretive Analogue of the *Scarlet Letter*." *Notre Dame English Journal* 4.1 (1968): 39-42. Web. 14 Jan. 2011.
- Duyckinck, Evert. "An Intellectual Chowder." Rev. of *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville. *The Critical Responses to Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*. Ed. Kevin J. Hayes. Westport: Greenwood, 1994. 19-22. Print. Critical Responses in Arts and Letters Ser. 13.
- Eisdorfer, Carl. Foreword. *Other Ways of Growing Old: Anthropological Perspectives*. Eds. Pamela T. Amoss and Stevan Harrell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1981. xiii-xxi. Print .
- Elbert, Monika. "Poe and Hawthorne as Women's Amanuenses." *Poe Studies* 37 (2004): 21-27. Web. 18 Jan. 2011.

- Ellis, Markman. *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, gender and commerce in the sentimental novel*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism Ser. 18.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Society and Solitude: Twelve Chapters*. London: Sampson Low, Son, & Marston, 1870. Google Books. Web. 27 Mar. 2012.
- Erlich, Gloria C. *Family Themes and Hawthorne's Fiction: The Tenacious Web*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1984. Print.
- Erikson, Erik H., Joan M. Erikson, and Helen Q. Kivnick. *Vital Involvement in Old Age*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986. Print.
- Evans, K. L. *Whale!* Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 2004. Print.
- "A Fashionable Female Shoplifter." *The New York Herald* 21 Jan. 1860: 5. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- "The Fast Young Man." *Northern Islander* 23 Sept. 1852: 4. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- Fern, Fanny. "Grandfather Glen." *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. Auburn: Derby and Miller, 1853. 277-82. Print.
- . "Grandmother's Chat about Children and Childhood." *Folly as it Flies*. New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1868. 33-49. Google Books. Web. 27 Nov. 2010.
- . *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*. New York: Penguin, 1997. Print.
- Finkbeiner, Brigitte. "Becoming God's Child: *The Wide, Wide World* of Susan Warner." *Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture*. Ed. Winfried Herget. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1991. 93-108. Print.
- Fischer, David Hackett. *Growing Old in America*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1978. Print.
- Fisher, Philip. *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.
- Fleischner, Jennifer. *Mastering Slavery: Memory, Family, and Identity in Women's Slave Narratives*. New York: New York UP, 1996. Print.

- Fluck, Winfried. "Sentimentality and the Changing Functions of Fiction." *Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture*. Ed. Winfried Herget. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1991. 15-34. Print.
- Fontaine. "From Our New York Correspondent. An Episode in Real Life." *The Weekly Wisconsin Patriot* 1 Oct. 1859: 5. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.
- Foreman, P. Gabrielle. *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2009. Print.
- Foster, Frances Smith. "Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* and the 'Careless Daughters' (and Sons) Who Read It." *The (Other) American Traditions*. Ed. Joyce W. Warren. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. 73-91. Print.
- . *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*. Ed. William L. Andrews. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Madison: The U of Wisconsin P, 1979. Print. Wisconsin Studies in American Autobiography Ser.
- "Foul and Savage Murder." *Providence Patriot Columbian Phoenix* 30 Oct. 1830: 2. Web. 10 Feb. 2010.
- "Found Dead." *The Alta California* 20 Feb. 1856: 2. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.
- Freedman, Richard. "Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature." *Aging and the Elderly: humanistic perspectives in gerontology*. Eds. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. Van Tassel. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press. 1978. 49-61. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "Binary Oppositions in Chapter One of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave Written by Himself*." *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*. Eds. Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1979. 212-32. Print.
- Gibson, Donald B. "Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and the Slavery Debate: Bondage, Family, and the Discourse of Domesticity." *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Eds. Deborah M. Garfield and Rafia Zafar. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 156-78. Print. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture Ser. 93.
- . "Reconciling Public and Private in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*." *American Literature* 57.4 (1985): 549-69. Web. 18 May 2011.

- Gilmore, Michael T. *Surface and Depth: The Quest for Legibility in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.
- Gratton, Brian. "The New History of the Aged: A Critique." *Old Age in A Bureaucratic Society: The Elderly, the Experts, and the State in American History*. Eds. David Van Tassel and Peter N. Stearns. New York: Greenwood, 1986. 3-29. Print. Contributions to the Study of Aging Ser. 4.
- Green, Carlanda. "The Custom-House: Hawthorne's Dark Wood of Error." *The New England Quarterly* 53.2 (1980): 184-95. Web. 7 Jan. 2011.
- Gruman, Gerald J. "Cultural Origins of Present-day 'Age-ism': The Modernization of the Life Cycle." *Aging and the Elderly: humanistic perspectives in gerontology*. Eds. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. Van Tassel. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press. 1978. 359-87. Print.
- Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York: Vintage, 1976. Print.
- Haber, Carole. *Beyond Sixty-Five: The Dilemma of Old Age in America's Past*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1983. Print.
- Haber, Carole and Brian Gratton. "Aging in America: The Perspective of History." *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*. Eds. Thomas R. Cole, David D. Van Tassel, and Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Springer, 1992. 352-70. Print.
- "The Harpers." *The Southern Patriot* 19 Sept 1839: 2. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Harris, Susan K. *19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretative strategies*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990. Print.
- Hauss, Jon. "Perilous Passages in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*. Eds. Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring. New York: Routledge, 1994. 144-65. Print.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings*. Ed. Leslie S. Person. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Norton, 2004. Print.
- Hazewell, Charles Creighton. "The Most Thoroughly Original Work of the Day." Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews*. Eds. John L. Idol Jr. and Buford Jones. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. 123. Print. The American Critical Archives Ser.

- Hendricks, Jon and Andrew W. Achenbaum. "Historical Development of Theories of Aging." *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. Eds. Vern L. Bengtson and K. Warner Schaie. New York: Springer, 1999. 21-39. Print.
- Hertzog, Christopher. "Theoretical approaches to the Study of Cognitive Aging: An Individual-Differences Perspective." *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 34-49. Print.
- Hillway, Tyrus. "A Preface to Moby-Dick." *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays*. Eds. Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1953. 22-29. Print.
- Hofer, Scott M. and Duane F. Alwin. Preface. *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. x-xiii. Print.
- Holland, Henry. *Medical Notes and Reflections*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1840. Google Books. Web. 4 Mar. 2010.
- Huf, Linda. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: the Writer as Heroine in American Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1985. Print.
- Huffman, Clifford Chalmers. "History in Hawthorne's Custom-House." *Clio* 2 (1973): 161-69. Web. 3 Jan. 2011.
- Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Slave and Citizen: The Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Oscar Handlin. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980. Print. The Library of American Biography Ser.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. London: A. Millar, 1751. Google Books. Web. 24 May 2010.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005. Print. Barnes & Noble Classics Ser.
- James, Henry Jr. *Hawthorne*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1879. Print.

- Jameson, Thomas. *Essays on the Changes of the Human Body, at its Different Ages, the Diseases to which it is Predisposed in Each Period of Life, and the Physiological Principles of its Longevity*. Ed. Robert Kastenbaum. New York: Arno, 1979. Print. Aging and Old Age Ser. Rpt. of *Essays on the Changes of the Human Body, at its Different Ages, the Diseases to which it is Predisposed in Each Period of Life, and the Physiological Principles of its Longevity*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1811.
- Jimenez, Jillian. "The History of Grandmothers in the African-American Community." *The Social Service Review* 76.4 (2002): 523-51. Web. 13 May 2011.
- Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding The Scarlet Letter: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Westport: Greenwood, 1995. Print. Literature in Context Ser.
- Johnson, Paul. "Historical readings of old age and ageing." *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*. Eds. Paul Johnson and Pat Thane. New York: Routledge, 1998. 1-18. Print.
- "Jonas Greenwood." *The Boston Daily Atlas* 19 Jan. 1852: 1. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.
- Jones, Anne Goodwyn. "Engendered in the South: Blood and Irony in Douglass and Jacobs." *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*. Eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997. 201-19. Print. The American South Ser.
- Jones, Jacqueline. "'My Mother was Much of a Woman': Black Women, Work, and the Family Under Slavery." *Feminist Studies* 8.2 (1982): 235-69. Web. 21 May 2011.
- Kelley, Mary. *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1984. Print.
- Kenyon, Gary M. et al. "Elements of a Narrative Gerontology." *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. Eds. Vern L. Bengtson and K. Warner Schaie. New York: Springer, 1999. 40-58. Print.
- Kilcup, Karen L. "The Conversation of 'The Whole Family': Gender, Politics, and Aesthetics in Literary Tradition." *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*. Ed. Karen L. Kilcup. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1999. 1-26. Print.

- Kirkland, Frank M. "Enslavement, Moral Suasion, and Struggles for Recognition: Frederick Douglass's Answer to the Question – 'What is Enlightenment?'" *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*. Eds. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland. Malden: Blackwell, 1999. 243-310. Print.
- Koller, Marvin R. *Social Gerontology*. New York: Random House, 1968. Print.
- Larson, Jennifer. "Renovating Domesticity in *Ruth Hall*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Our Nig*." *Women's Studies* 38.5 (2009). 538-58. Web. 20 Nov. 2010.
- "The Last Game of Fraud – Caution to Landlords." *The Boston Daily Atlas* 17 Jan. 1852: 2. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- Leverenz, David. *Manhood and the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. Print.
- "Literature." Rev. of *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern. *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art* Feb. 1855: 212-21. Web. 23 Nov. 2010.
- Logue, Cal M. and Eugene F. Miller. "Communicative Interaction and Rhetorical Status in Harriet Ann Jacobs' Slave Narrative." *The Southern Communication Journal* 63.3 (1998): 182-98. Web. 12 July 2011.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Ed. John Drakakis. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print. The New Critical Idiom Ser.
- Loring, George Bailey. "Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*." Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews*. Eds. John L. Idol Jr. and Buford Jones. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994. 135. Print. The American Critical Archives Ser.
- "Lunatic Asylum; Blackwell's." *The Constitution* 14 Sept. 1842: 2. Web. 11 Feb. 2010.
- Markels, Julian. *Melville and the Politics of Identity From King Lear to Moby-Dick*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. Print.
- Marovitz, Sanford E. "Old Man Ahab." *Artful Thunder: Versions of the Romantic Tradition in American Literature in Honor of Howard P. Vincent*. Eds. Robert J. DeMott and Sanford E. Marovitz. Kent: The Kent State UP, 1975. 139-62. Print.

- Martin, Robert K. *Hero, Captain, and Stranger: Male Friendship, Social Critique, and Literary Form in the Sea Novels of Herman Melville*. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1986. Print.
- Matlack, James. "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass." *Phylon* 40.1 (1979): 15-28. Web. 12 May 2011.
- Matthiessen, F. O. "The Fate of the Ungodly God-like Man." *Ahab*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1991. 69-80. Print. Major Literary Characters Ser.
- McCall, Dan. *Citizens of Somewhere Else: Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999. Print.
- McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Norton, 1991. Print.
- McKivigan, John R., ed. *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Three: Correspondence, Vol 1: 1842-1852*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009. Print.
- McSweeney, Kerry. *Moby-Dick: Ishmael's Mighty Book*. Boston: Twayne, 1986. Print. Twayne's Masterwork Studies 3.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. New York: The Modern Library, 2000. Print.
- Miller, Edwin Haviland. "Hawthorne at the Salem Custom-House." *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 12.1 (1986): 15-16. Web. 3 Jan. 2011.
- . *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1991. Print.
- Miller, Perry. *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville*. New York: Harvest Books, 1956. Print.
- Mills, Bruce. "Lydia Maria Child and the Endings to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*." *American Literature* 64.2 (1992). 255-72. Web. 22 July 2011.
- "More of the 'Spirits.'" *Daily Atlas* 14 June 1850: 1. Web. 12 Feb. 2010.
- Moses, W. R. "A Further Note on 'The Custom House.'" *College English* 23.5 (1962): 396. Web. 5 Jan. 2011.
- Moss, Gordon and Walter Moss. *Growing Old*. New York: Pocket Books, 1975. Print.

- Mott, Frank Luther. *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States*. New York: Macmillan, 1947. Print.
- "Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert's Benefit." *The Daily Atlas* 14 Feb. 1857: 2. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.
- Mullen, Harryette. "Runaway Tongue: Resistant Orality in *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Our Nig, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, and Beloved*." *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ed. Shirley Samuels. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. 244-64. Print.
- Myers, Henry Alonzo. "Captain Ahab's Discovery: The Tragic Meaning of Moby Dick." *The New England Quarterly* 15.1 (1942): 15-34. Web. 4 Mar. 2011.
- Myerson, Joel, ed. *Selected Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2002. Print.
- Nelson, Elizabeth White. *Market Sentiments: Middle-Class Market Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004. Print.
- Nemo. "Notices of New Publications." Rev. of *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner. *New York Daily Times* 11 Oct. 1851: 1. Web. 28 Sept. 2010.
- Neugarten, Bernice L. and Nancy Datan. "Sociological Perspectives on the Life Cycle." *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Personality and Socialization*. Eds. Paul B. Baltes and K. Warner Schaie. New York: Academic Press, 1973. 53-69. Print.
- "New Books." Rev. of *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner. *Littell's Living Age* 11 Oct. 1851: 95. Web. 25 Sept. 2010.
- "A New Orleans Humor." *Emancipator and Republican* 5 Sept 1850: 4. Web. 12 Feb 2010.
- "The New Romance." Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Boston Daily Evening Transcript* 15 Mar. 1850: 4. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.
- The New York Herald*. 2 June 1857: 7. Web. 14 Feb. 2010.
- Nichols, Charles H. "Who Read the Slave Narratives?" *The Phylon Quarterly* 20.2 (1959): 149-62. Web. 10 May 2011.
- Noble, Marianne. *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000. Print.

- . "Sentimental Epistemologies in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The House of the Seven Gables*." *Separate Spheres No More: Gender Convergence in American Literature, 1830-1930*. Ed. Monika M. Elbert. Tuscaloosa: The U of Alabama P, 2000. 261-81. Print.
- "Notices of New Books." Rev. of *Ruth Hall* by Fanny Fern. *New York Daily Times* 20 Dec. 1854: 2. Web. 29 Nov. 2010.
- "Notices of New Works." Rev. of *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner. *The Albion, A Journal of news, Politics, and Literature* 28 Dec. 1850: 621. Web. 23 Sept. 2010.
- "Novels and Novelists." *The North American Review* Jan. 1853: 104-23. Web. 6 Sept. 2010.
- Old, Susan R. and Moshe Naveh-Benjamin. "Age-Related Changes in Memory: Experimental Approaches." *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 151-67. Print.
- Owens, Leslie Howard. *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South*. New York: Oxford UP, 1976. Print.
- Pachmuss, Temira. "Prometheus and Job Reincarnated: Melville and Dostoevskij." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 23.1 (1979): 25-37. Web. 12 Mar. 2011.
- Parris, Brandy. "'Feeling Right': Domestic Emotional Labor in *The Wide, Wide World*." *The Arizona Quarterly* 61.4 (2005): 31-66. Web. 14 Sept. 2010.
- Penry, Tara. "Sentimental and Romantic Masculinities in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*." *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*. Eds. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler. Los Angeles: U of California P, 1999. 226-43. Print.
- Peterson, Vera J. and Jerome S. Peterson. "The Health of the Aging." *Aging in Western Societies*. Ed. Ernest W. Burgess. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1960. 156-202. Print.
- "Police Intelligence." *The New York Herald* 17 Aug. 1845: 2. Web. 11 Feb 2010.
- Pollard, Leslie J. "Aging and Slavery: A Gerontological Perspective." *The Journal of Negro History* 66.3 (1981). 228-34. Web. 5 May 2011.

- Portales, Marco. *Youth and Age in American Literature: The Rhetoric of Old Men in Mathers, Franklin, Adams, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, and James*. New York: Peter Lang, 1989. Print. American University Studies Ser. 24.
- “Portsmouth: Tuesday Morning July 11, 1843.” *The New Hampshire Gazette* 11 July 1843: 1. Web. 10 Feb. 2010.
- “The Presidency – Democratic Conspiracy to Defeat Mr. Buchanan.” *The New York Herald* 17 July 1856: 4. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- Preston, Dickson J. *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. Print.
- “Prose Fiction.” Rev. of *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville. *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*. Eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker. . New York: Cambridge UP, 1995. 412. Print. The American Critical Archives Ser. 6.
- Radloff, Bernhard. *Will and Representation: The Philosophical Foundations of Melville’s Theatrum Mundi*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996. Print. Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature Ser. 17.
- Ramsey, William M. “Frederick Douglass, Southerner.” *Southern Literary Journal* 40.1 (2007). 19-38. Web. 7 May 2011.
- Randle, Gloria T. “Between the Rock and the Hard Place: Mediating Spaces in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.” *African American Review* 33.1 (1999). 43-56. Web. 13 July 2011.
- Range, Jane and Maris A. Vinovskis. “Images of Elderly in Popular Magazines: A Content Analysis of *Littell’s Living Age*, 1845-1882.” *Social Science History* 5.2 (1981): 123-70. Web. 8 Nov. 2010.
- Reid, John. *The philosophy of Death; or A General Medical and Statistical Treatise on the Nature and Causes of Human Mortality*. London: S. Highley, 1841. Print.
- Rel. Spectator. “A Remarkable Narrative.” Rev. of *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, by Frederick Douglass. *Christian Reflector* 7 Aug. 1845: 125. Web. 9 May 2011.
- Reynolds, Chandra A. “Genetic and Environmental Influences on Cognitive Change.” *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 557-74. Print.

- Ripley, George. "Literary Notices." Rev. of *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville. *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*. Eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker. New York: Cambridge UP, 1995. 392. Print. The American Critical Archives Ser. 6.
- . "Reviews of New Books: *The Scarlet Letter*." Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *New York Tribune Supplement* 1 Apr. 1850: 9. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.
- Ripley, Wendy. "'What's in a name?': Negotiating the Literary Marketplace with Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publishing." *Popular Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers and the Literary Marketplace*. Eds. Earl Yarrington and Mary De Jong. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. 59-73. Print.
- Rosenkrantz, Barbara G. and Maris A. Vinovskis. "The Invisible Lunatics: Old Age and Insanity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Massachusetts." *Aging and the Elderly: humanistic perspectives in gerontology*. Eds. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. Van Tassel. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978. 95-125. Print.
- Rush, Benjamin. "Lectures upon the Mind." *Benjamin Rush's Lectures on the Mind*. Eds. Eric T. Carlson, Jeffrey L. Wollock, and Patricia S. Noel. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981. 403-553. Print.
- . "Of Animal Life: Lecture I." *Benjamin Rush's Lectures on the Mind*. Eds. Eric T. Carlson, Jeffrey L. Wollock, and Patricia S. Noel. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981. 81-116. Print.
- . "Of Animal Life: Lecture II." *Benjamin Rush's Lectures on the Mind*. Eds. Eric T. Carlson, Jeffrey L. Wollock, and Patricia S. Noel. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981. 116-54. Print.
- "Ruth Hall." Rev. of *Ruth Hall*, by Fanny Fern. *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* (1855): 196-200. Web. 29 Nov. 2010.
- "Ruth Hall." Rev. of *Ruth Hall*, by Fanny Fern. *New York Daily Tribune* 16 Dec. 1854: 1. Microform.
- Ryan, Mary P. *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing about Domesticity 1830-1860*. New York: Hawthorne, 1982. Print. Women & History Ser. 2/3.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.

- “The Scarlet Letter.” Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Christian Register* 13 Apr. 1850: 58. Print.
- “A Scene at the Exchange.” *Salem Gazette* 2 Nov. 1838: 2-3. Web. 10 Feb. 2010.
- Scharnhorst, Gary, ed. *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Greenwood, 1992. Print. Critical Responses in Arts and Letters Ser. 2.
- Schnog, Nancy. “Inside the Sentimental: the Psychological Work of *The Wide, Wide World*.” *Genders* 4 (1989): 11-25. Print.
- Seidel, Michael. *Exile and the Narrative Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1986. Print.
- “Selections: Narrative of Frederick Douglass.” Rev. of *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, by Frederick Douglass. *The Liberator* 30 May 1845: 1. Web. 18 May 2011.
- Sewall, Richard B. “*Moby-Dick*.” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Michael T. Gilmore. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977. 42-53. Print.
- Sherman, Sarah Way. “Moral Experience in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.” *NWSA Journal* 2.2 (1990): 167-85. Web. 17 July 2011.
- Sigma. “Medical College of Philadelphia.” *The Boston Daily Atlas* 10 Feb. 1846: 2. Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- Simmons, Leo W. *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Society*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1945. Print.
- Slochower, Harry. “*Moby Dick*: The Myth of Democratic Expectancy.” *American Quarterly* 2.3 (1950): 259-69. Web. 3 Mar. 2011.
- Slotkin, Richard. “*Moby-Dick*: the American National Epic.” *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Moby-Dick: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Michael T. Gilmore. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977. 13-26. Print.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. New York: A. M. Kelley, 1966. Print.
- Smith, Henry Nash. “The Image of Society in *Moby-Dick*.” *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays*. Eds. Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1953. 59-75. Print.

- Solomon, Robert C. *In Defense of Sentimentality*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
- Soriso, Carolyn. "'There Is Might in Each': Conceptions of Self in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*." *Legacy* 13.1 (1996): 1-18. Web. 20 July 2011.
- Spicker, Stuart F. "Gerontogenetic Mentation: Memory, Dementia and Medicine in the Penultimate Years." *Aging and the Elderly: humanistic perspectives in gerontology*. Eds. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. Van Tassel. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978. 153-80. Print.
- Spiro III, Avron and Christopher B. Brady. "Integrating Health into Cognitive Aging Research and Theory: Quo Vadis?." *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 260-83. Print.
- Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. "Ruth Hall." Rev. of *Ruth Hall*, by Fanny Fern. *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: In the School of Anti-Slavery 1840-1866*. Ed. Ann D. Gordon. Vol I. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998. 297-301. Print.
- Steckel, Richard H. "Women, Work, and Health under Plantation Slavery in the United States." *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*. Eds. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. 43-60. Print.
- Stein, Suzanne. *The Pusher and the Sufferer: An Unsentimental Reading of Moby-Dick*. New York: Garland, 2000. Print. Studies in Major Literary Authors Ser.
- Sten, Christopher. *Sounding the Whale: Moby-Dick as Epic Novel*. Kent: Kent State UP, 1996. Print.
- Stewart, Randall. "Melville and Hawthorne." *Moby-Dick Centennial Essays*. Eds. Tyrus Hillway and Luther S. Mansfield. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1953. 153-64. Print.
- Stewart, Veronica. "Mothering a Female Saint: Susan Warner's Dialogic Role in *The Wide, Wide World*." *Essays in Literature* 22.1 (1995): 59-74. Print.
- . "The Wild Side of *The Wide, Wide World*." *Legacy* 11.1 (1994): 1-16. Print.
- Stouck, David. "The Surveyor of the Custom-House: A Narrator for *The Scarlet Letter*." *The Centennial Review* 15 (1971): 309-29. Web. 4 Jan. 2011.

- Stubbings, Hilda Uren. *The Magic Glass: The Individual and Society as Seen in the Gams of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*. Bloomington: Rubena, 1992. Print.
- Stuckey, Sterling. "‘Ironic Tenacity’: Frederick Douglass’s Seizure of the Dialectic." *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990. 23-46. Print. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture Ser.
- "Sub-Nasal Hair." *The Daily True Delta* 10 Feb. 1858: 3. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- "Suicide by Drowning." *Weekly San Joaquin Republican* 27 June 1857: 2. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- "Suicide Mania in Preble County." *The Ohio State Journal* 5 July 1859: 2. Web. 16 Feb. 2010.
- Sundquist, Eric J. Introduction. *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990. 1-22. Print. Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture Ser.
- Thane, Pat. "Social Histories of Old Age and Aging." *Journal of Social History* 37.1 (2003): 93-111. Print.
- "Thirty Children." *The Deseret News* 10 June 1857: 107. Web. 15 Feb. 2010.
- Thomson, Shawn. *The Romantic Architecture of Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*. Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2001. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden & On Civil Disobedience*. Rockville: Arc Manor, 2007. Google Books. Web. 26 Mar. 2012.
- Todd, Janet. *Sensibility: An Introduction*. New York: Methuen, 1986. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. Introduction. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. By Tompkins. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. ii-xxvi. Print.
- . *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. Print.
- "The Tragedy in Conecuh County, Ala." *The Daily True Delta* 25 Nov. 1859: 2. Web. 16 Feb. 2010.

- “Untitled.” Rev. of *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter*. Ed. Gary Scharnhorst. New York: Greenwood, 1992. 34. Print. Critical Responses in Arts and Letters Ser. 2.
- Van Oven, Bernard. *On the Decline of Life in Health and Disease, Being an Attempt to Investigate the Causes of Longevity, and the Best Means of Attaining a Healthful Old Age*. London: John Churchill, 1853. Google Books. Web. 12 Mar. 2010.
- “Vile Overdaubing with a Coat of Book-Learning and Mysticism.” Rev. of *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville. *The Critical Responses to Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick*. Ed. Kevin J. Hayes. Westport: Greenwood, 1994. 12-16. Print. Critical Responses in Arts and Letters Ser. 13.
- Walker, Nancy A. *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1995. Print.
- . *Fanny Fern*. New York: Twayne, 1993. Print.
- Warner, Susan. *The Wide, Wide World*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1987. Print.
- Warren, Joyce W. “Domesticity and the Economics of Independence: Resistance and Revolution in the Work of Fanny Fern.” *The (Other) American Traditions*. Ed. Joyce W. Warren. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. 54-72. Print.
- . *Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992. Print.
- . “Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis Parton) (1811-1872).” *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers: a Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Denise D. Knight. Westport: Greenwood, 1997. 123-30. Print.
- W. H. B. “A Heaven Below.” *The New London Gazette, and General Advertiser* 26 Sept. 1832: 1-2. Web. 10 Feb. 2010.
- Whipple, Edwin Percy. “The Gothic, the Supernatural, the Imagination.” *Critical Essays on Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter*. Ed. David B. Kesterson. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988. 25-27. Print. Critical Essays on American Literature Ser.
- . “A True Artist’s Certainty of Touch and Expression.” *Critical Essays on Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter*. Ed. David B. Kesterson. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988. 27-29. Print. Critical Essays on American Literature Ser.
- White, Isabelle. “Anti-Individualism, Authority, and Identity: Susan Warner’s Contradictions in *The Wide, Wide World*.” *American Studies* 31.2 (1990): 31-41. Print.

- Widaman, Keith F. "Integrative Perspective on Cognitive Aging: Measurement and Modeling With Mixtures of Psychological and Biological Variables." *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 50-68. Print.
- Widmer, Edward L. *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.
- Willey, Nicole L. *Creating a New Ideal of Masculinity for American Men: The Achievement of Sentimental Women Writers in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2007. Print.
- Wilson, Robert S. "Neurological Factors in Cognitive Aging." *Handbook of Cognitive Aging: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Eds. Scott M. Hofer and Duane F. Alwin. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008. 298-307. Print.
- Woodruff-Pak, Diana S. and Michelle Papka. "Theories of Neuropsychology and Aging." *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. Eds. Vern L. Bengtson and K. Warner Schaie. New York: Springer, 1999. 113-32. Print.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2004. Print.
- , ed. *The Harriet Jacobs Family Papers*. Vol I. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2008. Print.
- Young, Robert J.C. *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- "Youthful Love." *National Journal* 1 June 1831: 2. Web. 10 Feb. 2010.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. *Gender and Nation*. Ed. Bryan S. Turner. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997. Print. Politics and Culture: A Theory, Culture & Society Ser.
- Ziff, Larzer. "The Ethical Dimension of 'The Custom House.'" *Modern Language Notes* 73.5 (1958): 338-44. Web. 15 Jan. 2011.
- . *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America*. New York: Viking, 1981. Print.
- Zoellner, Robert. "Ahab's Entropism and Ishmael's Cyclicism." *Ahab*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1991. 104-15. Print. Major Literary Characters Ser.

---. *The Sea-Salt Mastodon: A Reading of Moby-Dick*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973. Print.

# Melissa R. Kowalski

Lehigh University  
317 Drown Hall  
Bethlehem, PA 18015  
Office: (610) 758-3336  
Email: mrk207@lehigh.edu

407 Townsend Drive  
Perkasie, PA 18944  
Home: (215) 766-8437  
Cell: (267) 629-9820

---

## Education

- Ph.D.      Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA      May 2012  
*English Literature*  
Major Field: American Literature, 1830-1945  
Minor Field: American Literature, 1945-Present
- Dissertation: "Troping the Elderly: Cultural Tensions, Senescence, and Sentimentalism in Antebellum Literature"
- Dissertation Chair: Dr. Edward Whitley
- Dissertation Abstract: I explore how the ambivalence with which elderly characters are portrayed reflects American society's uncertainty towards the position of the senescent in the mid-nineteenth century through the examination of six influential antebellum texts.
- M.A.      University of York, York, United Kingdom      March 2007  
*Cultures of Empire, Resistance and Postcoloniality*  
Thesis: "Hybridity in the Oriental Musicals of Rogers and Hammerstein"
- M.Ed.      Arcadia University, Glenside, PA      May 2003  
*Secondary English Education*  
Graduate Project: "Unit Design for Teaching Shakespeare to Secondary Students"
- B.A.      The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA      May 2001  
*Honors in English* from the Schreyer Honors College  
Thesis: "**Frederick Douglass**: A Literary Critique of Southern Antebellum Paternalism"

B.A. The Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA  
*Political Science*

May 2001

## Research/Teaching Interests

Nineteenth-Century American Literature, Twentieth-Century American Literature, African-American Literature, Nineteenth-Century British Literature, Postcolonial Literature, Composition, Humanistic Gerontology, Women's Literature.

## Teaching Experience

Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA

*Instructor* – Literature and Composition 011

This course is designed for advanced students who have tested out of the standard, year-long freshman composition course.

“The Nineteenth-Century Family” Fall 2011

*Instructor* – Composition 002

This course is the second in a compulsory year-long series of composition for incoming freshmen and utilizes a sustained inquiry into a contemporary topic of national relevance.

“It's Not Easy Being Green: The Environment and Us” Spring 2012

“American Immigration in the Twentieth Century” Spring 2010

“Celebrity: Reach for the Stars” Spring 2009

*Instructor* – Composition 001

This course is the first in a mandatory year-long series of composition for incoming freshman and offers several brief units on topics of interest in the twenty-first century.

“Vices: Are there any Virtues Here?” Fall 2009

“Contemporary American Debates” Fall 2008

## Other Professional Experience

*Digital Archive Assistant*

Lehigh University

Bethlehem, PA

Spring 2008

*Secondary English Teacher – Grade 11*

Central Bucks West High School

Doylestown, PA

Fall 2001 – Spring 2005, Fall 2006 – Spring 2007

Eleventh grade English features a British Literature and Composition survey course in a block-schedule format modified for a three-track system.

*Secondary English Teacher – Secondary Summer School English*

Middle Bucks Institute of Technology

Jamison, PA

Summer 2005

Central Bucks's Summer School program is a remedial course for students who have not achieved proficiency in any secondary English course in any district from the Central Bucks Intermediate Unit during the academic year.

*Scholar's Bowl Coach*

Central Bucks West High School

Doylestown, PA

Fall 2003 – Spring 2005, Fall 2006 – Spring 2007

*Advisor to the Committee on Plagiarism*

Central Bucks West High School

Doylestown, PA

Fall 2003-Spring 2004

*Peer Tutor*

The Pennsylvania State University Writing Center

State College, PA

Spring 1999 – Spring 2001

## Conference Papers

“A Tale of Two Bodies: Illness and Aging in *The Wide, Wide World* and *The Scarlet Letter*”

43<sup>rd</sup> NeMLA Convention

Rochester, NY

March 15-18, 2012

“Family Values, Community Influence: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Depiction of the Elderly in *Poganuc People*”

Harriet Beecher Stowe at 200

New Brunswick, ME

June 23-25, 2011

“Parody, Fantasy, and Re-visioning Antebellum Culture in Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*”

Celebrating African American Literature: The Novel Since 1988

State College, PA

October 23-24, 2009

“*Dessa Rose*: Rethinking Antebellum Women”

32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Colloquium on Literature and Film

Morgantown, WV

September 11-13, 2008

“Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*: One Delicious Novel”

PCEA Conference

State College, PA

April 10-12, 2008

## Awards

Teaching Fellowship

Lehigh University

Fall 2011 – Spring 2012

University Fellowship

Lehigh University

Fall 2010 – Spring 2011

Teaching Fellowship

Lehigh University

Fall 2008 – Spring 2010

University Fellowship

Lehigh University

Fall 2007 – Spring 2008

Student Marshal for Department of English

Penn State University

May 2001

Honors Scholarship  
Penn State University      Fall 1997 – Spring 2001

## Certifications

Level I Teaching Development Certificate  
Lehigh University      May 2011

Level I Secondary English Education Certification  
State of Pennsylvania      May 2003

## Languages

Italian – read and write with high proficiency, speak with moderate proficiency  
French – read, speak, and write with basic proficiency

## Professional Memberships

C-19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists  
The Harriet Beecher Stowe Society  
MLA  
NeMLA  
The Society for the Study of American Women Writers