Just Like Other Girls:

Socialising Conventionally with the Brontë Sisters, George Eliot, and Emily Dickinson

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I develop a definition of "conventional characters" in realist fiction and a more expansive theorisation of social conventionality as a literary construct. To do so, I examine Emily Dickinson's poems alongside six novels by her favourite Victorian writers: Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, and George Eliot. Methodologically, I position this project against an ongoing scholarly tendency to separate formal studies of narrative and poetry, as well as the widespread critical assumption that literature's ethical, aesthetic, and political potential primarily rests on the representation of difference.

Transatlantic literatures of the nineteenth century have a particularly strong association with both social etiquette and individual subjectivity, and literary criticism was consolidated as a professional activity during this period. Each of my chapters disrupts "conventional" interpretations of five touchstones of anglophone literary education, nineteenth-century studies, and theories of literary form. In my reading, Dickinson sustains social conformity, the Brontës become advocates for superficial social ties and the necessity of polite discourse, and Eliot's emphasis on realist ethics is neutralised by the artificial socialising of conventional women. I argue that treating normativity as a stable form of social knowledge, and an equally stable backdrop to literary representation, is a cultural ideology and a learned critical process; taken together, my examples demonstrate that conventionality has a wide range of poetic and narrative functions beyond social satire and conservative mimesis. My strategic readings of conformist likeness thereby offer productive new insights into individual characters and the societies they claim to represent.

Résumé

Cette thèse développe une définition des « personnages conventionnels » dans la fiction réaliste et une théorisation plus large de la conformité sociale en tant que construction littéraire. Pour ce faire, j'examine les poèmes d'Emily Dickinson ainsi que six romans de ses écrivaines victoriennes préférées : Charlotte, Emily et Anne Brontë, ainsi que George Eliot. D'un point de vue méthodologique, je positionne ce projet en opposition à la tendance académique actuelle consistant à séparer les études narratives et les études en poésie, ainsi qu'à l'hypothèse critique largement répandue selon laquelle le potentiel éthique, esthétique et politique de la littérature repose principalement sur la représentation de la différence.

Les littératures transatlantiques du dix-neuvième siècle sont particulièrement associées à l'étiquette sociale et à la subjectivité individuelle. Cette période a aussi vu la consolidation de la critique littéraire en tant qu'activité professionnelle. Chacun de mes chapitres perturbe les interprétations « conventionnelles » de cinq pierres de touche de l'enseignement littéraire anglophone, des études du dix-neuvième siècle et des théories de la forme littéraire. Selon ma lecture, Dickinson soutient la conformité sociale, les Brontës prônent les liens sociaux superficiels et la nécessité d'un discours courtois, et l'accent mis par Eliot sur l'éthique réaliste est neutralisé par la socialisation artificielle à laquelle se livrent les femmes conventionnelles. Je soutiens que le traitement de la normativité comme une forme stable de connaissance sociale, et une toile de fond tout aussi stable pour la représentation littéraire, constitue une idéologie culturelle et un processus critique acquis. Considérés dans leur ensemble, mes exemples démontrent que la conformité sociale a de nombreuses fonctions poétiques et narratives au-delà de la satire sociale et de la mimesis conservatrice. Mes lectures stratégiques de la similitude conformiste offrent ainsi de nouveaux aperçus utiles sur les personnages individuels et les sociétés qu'iels prétendent représenter.

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Introduction: Social Conventionality

Are some lives too ordinary, even for literature about ordinary lives? In *Just Like Other Girls*, I identify and interpret nineteenth-century representations of conventional social behaviour in Emily Dickinson's poetry and novels by Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, and George Eliot. More broadly, I argue that social conventionality requires further attention and definition as a literary feature. Dickinson's realist commitment to the representation of ordinary social life is the starting point for my theorisation of conventionality as a mode of fictional characterisation, and her fascination with British Victorian literature is well known. She wrote ardently of "Currer Bell" as early as 1849 (*Letters* 77), famously requested that Emily Brontë's "No Coward Soul Is Mine" be read at her funeral, and hung a framed portrait of Eliot in her bedroom. Nevertheless, this study is the first to use Victorian realism as the primary literary context for Dickinson's poetry.[1] This dissertation, however, is not a historical or textual analysis of allusion and influence, but a theoretically oriented argument about how we read and interpret that broad species of social behaviour, expectations, experiences, and personalities termed "conventional."

"Conventional" is conceptually capacious, imprecise, and often derogatory. Conventions signify a set of expectations in both social and aesthetic contexts that are easy to recognise, but rarely defined. D.A. Miller's now-infamous claim that "'the normal' itself is 'nonnarratable'; a story can exist only when there is some kind of disruption of the quiescence of the status quo ante" (*Narrative and its Discontents* ix) is just one example of

[1] See Monika Fludernik's analysis of "prison-like homes" (225) in Dickinson and Dickens (a Victorian novelist who Dickinson also read extensively) for a rare example of a thematic comparison between Dickinson's poetry and Victorian fiction.

the way that "normality" is understood as socially quiescent and formally nonnarratable.[2] All the writers in this thesis invest the status quo with distinct characteristics and dynamic poetic and narrative functions. Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's introduction to "surface reading" illustrates the problematic role of the status quo in twenty-first-century scholarly interpretation. As they ask, "can surface reading be anything other than a tacit endorsement of the status quo, the academic version of resignation's latest mantra, 'It is what it is'?" (13).[3] Depth and surface (deep and shallow), key terms throughout this dissertation, demonstrate the way a vocabulary used to pass social judgements on human personalities also infiltrates our critical analysis.

Scholars deem fictional characters and representations "conventional" rapidly and dismissively. Marta Figlerowicz describes "the nineteenth-century notion of novel protagonists as individuals who are at odds with their society" (19), and Rita Felski makes the same observation about the way modernist fiction produced a tendency for "fictional and real persons" to find themselves "linked by a shared sense of disassociation" in which "what is held in common is an experience of having nothing in common with others, of feeling at odds with the mainstream of social life" (113). I propose that disidentification with mainstream social life has too readily become the primary lens through which fictional persons are interpreted by their readers. Dorothy J. Hale succinctly responds to such claims by arguing

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[2] Miller's assumption has persisted. Leila Silvana May, for instance, returns to Miller's understanding of "the normal" in narrative to make her much more recent sociological argument about secrecy in Victorian fiction (35).

[3] Best and Marcus define surface reading as a method that "produces close readings that do not seek hidden meanings," "refuses the depth model of truth," and understands "the purpose of literary criticism" as "a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself" (10–11). They thereby position surface reading as a corrective to what John Guillory describes as an "overestimation" of the aims and efficacy of professional literary criticism (xii). The concept of surface reading, however, is more effective as an illustration of the self-defeating rhetoric of literary scholarship than as an actual methodology.

that "contemporary novelists and academic theorists increasingly define the social value of literature more and more exclusively as the ethical encounter with otherness made available through novelistic form" (5). My study speaks to Hale's impression that a vested interest in literature's real-world ethical potential, and its capacity to offer encounters with alterity, has survived both postmodernism and poststructuralism.[4] I turn to literary encounters with "sameness" to recover the role of conventionality in what Daniel Drew has called "the gearbox of social stratification that churns within aesthetic categories" (8). This thesis thereby develops a critical understanding of social conventionality, a concept that is currently not meaningfully distinguished from its popular usage when applied to literary analysis. Dickinson's syntactic and structural irregularities describe and participate in conventional social rituals, challenging the eccentric and alienated subtexts commonly attributed to her poetry. The Brontës' and Eliot's most socially conventional characters, in turn, put pressure on existing accounts of how their respective novels represent society.

Conventional Society

Scholars routinely associate the nineteenth century with representations of society, individuality, and social networks.[5] Nineteenth-century realism remains overrepresented in narrative studies,[6] while Dickinson still has a disproportionate presence in studies of poetic

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[4] "Difference" has also been a key term in recent attempts to evaluate (and overhaul) the study of literary form. Caroline Levine's "new formalist method" (*Forms* 3), informed by novels, takes as one of its five central claims that "forms differ" (4). Jeff Dolven's study of style, informed by poetry, describes the "lifelong negotiation of likeness and difference" (176). Ronjaunee Chatterjee's concept of "feminine singularity" aims to consider "likeness, difference, and oneness, anew" (1).

[5] Guillory links his recent analysis of the profession of literary scholarship to "the emergence in the nineteenth century of 'professional society'" (x). Diedre Lynch "turns to literary studies' eighteenth-and nineteenth-century prehistory" to examine how "we have come to inhabit a profession that is paradoxically beholden to statements of personal connection" (*Loving Literature* 1).

[6] For recent and foundational work on realism most in dialogue with the ideas in this thesis, see: Miller; Sparks; Shaw; Gallagher; Ermarth; MacDonald; Jameson; Freedgood; Auyoung; Farina; Jaffe; Glazener; O'Farrell; Armstrong; Beer; Marcus; Mullen; and Woloch.

form. To interrogate the fictional construction and representation of social conventionality, I rely upon decades of critical scrutiny regarding society and subjectivity in the nineteenth century. Fictional conventionality traverses class, gender, race, nationality, and sexuality, but I have deliberately situated my examples in the historical period that consolidated these social constructs as tools for establishing and violently hierarchising contemporary Western expectations and representations of "normal" personhood and ordinary life.[7] All of the texts in this thesis, like most transatlantic literature of the nineteenth century, directly and indirectly engage with race, empire, war, enslavement, migration, and globalisation.[8] I discuss race and nation in most detail in chapter five, concerning the intersection in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* between Gwendolen's conventional characterisation and the novel's concurrent representation of Daniel's Zionism, but others have written much more comprehensively about nineteenth-century British and American racism and colonialism, and its ongoing legacy in literary studies.[9] The fictional social conventionality I identify and describe in this thesis is related to, without always being perfectly analogous with, the economic and imperialist power structures central to most recent accounts of transatlantic prose and poetry of the nineteenth century.

This project is also shaped by a long history of Marxist and feminist criticism that continues to inform the reception of its canonical case studies. I have called this dissertation

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[7] As Maia McAleavey notes: "critical studies of the nineteenth-century novel have long associated it with the process of subject formation of national citizens, women, and, most broadly, the individual" (15).

[8] The Brontës, most obviously, have been key sites of nineteenth-century postcolonial studies for decades. Heathcliff's racialisation, for example, continues to generate scholarly discussion, and many twentieth-century postcolonial responses to the Brontës' fiction, such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, are now themselves highly canonical.

[9] For recent and foundational work on race, nation, and imperialism most in dialogue with the ideas in this thesis, see: Hall; Chatterjee; Fretwell; Koretsky; Makdisi; Meyer; Christoff; Banerjee; Spivak; Said; Bhabha; Buzard; Chander; Chapnick; Lane; Morrison; Wong; Byrd; and Dickerson.

Just Like Other Girls, but it is neither a strictly feminist study, nor one that focuses only on female characters.[10] I also examine primarily, but not exclusively, characters who do not work for a living, and who have an established social rank. My account of character and conventionality is informed by the gender and class associations with interiority, creativity, and originality, and their counterparts of shallowness, artifice, and predictability. Grace Lavery observes that "the feminization of interiority was one of the most consequential cultural projects of the nineteenth century" (88), while Talia Schaffer remarks that, "the interiority so fundamental to the novel form depends on class privilege" (89–90). Since the nineteenth century, both "deep" and "shallow" modes of characterisation have been understood in relation to the representation of well-off women: the "other girls" that realist characters conform to or depart from. Conventional, in its socially pejorative usage (superficial, artificial, vapid, "basic"), is unmistakably feminised and more noticeable in middle- and upper-class characters, whose interiority usually comprises the realist novel's critical focal point.

My chapters and their fictional subjects also reveal that conventional characterisation does not necessarily mean heterosexual or heteronormative characterisation. Rosamond's and Ginevra's campiness, Gwendolen's masculinity, and the homosocial organising structure of Gilbert's marriage plot, for instance, illustrate the way that normativity queers itself in the process of fictional construction. Dickinson's poetry (and, as the recent glut of biopics demonstrate, her social life) also has a long association with queerness and gender play. Many of the poems and images I discuss in chapter one, such as Dickinson's conformist brooks, rivers, and seas, exhibit a queer poetics that is just as striking as more familiar

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[10] Beyond chapter two's discussion of Gilbert Markham, many male characters who appear in this thesis, such as Lockwood, Graham Bretton, Harold Transome, Fred Vincy, Tertius Lydgate, James Chettam, and, as I argue in more detail in chapter five, Daniel Deronda, exhibit similar conventional characterisation to the female conventional characters I take as my primary examples.

examples like “The Zeroes taught Us – Phosphorous –” (CM 366; FR 284) or the poet’s correspondence with Susan Dickinson.[11] Indeed, conventionality as a literary characteristic produces a wide range of queer affects. Eliot and the Brontës have provoked a relatively limited number of queer readings, despite the fact that, as Richard A. Kaye reminds us, queer theory is yet another literary subdiscipline that “originated in critical accounts of Victorian literature” (38).[12] The characters that come up in Kaye’s overview of a queer “counter-tradition” (54) in interpretation of the Brontës’ novels (Heathcliff, Jane Eyre, Emily Brontë herself), however, demonstrate the extent to which “queering” a text still implies reading for “social otherness” and a “literary ethics of alterity” (Hale, *The Novel* 5).[13]

At this point in queer scholarship, reading for sameness can be as generative as reading for difference. Sara Ahmed describes “not getting used to it” as “a queer aspiration, a queering of aspiration” (228). I suggest that social conventionality in literature is worth getting unused to; that seeking difference, rebellion, and resistance in fiction does not necessarily nurture those qualities in either literary analysis, or the real world. Many representations of conventionality that appear in this thesis, such as Dickinson’s poem about an insufferable conversation or Gwendolen’s and Daniel’s novel-length attempt at intimacy, parody both social norms and the idealistic values like sympathy and transcendence that claim to oppose them. Judith Butler describes gendered conventions as “hyperbolic

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[11] Ellen Louise Hart’s and Martha Nell Smith’s edited collection of Dickinson’s correspondence with her sister-in-law has been perhaps most instrumental in subsequent queer readings of both Dickinson’s poetry and her biography.

[12] Both Leo Bersani and Eve Sedgewick, for example, rely on the example of nineteenth-century realist fiction.

[13] Elsewhere, Hale describes alterity as fundamental to novelistic aesthetics, as well as ethics: “the founding assumption of novelistic aesthetics is that alterity can in fact be represented through a combination of authorial intention and the novel’s specific representational capacities” (“‘On Beauty’” 818).

exhibitions of 'the natural'" that become parodies by, "in their very exaggeration, reveal[ing] its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (200). I also read conventional social behaviour as exaggerated and referentially "phantasmatic," but I am attuned to the fact that fictional exhibitions of social conventionality rarely destabilise a text's representation of society and that they have been repeatedly naturalised by critics as realistic. Similarly, Lavery's trans reading of Eliot's realist technique picks up from realism's long, contested, critical, and definitional history by aiming "to read realism as far as possible without paranoia and without fear that the knowledge schemes into which it attempts to induct me are either totalizing (they do not explain everything) or hostile (they will not make my life worse)" (xix). *Just Like Other Girls* proposes another way of juxtaposing realism's limits while embracing its potential as an arena for new, queer, interpretative directions.

In addition to queer studies, my readings of individual texts and explications of social conventionality are informed more broadly by scholarship spanning narratology, sociology, affect theory, ecocriticism, book history, historicist studies, work on literary texts from the seventeenth century to the present, and postcolonial, decolonial, and critical race studies. Principally, however, this thesis advocates for the relevance of studying formalist criticism on narrative and poetry alongside each other.[14] While Dickinson scholarship exemplifies a persistent equation between literary creation and a protest against social norms, I begin my argument with Dickinson to propose that social conventionality is Dickinson's primary poetic subject.

"Fragmentary" and "sympathetic," defined in more detail in chapter one, are recurring terms in this thesis. Like realism and conventionality, both concepts have particular and

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[14] The resurgence of interest in literary form traverses both genres, and recent studies have been particularly invested in revitalising the political stakes of formal analysis. See, for instance: Chuh; Leighton; Levinson; Nersessian; and Levine.

varied significations in the nineteenth-century transatlantic context, are still used in contemporary literary criticism, and often operate across formal and social discourse. As I explain in chapter one, references to fragmentariness are a staple of Dickinson criticism. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Renker notes:

> Gaps, contrasts, disconnections, and dualities are characteristic of realist styles, in both fiction and poems. Scholars of both American literary realism and of Victorian realism have long pointed out that one of the most persistent hallmarks of realist fiction is this negative self-definition. (6)

A similar lexicon tends to be applied to British Victorian social theory.[15] Regenia Gagnier claims that "the genealogy" of nineteenth-century British liberalism itself was constituted by "a particular problem in conceptualizing the relation of parts to wholes, especially the individual to larger social units" (1).[16] Because unity and coherence are reference points for the expanse of realist novels as well as the brevity of lyric poems, the language of fragments and fragmentation is used to distinguish the reality of both forms of representation from their apparent ambition.[17] I contend that identifying and focusing on the middle-ground of conventionality and conformity provides productive new insights into how individual texts navigate the representation of that vague and unwieldy force, "society."

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[15] Andrew Miller, for instance, describes Victorian morality as, both historically and fictionally, a process of "understanding the self to be constituted in relation to others and across time, divided even as it dreams its own present coherence" (15–16).

[16] Alexis Shotwell characterises contemporary globalisation in similar terms: the "world is partially shared, offers finite freedom, adequate abundance, modest meaning, and limited happiness. Partial, finite, adequate, modest, limited — and yet worth working on, with, and for" (5).

[17] Nicholas Dames describes "an organic form that was both fragment and whole" as "the gambit around which late Victorian formalism rested: the ability to keep fragment and whole, unit and process, in productive tension with one another while not obscuring either side of the equation" (179). Freedgood's theorisation of metalepsis frames Victorian realism in similar terms: "if these novels have a 'form,' it is ragged and broken in its diegetic dispersion of a coherent world" (xvi).

Conventional Characters

Subjects I identify as "conventional characters" appear from chapter two onwards. Literary characters tend to be divided into binaries: original and stock, round and flat (Forster), dynamic and static (Pfister), major and minor (Woloch), and, in Catherine Gallagher's most recent formulation, instance and type.[18] Gallagher claims that:

> Fictional characters may refer to people in the world by conforming to type, but they only resemble people in their nonconformity. The impulse toward reference and the impulse toward realization are thus not only separate but also deeply opposed, and their tension, rather than cooperation, might be said to define realism. ("George Eliot" 66)

The characters I call "conventional" are an important exception to this deep opposition because representing social conventionality requires individuating the process of conforming to type.[19] Deidre Lynch argues that the way "novelists divided attention between reticent heroines and forward, overdressed beauties helped to reorganize romantic-period reading as an experience in exercising personal preferences — in choosing not only among texts, but also among characters and ways of regarding them" (151). Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi reopen the question of personal preferences for, or "identifying" with, fictional

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[18] Stephen Guy-Bray, regarding "binary systems" in the history of sexuality, makes the obvious but important point that, "as a rule, all that is at issue in any given binary taxonomy is whether two things or people are the same as each other or different from each other" (113). In studies of character, binary categories themselves tend to divide characters based on whether they are archetypal (the "same," or stock, minor, flat, static) or singular ("different," or original, major, round, dynamic).

[19] Gallagher claims that *Middlemarch* "takes the plight that belongs specifically to novel characters — that they are supposed to illustrate types from which they must depart — and makes it the central dilemma of a life story" ("George Eliot" 66). My argument extends this reading to claim that Eliot has a specific, sustained, interest in novel characters who illustrate a type from which they do not depart.

characters in contemporary criticism.[20] Their joint introduction paraphrases Robert Pippin's argument about "the status of normative considerations" in the humanities (36). Anderson's, Felski's, and Moi's application of Pippin's "problem" to literary character revealingly associates "first-person or normative questions" with the abstract ethical value of literary texts: "why these texts matter, or might matter, to us" (2).[21] Contemporary scholarly practices, however, resemble the modes of reading and characterisation inaugurated in romantic-era novels, and forward, overdressed beauties in fiction still rarely appeal to the personal preferences of their critics.

No one, fictional or otherwise, has ever thought that Nelly, Gilbert, Ginevra, Mrs Transome, or Rosamond matter very much, or that Dickinson's poetic representations of a contented stone or a tedious social call are as thought-provoking as wild nights, bullets in brains, or lives that stand like loaded guns. In contrast, Gwendolen, the subject of my final chapter, has provoked an astonishing critical response, which has generally insisted that she is fascinatingly unconventional. I argue that existing research on Gwendolen's peculiar lack of development or closure, and her undefined relationship with Daniel, has mischaracterised

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[20] Their work, *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, contributes to a scholarly conversation on character, narration, and ethics that has recently included, among many others: Bewes; Frow; McWeeny; Phelan; Lanser; Warhol; and Vermeule. Marcus's and Best's definition of surface reading, and their follow up (with Heather Love) on description, also inform and engage with the ongoing resurgence of "normative considerations" and character identification in the humanities, as do, for instance, the contributors to Lauren Berlant's collection on compassion. Conversely, the digital humanities and its advocacy of data-driven computational methods of analysis, many of the principles of which were outlined by Franco Moretti, strives for specifically depersonalised alternatives to traditional close-reading practices.

[21] Though a useful counterpoint to "the over-derided 'hermeneutics of suspicion'" (Chatterjee 19) used to establish literary studies as an academic field, investing in normative questions about why literature matters can itself, as Lynch notes, become "irksomely normalizing" (*Loving Literature* 12). Guillory credits a "crisis of faith" among professional literary scholars with "a surprising turn away from the 'professional' discipline of reading to an idealization of the 'amateur' reader. …The return of the amateur reader, the 'lover' of literature, is a curious unintended consequence of the profession's overestimation of its aims" (xiii). Lynch historicises this "amateur envy" as a conventional feature of "each new call for the professionalization that might better secure the English professor's claim to expertise" over the past 150 years (2).

her narrative role. The conventional characters I discuss in chapters two through five, Nelly Dean (*Wuthering Heights* [1847]), Gilbert Markham (*Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848]), Ginevra Fanshawe (*Villette* [1853]), Arabella Transome (*Felix Holt* [1866]), Rosamond Vincy (*Middlemarch* [1871]), and Gwendolen Harleth (*Daniel Deronda* [1876]) are all chiefly characterised by their lack of interest in the "radical ethical position that would transcend social and moral convention," which Kent Puckett attributes to Eliot's most memorable protagonists (85). They cumulatively establish a central metric for socially conventional characterisation: realist characters who are hypothetically susceptible to what Schaffer calls "the climactic achievement of individuality" (8), and yet whose narrative "achievement" cannot be measured by the extent of their individuation.

I define conventional characters as those who take few practical or emotional risks, interpret others superficially or inaccurately, and have a limited capacity for self-reflection. Relatedly, they are unlikely to form deep emotional bonds and undergo little or no development throughout a novel.[22] These characters often take up a significant amount of character space but are infrequently an identifiable protagonist. The easiest way to spot a conventional character, however, is the repetition of their socially conditioned conformity. Rosamond Vincy, for instance, is described by *Middlemarch*'s narrator as "a sylph caught young and educated at Mrs Lemon's" (150), and by Lydgate as having "an exquisite tact and insight in relation to all points of manners" (280).[23] My definition of conventional character

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[22] Figlerowicz describes "flat protagonists," her own contribution to theories of character, as protagonists who try and fail to develop independently of their society: "characters whose represented self-expression and ties to others contract and simplify over the course of a novel" (3). My conventional characters, by contrast, do not contract, expand, or develop either individually or in relation to others.

[23] Interestingly, the term "sylph," an image for unsubstantial beauty that Eliot employs to characterise vacuous efforts of characterisation in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" ("she dances like a sylph" [140]), is also used to characterise Gwendolen as "a problematic sylph" (5). Lucy Snowe characterises her young students against the sylph-like model of feminine good looks — "I was going to write sylph forms, but that would have been quite untrue" (*Villette* 214) — that she indirectly

is not just based on how well or how often a particular character obeys social "rules" or undertakes customary social rituals (calling on neighbours, writing letters, getting married, going to funerals, taking tea), but on a specific narrative function. The conventional characters that I identify in this thesis establish social convention and its associated behaviours as a fixed reality within a novel world and therefore cannot, and more importantly, *need* not, develop individually. These characters constitute the ground zero of a novel's social system and determine the verisimilitude of the realistic social structure within which a realist text takes shape, a feature that realism relies upon as much as, if not more than, the verisimilitude of psychological individuation.[24]

The characters I focus on invert Alex Woloch's definition of minorness by taking up more character space than the representation of their "individual human personality" warrants (14). Nelly, Gilbert, Ginevra, Mrs Transome, Rosamond, and Gwendolen all challenge Woloch's distinction between "major" and "minor" characters by having a prominent place in the overall character system, yet nevertheless the "strange resonance" of minor characters: failing to be "directly or fully represented" (40). Conventional characters often do have distinctive characteristics and experiences and pursue individuated desires, but these desires simultaneously reflect and establish a novel's social order by providing a portrayal of individual conformity to abstract norms. The representation of such characters' interiority tends to be both lacking in complexity and predicated on an assumption that they do not require complex characterisation for their motivations to be understood. An exchange

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applies to Ginevra and similarly associates with shallow complacency: "[Ginevra] had a slight, pliant figure, not at all like the forms of the foreign damsels. … She chatted away volubly, and seemed full of a light-headed sort of satisfaction with herself and her position" (215).

[24] In this observation, I am extending recent work on fictional characters and their social networks. McWeeny, for instance, positions his study as "a countercurrent to long-standing critical associations of the realist novel in the nineteenth century with privacy and interiority" (6) as well as "a turn from that great Victorian value, sympathy" (7).

between Nelly and the elder Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates one way this lack of psychological depth is constructed in novels:

> "Nelly, do you never dream queer dreams?" she said, suddenly, after some minutes' reflection.
>
> "Yes, now and then," I answered. (70)

Nelly's obligatory "now and then" is dismissive and unreflective, but just polite and encouraging enough to enable Catherine's "I am Heathcliff" speech and provide a conventional counterpoint to its affect. A conventional character's lack of "depth" is not attributed to a lack of space on the page, but to a lack of depth to represent. No novel would bother to describe Nelly's dreams, and, the dialogue implies, she has never had queer dreams like these.

I use conventional, then, to describe characters who collectively constitute a novel's definition of "society" and whose primary individuating characteristic is shallowness.[25] They defy realism's association with the development of individual subjectivity and formalise one of its major themes: thought and behaviour *en masse*.[26] John Frow uses the term "conventional" to establish a link between "fictional characters" and "kinds of person": "both

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[25] Pamela Gilbert's study of skin also relies upon surface and depth as central concepts for both nineteenth-century literature and its critics, describing Victorian realism as "not just a question of describing ordinary reality, but of situating that reality in bodily terms" (9). Gilbert uses the body's actual physical surface to explain the way realism's attention to "surface detail" became associated with both "'depth' psychology" and "suspicious and close reading" (22).

[26] The motivations of the masses, as this thesis will demonstrate in more detail, have formal consistencies that are untethered to a particular gender representation, ethical subjectivity, or class position. Lucy Deane in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Allan Woodcourt in Dickens's *Bleak House* are good examples of the morally upstanding conventionality that realist novels tend to reward but struggle to focus on. *Adam Bede*'s Hetty Sorrel and *David Copperfield*'s James Steerforth are good examples of the negatively conventional characters (flirtatious, materialistic, motivated by the desire for social status) realist novels often punish with similar efficiency. Characters like *Middlemarch*'s Celia Brooke and Fred Vincy (who appear briefly in chapter four) are, in turn, instances of the large number of conventional characters whose representation and trajectory is — like most realist representations of the influence of society itself — more ambiguously pitched between good-natured orthodoxy and corrupted conformity.

fictional characters and kinds of person are models of an aspect of the world, schemata which generalize and simplify human being in conventional ways and make it available to understanding and action" (108). Rather than modelling an aspect of the world, the characters I study perform the generalised function of modelling a broad series of (often clichéd) assumptions about society's entire code of conduct.[27] For all five writers in this thesis, conventionality is equally and sometimes indistinguishably a formal strategy and a thematic preoccupation.

In selecting objects of focus, studies of character necessarily reconstitute the character space of the novels they analyse. Lynch claims that the habit of reading fictional characters as "the expressive analogue to ourselves" (2) is ahistorical, she cautions that "character is some readers' means to distinguish their own deep-feeling reception of texts from other readers' mindless consumption" (19). Parts of any literary work will inevitably be more "mindlessly consumed" than others, and representations of social conventionality are particularly vulnerable to mindless consumption. I therefore rely extensively on the traditional method of closely analysing individual characters, without associating the closeness of my analysis with particularly "deep-feeling reception."

Development — the oscillation between slow, accumulative progress and moments of electrifying revelation — is still taken for granted as a major structural feature of literary realism. Andrew H. Miller describes "the sort of quietly accumulating and solidifying elements of character which the realistic novel realized and explored in the everyday world"

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[27] A novelistic function frequently taken for granted in accounts of realist fiction. Elaine Hadley, for instance, claims that "the novel as a genre of this era operates on certain assumptions regarding its relation to the quotidian, to the probabilities associated with the quotidian nature of living, to the developmental model of human growth, and certainly to the role of individual character in the unfolding of narrative, and so on" (36). Farina makes a similar observation that "if novels are not now routinely respected as epistemology per se, they are the pre-eminent medium of characterization, and they record routine assumptions about the relations between things in the world" (xv).

(13) as well as the investment in "an elusive self of great intricacy" that realist characterisation uniquely reveals (21). Amanda Anderson uses the famously comprehensive social network of *Bleak House* to describe the way Victorian fiction "foregrounds exemplary moments of affection, understanding, and sympathy" (*Bleak Liberalism* 50). Gary Saul Morson puts it most straightforwardly: "realist novels, which describe a personality's gradual development, need time for small alterations to accumulate into real change of character" (10). Realist character, perhaps more than any other subject of literary analysis, draws attention to the imperfectness of critical methods for distinguishing between real people, real societies, and their fictional counterparts. Conventional characters offer an opportunity to reassess the relationship between representations of social and political change, the moral potential of social relationships, and narratives of individual development in realist fiction.

Realist characters are supposed to be deep. Seasoned readers of nineteenth-century fiction expect "unique and coherent characters possessing depth or interiority" (Jaffe 6) and an "intensive deep focus on individual characters' deep psychology" (Schaffer 22). We have celebrated this "deep internality" (Gagnier 3) and sought to get ever "deeper inside" (Gornick 2) these characters and their aspiration towards "deep human significance" (Shaw 247). This emphasis on deep characterisation presumes, by implication, that socially "shallow" characters also require only superficial interpretation as fictional constructs. Puckett claims that "to understand literary form is, in other words, to understand how it is both generally and at particular moments coincident with or identical to social form" (9), Jaffe remarks similarly on the continuity between "those conventions that structure novelistic realism and those similarly arbitrary and often unarticulated rules that structure the social real" (7), and Frow proposes that "the doctrine of realism, which is elaborated as the key support of the nineteenth-century novel, is grounded in a notion of the correspondence of novelistic

character with an objectively given social taxonomy" (116).[28] Though I agree with Puckett that the "methodological opposition between social content and literary form is neither as useful nor as descriptive as it has sometimes seemed" (9), I contend that social conventionality is an aspect of literary form that has often been misread as straightforward social content.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is divided into three parts that each address an iteration of conventional characterisation: poetic speakers and figures, first-person narrators, and normative female characters. My five chapters all focus on specific texts, writers, and characters while modelling interpretative strategies with broader applications. Chapter one, "Socialising Sustainably with Emily Dickinson," focuses on a range of Dickinson's poetry that I divide into four categories: social rituals, social encounters, social relationships and, finally, the social language of flowers. Dickinson has had a remarkable resurgence in the past ten years, with contemporary audiences seeking new frameworks through which to politically activate the poetry. My analysis of social conformity in Dickinson's poems is, in part, a response to the strikingly wide appeal of her authorial persona to the Western cultural imagination in the present.[29] Our twenty-first-century Dickinsons barely resemble the old "myth of Amherst," but portrayals of the poems and their composition tend to maintain her texts' reputation for

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[28] Relatedly, Puckett advocates for "narratology" as "a productive kind of sociology" (9). There is a growing interdisciplinary conversation with, and application of, narrative methods to sociology, as well as other disciplines including anthropology, psychology, economics, law, medicine, philosophy. See Charon et al., Holmgren, Olson, Shuman and Warhol, Phelan, Mäkelä, Meretoja, Caracciolo and Kukkonen, Latour, and Zunshine for interdisciplinary narrative work in dialogue with this thesis. My thesis is attuned to the ways literary research on representations of society in fiction can inform and anticipate real-world applications of literary-critical methods. Conventionality is an aspect of literary interpretation that has obvious sociological implications and deserves further disciplinary scrutiny to be effectively absorbed into wider applications of narratology.

[29] In March 2024, several major international news outlets enthusiastically reported Ancestry.com's announcement that Taylor Swift and Emily Dickinson are related.

extreme inwardness. Rejecting the world to focus on cultivating a more liberated version of the self is as seductive a fantasy as it ever was. Focusing on Dickinson's extensive representation of, and aesthetic vocabulary for, social conventionality reveals that reader responses prioritising individuality and originality are a cultural ideology rather than an intuitive reaction to art itself.

In a brief interlude between chapters one and two, I outline some textual connections between Dickinson, the Brontës, and Eliot to complement this more theoretic introduction, providing examples of Dickinson poems that convincingly correspond to scenes and characters in realist fiction. The following four chapters then turn to the realist novel to develop my definition of conventional character by focusing on the narrative function and conventional social behaviour of specific characters. Chapter two, "Two Bad Narrators," compares Nelly and Gilbert, the conventional character-narrators of *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, respectively. "One Bad Friend," chapter three, scrutinises Lucy Snowe's subnarrated relationship with the "limited and insipid" (142) Ginevra in *Villette*, providing a bridge between my analysis of conventionality, narration, and superficial socialising in the Brontës' novels and my subsequent focus on George Eliot's artificial female characters and the third-person narration of their social relationships. Chapter four, "Normative Youth and Normative Age," analyses Mrs Transome's and Rosamond's climactic yet non-progressive social encounters that conclude *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*. "What Happens to Gwendolen Harleth," chapter five on *Daniel Deronda*, provides an example of a conventional character as a novel protagonist and proposes a new reading of Gwendolen's characterisation and the novel's friendship plot. In this final chapter, I demonstrate that Gwendolen's socially conventional characterisation is mapped onto the novel's representation of Daniel's colonising ambitions. In all my examples, conventional

characterisation reconceives the presumed and social task of nineteenth-century realist narrators: to provide intimate access to a novel's characters.

The premise of realism is that ordinary people and everyday life are meaningful subjects of representation. Each chapter argues that the meta-level of ordinariness within novels and poetry provides an opportunity to make new (and often unexpected) connections between fictional constructs and the social worlds they claim to represent. Both the study of literature and the application of narratology in other disciplines require such comparisons.[30] My argument is not just that conventionality is more interesting in literature than in real life (though this is probably true), but that conventional socialising tends to be passively consumed in "storyworlds" as well as in "actual worlds."[31] This interpretative metalepsis is as observable in the reception of a four-line Dickinson poem as in that of an eight-hundred-page realist novel. The representation of conventionality is an uncanny triumph of realism insofar as its social and formal iterations have usually been treated as synonymous by scholars. My central claim is that the realist tensions (and slippages) between art and life still exert inhibiting pressures on literary analysis. This dissertation deliberately focuses on writers and texts that have become associated with a conventional anglophone literary education and many of its most pernicious clichés about reading, writing, and rebelling. Being just like other girls happens often, but in specific ways, in literature. By compiling some of these forms of "likeness" into their own study, I hope to demonstrate that fictional social conventionality is far from one dimensional.

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[30] Guillory notes that the discipline of literary studies "and its institutional structures, especially the curriculum," have had a particular tendency to be imagined as "surrogates for the social totality" (xii).

[31] I borrow here the terms used by Malcah Effron, Margarida McMurry, and Virginia Pignagnoli to theorise narrative co-construction.

Part I: Socialising Sustainably with Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson has long been synonymous with both formal experimentation and social isolation. Geoffrey Sanborn characterises the Amherst poet as not only "a wickedly private writer," but also one of literature's most influential "models of creative privacy and private creation" (1336).[32] This chapter has two aims. First, I demonstrate that Dickinson's experimental fragmentariness frequently represents conventional social encounters instead of states of withdrawal or alienation. Second, and relatedly, I contend that Dickinson's poetic speakers operate within a realistic social world. Characterising Dickinson's poems as socially conformist is a deliberate provocation. Nevertheless, reading Dickinson's speakers as more realistic than idealistic[33] opens up productive new ways of interpreting the poems and intervenes in a critical tradition that characterises Dickinson's aesthetic as evasive, demanding, and eccentric by associating the poetry with her own idiosyncratic social life.[34] As Diana Fuss puts it, "ultimately, all of the mythologizations of Dickinson are based on the

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[32] As Seth Perlow notes, Dickinson's personhood has contributed as much, if not more than, the poems to her centrality as a figure for theories of authorship and the politics thereof: "Since [Susan] Howe's book appeared, the rhetoric of possession has helped make Dickinson central to ongoing debates about the lyric genre, about the role of original manuscripts and holograph images in textual studies, and about the significance of nontextual artifacts from a poet's workshop. … [T]his rhetoric has also informed the social theories through which Dickinson's identity-political significance continues to emerge" (44).

[33] My use of "idealistic" versus "realistic" is borrowed from Elizabeth Renker's study of realism and "realist poetics" in nineteenth-century America. Renker explicitly incorporates poetry into historical accounts of the American realist tradition and defines realism "as it applies to postbellum phenomena in U.S. literature" as "a mode of literary writing that seeks to represent the contemporary everyday 'reality' of human experience (however differently defined by individual writers) and that renders these representations without recourse to transcendental frames of reference as a foundation" (3). Dickinson's poetry has often been linked to transcendentalist frames of reference and seems emblematic of what Renker describes as "a competing aesthetic" (4). Nevertheless, I have found that realist frames of reference offer a surprisingly coherent way into Dickinson's poems and their representation of "everyday" social life.

[34] Monika Fludernik's recent comment that "Dickinson's poetry has always been read biographically: Dickinson, the reclusive spinster, who blossomed into an artist while she was shut up, and shut herself in, in the family home in Amherst, Massachusetts" (233) followed by the remark that "the passionate nature and syntactic irregularities of her writing suggest a psyche unbalanced when in the grip of poetic inspiration" illustrates this tendency (234).

same twin premise: Dickinson fashioned a radical interior life by shunning a conventional exterior one" (9). Despite the power of these "mythologizations," "conventional exterior" life is one of Dickinson's preeminent poetic subjects.

There is a substantial poetic index associated with Dickinsonian representations of inner life. Take, for example: "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –" (CM 354; FR 764); "This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to Me –" (CM 254; FR 519); and "I dwell in Possibility –" (CM 233; FR 466). [35] Dickinson's distinctive imagery, however, is equally legible within the bounds of a much more conventional social vision. "The Soul selects her own Society –," for instance, concludes with an emphasis on the negative consequences of rigid ("Unmoved") individual introspection that fails to give "an ample nation" any "attention" (CM 218; FR 409). Yet the poem is often reduced to its easily digestible and apparently representative first line, which Adrienne Rich incorporates into her well-known treatise on Dickinson's importance to subsequent generations of female artists: "I have a notion that genius knows itself; that Dickinson chose her seclusion, knowing she was exceptional and knowing what she needed. … [S]he carefully selected her society and controlled the disposal of her time" (179).[36] Exceptional seclusion has been a consistent backdrop against which Dickinson and her poetic form and production have been understood. Indeed, Cristanne Miller's and Domhnall Mitchell's introduction to their new edition of

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[35] Throughout this chapter I provide references to both the Miller and Franklin editions of the poems. Though Franklin's edition has retained its authoritative status, I primarily reference, and reproduce the transcriptions of, Miller's more recent edition. Aside from admirable readability, the logic of Miller's edition — organised around the poet's habits of retention and circulation, with a far greater incidence of printing multiple versions of the same poem than any previous edition — resonates with my approach to the poet's sociality and has assisted in my thinking.

[36] Similarly, the recent release of Andrew Bird's and Phoebe Bridgers's "I Felt a Funeral, in my Brain" (2022), one of many contemporary musical compositions inspired by Dickinson's poetry, tellingly circles back to the poem's first line (which takes place "in my Brain," [Bird and Bridgers 3:37) rather than concluding where the poem does, with "a World."

Dickinson's letters, the first in over sixty years, reveals the extent to which it is still necessary for contemporary Dickinson critics to push back against the poet's reputation for social isolation and political insularity: "Dickinson was by no means an isolated, lonely, woman. She lived fully within the stream of events in her town, state, country, and times" (1).[37] My approach takes Dickinson's immersion in nineteenth-century New England social life for granted and focuses instead on representations of social life in the poems to make a still-controversial association between conventionality and Dickinson's sociality. A significant and compelling number of Dickinson's speakers linger in demonstrably unexceptional, unselective, society.

Now, a range of contemporary commentators are condemning or redeeming Dickinson's seemingly unavoidable emphasis on practical and creative retreat with renewed urgency. Alena Smith's television series *Dickinson* (2019–21) encapsulates Dickinson's conflicted status, as poet and person, in the present moment. Despite, or perhaps because of, revelling in the construction of a highly social (drinking, dancing, dating, drug-taking) vision of its titular subject, Smith's series frequently grapples with the dilemma of how to politically categorise Dickinson's artistic productions. Most conspicuously, in "You Cannot Put a Fire Out," the final episode of season two, a deceased Civil War soldier declares, "you have wars to fight, Emily Dickinson, but you must fight them in secret, alone, unseen. You must give all the glory to yourself and ask for nothing from the world" (12:17). The dialogue addresses a white, wealthy poet's social and political commitments during the American Civil War by asserting that creating meaningful art is a necessarily isolated, and isolating, undertaking.[38]

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[37] At the time of writing, Miller's and Mitchell's edition was not yet published. References to Dickinson's correspondence throughout this thesis therefore refer to Johnson's and Ward's edition.

[38] As Eliza Richards notes, the actual possibility of a distinction between war and poetry is barely credible in the literature of this period, much of which the Dickinson family consumed. The Civil War permeated the work of mid-century American poets, who became invested in issues like

To reconsider Dickinson's sociality, this chapter puts fragmentation in dialogue with sustainability, rather than unity or wholeness.[39] As both theme (breaking down, shattering, unfinishedness, incompletion, spaces of possibility, alienation) and literary device (dashes, open-endedness, ellipses, gaps in syntax, weak closure, the vocabulary of rupture and disruption), fragmentariness has always been central to discussions of the Dickinson canon. The reception of Dickinson's distinctive dashes illustrates the process by which the poet's own apparent social hostility is mapped onto formal interpretations of the poems.[40] Seth Perlow summarises the appeal of the dash as an inviting mystery, an apparent communicative breakdown between feeling and language, poem and reader: "this mark's shifty grammar — its powers of apposition, elision, fragmentation, and trailing conclusion — shapes her distinctive syntax. … [I]t signifies the wordlessness of strong feelings, their tendency to disrupt language" (68).[41] Perlow relies on an affective description of fragmentary language to characterise how Dickinson's disruptive poetics attest to the incomprehensibility of

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"broken communication" and "the encroachment of violence on the very poetic traditions they are using to address war's circumstances" (248).

[39] Studies such as Sharon Cameron's *Lyric Time* have consolidated Dickinson's status as an exemplar of the intersection between poetic fragmentariness and Coleridgean organic unity: "Dickinson's utterances fragment, word cut from word, stanza from stanza, as a direct consequence of her desire for that temporal completion which will fuse all separations into the healing of a unified whole" (1).

[40] Cindy Mackenzie offers a fairly critically representative description of the way in which Dickinson's (fragmented) biographical self has been associated with the formal qualities of the letters and poems: "distinguished by gaps, ellipses, dashes, and disjunction, her poems and letters became increasingly integrated with her life as she increasingly resembled her poems and letters and they resembled her. Epistolary representations of the self clearly make their way into Dickinson's poetry as her numerous personae express one facet of the poet's complex and often contradictory self" (16).

[41] In a broader public domain, Joanne O'Leary's online review of Julie Dobrow's *After Emily* (2018) drew a large readership and describes the "twisted peekaboo quality" of Dickinson's verse: "we're left to supply a meaning the poet hasn't; or else to occupy a typographical void where sense evades us. The poems require an intensity of engagement that can make the reading experience border on masochism." Like many critics, O'Leary's moves from Dickinson's own social "intimacy" to poetic "visual markers" and then to readerly "engagement."

individual experience. I therefore employ the terms "fragment," "fragmentation," and "fragmentariness" to reconsider Dickinson's approach to both the social experience of alienation and the literary contention with the limits of language and representation.[42]

Michael Cohen's historical argument about the "social lives of poems" in nineteenth-century America and Bruno Latour's sociological actor-network theory remind us that the political importance of "imagined community" (Cohen 4) and "the social question" (Latour 6) originate in the nineteenth century. Latour relies on the vocabulary of formal fragmentation ("de-fragmented," "re-association," "reassembling") to articulate the political efficacy of breaking down "the social" into a process of tracing particular associations.[43] Reassessing Dickinson's fragmentariness and its social implications also addresses the inevitably political implications of the poet's staggering cultural impact, and the self-enclosed model of creative life with which it continues to be associated.

Sociologists and political theorists, like literary critics, return to the image of the fragment so often because it raises the spectre of social order. Miller's description of Dickinson's "disjunction" captures the way fragmented language and social visions construct (and deconstruct) one another:

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[42] Camila Ring's recent remark about the "anachronistic leaning" of a scholarly "tendency to construe Dickinson's hallmark stylistics — extreme compression, syntactical ellipses, interrupting dashes, and other mechanisms of silence or self-subversion — as pointing primarily to the indeterminacy of meaning in her poems" (96) is another demonstration of the force twentieth-century associations with fragmentariness continue to exert over Dickinson criticism.

[43] Daniel Tiffany's theorisation of "lyric obscurity and social being" also relies on the vocabulary of fragmentation, describing literary obscurity as "a splintering of mass experience into 'sleeper cells,' the fragmentation of a posthuman world into countless underworlds" (12). More broadly, Tiffany's use of "obscurity" is not dissimilar from my use of the term "fragmentation" and his conclusion that "the conditions of solipsism and connectedness, of secrecy and expressiveness, are not necessarily exclusive or antithetical" (234) has informed my study of form and sociality in Dickinson, and in this thesis more broadly.

> Language that knowingly disrupts culturally shared ordering patterns (such as those of sentence structure, grammar, punctuation) seems to give structural body to a larger comment on that society's order as well. Especially when formal disruptions reflect thematic variance from cultural ordering patterns, they seem to voice a belief that the world is not harmonious, that life is neither reasonable nor easy, that there is no natural or divine plan of things keeping meaning safe from the threat of incipient chaos. … Dickinson does not write in a new language — that would be absurd, primarily because then no one would understand her. Rather, she reorders meaning along associative, analogical lines in order to express what was before inexpressible or unseen. … Dickinson's language is essentially, not superficially, disjunctive. (*Emily Dickinson* 46)

Like Miller, I consider Dickinson's language "essentially, not superficially" fragmentary. Unlike her, I find it possible to trace a commitment in Dickinson's disjunctive and experimental language to encountering a "harmonious" world that does not necessarily resist dominant "cultural ordering patterns." Indeed, every Dickinson poem in this chapter engages with socially conventional behaviours and practices that define and uphold cultural ordering patterns. Fragmentation is fundamentally entwined with Dickinson's prominent place in conceptions (and fantasies) of creative singularity in the Western tradition. The concept of "outsider art," with which Dickinson has always been associated, imagines a radical break from aesthetic, and therefore social (or social, and therefore aesthetic), convention.[44] For

[44] Fragmentation in Dickinson is, as Miller puts it, one of the poet's "continuous characteristics," comprising "compressed syntax, disruptive use of dashes, wide-ranging registers of diction, and use of radically disorienting metonymy and metaphor" (*Reading* 6). More recently, an intuitive link between Dickinson's biography — what readers might be tempted to imagine as her own (social) experience — and the "disruptive" fragmentariness of her poetics has been generally affirmed rather than questioned. Mackenzie's essay on Dickinson's epistolary poetics reflects this tendency, by characterising "mystery" and "the riddle" as formal strategies that insist on strenuous decoding from readers and are therefore "at the forefront of [Dickinson's] artistic aims" (14).

many of Dickinson's speakers, however, fragmentary language precipitates submission to the conditions of social life.[45]

The poems that appear in the first three sections of this chapter highlight the stable sociality of Dickinson's "formal disruptions" by addressing social situations, encounters, and relationships that replicate, rather than resist, "cultural ordering patterns." The final section then turns to Dickinson's poems about floral gift exchange. These texts, which appropriate the "language of flowers" popularised by nineteenth-century floral dictionaries, are a large and understudied subsection of Dickinson's corpus. I argue that Dickinson's thematic interest in, and aesthetic reliance on, floriography challenges the ongoing critical emphasis on the poet's entwined formal and social originality. A broad fascination with the missing pieces of Dickinson's biography — what Virginia Jackson refers to as the "everyday remnants of a literate life" (1) — has reinforced a critical conflation between inaccessibly private "strong feelings" and fragmented poetic style.[46] Dickinson's poetic (and actual) floral gifts instead use fragmentary language and enigmatic images to knowingly uphold the "culturally shared ordering patterns" of floriography, a mainstream social language and poetic subject in the nineteenth century.

Sympathy is the nineteenth-century literary and philosophical model most strongly associated with meaningful social experiences. Marianne Noble has recently updated the term in her study of human contact in antebellum American writers. Noble describes a turn after

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[45] And therefore resists Levinson's apparently obvious claim that, "genetically speaking, the particular formal (and social) realization of the fragment is its *dis*integration" (13).

[46] Many recent studies aim to resist the tendency to individuate and isolate Dickinson's authorship by situating her reading and manuscripts in a broader historical context but still tend to take the poetry's thematic focus on individual experience for granted. See Miller (*Reading in Time*), Socarides, Fretwell, Blake, Tinonga-Valle, and Mastroianni.

the 1850s to "benevolent skepticism" in the work of Hawthorne, Douglass, Stowe, and Dickinson:

> One who sympathizes knows she does not know the other truly, but she does genuinely care for that other. Skepticism is sweet; sympathy is skeptical. That combination of caring non-knowing is the central quality of sympathetic human contact in these antebellum works. (3)

Noble's reconceptualisation of sympathetic human relations in the latter part of the nineteenth century describes a fragmentary relationship of "caring non-knowing" between sympathetic subjects and their objects that informs my approach to Dickinson and has broader implications for the social modes explored transatlantically and cross-generically in this dissertation.[47] Nevertheless, Noble resembles Dickinson's other critics (past and present) in two crucial respects. Her assumption about the poet's fundamental "hostility" to "forms of social subjectivity" (15) verges on intentional fallacy, and her analysis of the poems relies upon a relationship between Dickinson's "unique style" and the "singularity" of individual readers (199). Like Noble's, my approach to Dickinson's poetry offers an alternative to two related idealisms: complete sympathetic incorporation and a total break from social life. Rather than being caught in a bind between these impossible versions of sociality, the poems I examine explore the precarity of realistic social dynamics.

This thesis revisits Dickinson's writing, and that of her favourite Victorian novelists, with something like "benevolent skepticism" to offer a method of reading that treats representations of conventional social life as a productive subject of literary analysis. It is possible to engage with Dickinson's fragmentariness without recourse to the intertwined

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[47] Noble, like Fludernik, is among the small number of critics who read Dickinson alongside realist novelists.

socio-aesthetic anxieties of rupture, loss, absence, and the difficulty of adequately representing individual experience.[48] Indeed, the poems often illustrate the process by which individual desires and potential must be curbed by external limitations. In Dickinson's poetry, incompletion and the inevitability of misunderstanding inform a realistic social world within which the poems operate and to which her speakers adjust.

In a poem written in the early 1860s, the height of Dickinson's productivity and during the period Noble identifies as marking a shift in her approach to human contact, images of fragmentation accompany a reflection on this process of compromise:

Taking up the fair Ideal,
Just to cast her down
When a fracture – we discover –
Or a splintered Crown –
Makes the Heavens portable –
And the Gods – a lie –
Doubtless – "Adam" – scowled at Eden –
For *his* perjury!

Cherishing – our poor Ideal –
Till in purer dress –
We behold her – glorified –
Comforts – search – like this –

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[48] My more neutral reading of the dashes is anticipated by Lucy Alford's positive interpretation. She describes ways Dickinson's texts "prolong and savor the pleasure of desire itself." Dashes for Alford, however, still "perforate the lines with absences, breaths held" and stand in for a "sense of hesitation," illustrating the difficulty of my task in this chapter: discussing Dickinson's poetic form without relying on an accompanying register of physical fractures and social scepticism (82).

Till the broken creatures –

We adored – for whole –

Stains – all washed –

Transfigured – mended –

Meet us – with a smile – (CM 206; FR 386)

Temporally, the poem seems to progress linearly, the final dash marking an anticipated moment of meeting indicated by the "till" that proceeds from a "search" in the second stanza. Dickinson's speaker describes "broken creatures" who were once "adored" as both a "fair Ideal" and a "whole." The revelation that the speaker is in fact projecting their idealism onto "fractured" and "splintered" objects, however, precipitates those same creatures emerging "in purer dress." What allows this fractured ideal to be "transfigured" in the speaker's imagination is a recognition that it is worth pursuing a more accessible goal: "Heavens portable." Meaningful contact, being met with a "smile," is the outcome of a reckoning with the inevitable incompleteness of social knowledge, the futility of idealism, and the imperfectness of those one might "meet." This is a poem in which "comforts" are sought not in the possibilities of imagination or transcendence but through re-encountering the concrete and ordinary realities of life, the only "Eden" on offer. Social contact requires neither mutual understanding nor moral idealism and ultimately usurps the "fair Ideal" offered at the poem's outset. Here and elsewhere, Dickinson's fragmentariness works to reconcile creative self-expression with collective existence.

Dickinson's poem characterises fragmentation as a first step towards sustainable meetings and abandons the unity (a "fair Ideal") that absorptive interiority makes possible. Dickinson's diverse and multitudinous speakers include a striking number whose horizons are confined to the conventional "comforts" of social contact. Stephanie Burt accounts for the quantity of "otherwise dissimilar poems about places" by claiming that a primary function of

poetry is its capacity to "let us see with apparently new eyes some place that we already know" (16). Burt's arch reference to "*apparently* new" poetic eyes resonates with Dickinson's texts' tendency to stage encounters with ordinary life that parody individual alienation. Dickinson's poetry is also, among many things, "about places" and frequently offers the image of a house as a metaphor for self in society. "The Props assist the House –" (CM 365; FR 729), for instance, describes the process of a "Soul" being "Built" and is evidently just as much about "The Scaffold" of a social network as the "Carpenter" of Christian religious faith. Dickinson's poems do not use fragmentation to abandon social convention for something new and unseen, but to look at social life with *apparently* new eyes. Socialising does not impede Dickinson's poetry but provides it with structural integrity.[49]

Dickinson's poems frequently contrast uncertain speakers with a stable social setting. Their representations of resistance, rebellion, and isolation as aspects of conventional social experience, rather than an alternative to it, therefore have striking affinities to the realist novels taken up in the next four chapters. The Dickinson poems I survey all move towards constructive, if obscure, concluding epiphanies. I will show that the linguistic and structural breakdowns characteristic of Dickinson's poems uphold a desire for sustainable encounters between poetic figures and emphasise the difference between literary form and conventional social life. Revisiting Dickinson's notoriously difficult social poetics also resonates with the revival of limitation and compromise as central tenets of Anthropocene-era anti-capitalist critique, in which giving something up (land, power, money, energy, convenience,

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[49] Burt's analysis ultimately accounts for place in similar terms, arguing that place has mattered so much in poetry because it provides a specific point of access for the inherently social aspirations of the form:

> the experience of a place allows people to literally come together, to meet each other where we are. … Lyric or quasi-lyric poems about place become evidence for the meeting of outside and inside, the manifestation of what's "inside" you to the "outside" of other people, that we may want lyric poetry to provide. (20)

consumption) can take precedence over asking for more. Anahid Nersessian's neo-Marxist reappraisal of romanticism has recently described this process as "the positive attenuation of desire's impacts on a material world under evermore impossible duress" (*Utopia* 16). Dickinson's poems repeatedly exhibit patterns of moderation and compromise set within surprisingly realist scenarios, despite Dickinson's enduring reputation as "*the* American poet whose work consisted in exploring states of psychic extremity" (Rich 192).[50] The poems I discuss below acknowledge the pressures of a rigid social system but remain oriented towards a model of sociality that prioritises shared experience over individual fulfillment.[51] The social life represented by Dickinson's fragmentary aesthetic suggests that these poems have little to say about radical individualism and a lot to say about being part of society.

Arks of Reprieve: Social Fragments

Dickinson's speakers tend to forfeit the desire to be completely articulate and therefore sympathetically interpretable. Sharon Cameron does note Dickinson's allegiance to "the ordinary incompletions of life" (206) but primarily defines the poems' fragmentariness as a "response to the task of representing interior experience" (16).[52] Many poems, however,

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[50] Rich's claim is neither the beginning nor the end of Dickinson's status as the poet of tormented inner life. More than twenty years after Rich, Sielke describes Dickinson as "the American woman poet whose work most obviously attests to the fragility and discontinuity of poetic utterance and identity, to the drama of self and subjectivity" (4).

[51] Many recent theoretical studies of poetry have explored and put pressure on precisely these concerns: the association of poetic expression with the isolation of singular selfhood and poetic speakers with individual wish-fulfilment. My approach to Dickinson's poetry is informed by these broader recalibrations of critical priorities and reading practices. Anne-Lise François formulates a theory entirely concerned with "the practice of making *do* with little" (34), advocating for "forms of reticent assertion" that represent the limited utopia Nersessian describes as "a different kind of idealism, one that seeks to remain faithful to the open-endedness of thought, and to preserve the delicacy of the relation between the having of a desire and its externalization, or the making of a wish and its accomplishment" (*Utopia* 22).

[52] For the persistence of this assumption about fragmentariness and inarticulable interiority in Dickinson's poem see, for instance, Sielke's very similar remark on the relationship between Dickinson's "highly fragmented lines" and their transformation of "a supposedly whole identity located beyond subjectivity into the ultimate challenge of her disruptive aesthetics" (10).

focus more closely on self-presentation than self-reflection. One of life's incompletions that Dickinson's poems address with surprising frequency is conversations with others. A little-discussed 1879 poem seems to exemplify the socially anxious Dickinson riddle:

> We talked with each other about each other
> Though neither of us spoke –
> We were listening to the Second's Races
> And the Hoofs of the Clock –
> Pausing in Front of our Palsied Faces
> Time compassion took –
> Arks of Reprieve he offered to us –
> Ararats – we took – (CM 621; FR 1506)

The social dynamics of "We talked with each other about each other" are obscure: the poem's syntactic fragmentation makes it difficult to distinguish between the two poetic figures. Association and alienation are also amalgamated by the repetition in the first line, which undercuts an image of connection ("we talked with") with an image of evasion ("about each other"). Are these speakers each talking "about" themselves, or about the other? Is there a difference? "Neither of us spoke" could just as easily refer to a straightforward communicative failure as to the kind of "talking" that transcends language. "We talked with each other about each other" documents the breakdown of what Lucy Alford has described as "the primary ethical or relational dynamic in the poem — the address of gaze and speech between one and an other" (77). The poem hinges on the tension between self-involvement and sympathy, never making clear whether each speaker is socialising selfishly, generously, or at all.

The stultifying images of "Hoofs of the Clock," "Palsied Faces," and "Time compassion took" then accumulate to suggest an awkward, uncomfortable, even unbearable,

interaction. “Arks of Reprieve” playfully (and hyperbolically) describes the prospect of escaping an interminable conversation after a suitably polite interval. Yet, the speakers abandon their promising escape route, opting for “Ararats” instead: to land in the presence of another, rather than departing at the first available opportunity. The poem imagines a conventional social call as a potential biblical apocalypse, but its suffocating premise belies the speakers’ unthinking, yet not wholly negative, submission to the social convention that gives this poem its structure.[53]

The incomplete and cautiously optimistic closure of the text is emphasised by the consistency of its plural pronouns. “We talked with each other about each other” becomes an homage to the value and solidity of social acts that are neither pleasant nor substantial. The speakers’ decision to remain in each other’s company means that, despite the intrusion of exaggeratedly negative imagery, the poem resolves with an account of a social relationship that resembles Dickinson’s remark to Elizabeth Holland a year earlier (1878): “‘[i]t is finished’ can never be said of us” (Dickinson, *Letters* 613). The poem is about continuity, not disruption. The pluralised speakers, as in “Taking up the fair Ideal,” ultimately embrace inconveniences they cannot change. Each rejects the offer of a “Reprieve” from the other by recognising the benefit of remaining, at least temporarily, a “we.” “We talked with each other about each other” is exemplary of Dickinson’s experimentally fragmented approach to poetic

[53] I take some liberties in imposing possible social contexts onto Dickinson’s poems throughout this chapter. As François notes, “Dickinson leaves undefined the occasions for and premises of her texts, whether because their inclusion in letters addressed to particular recipients would once have made superfluous further explanation or because such underdetermination, informality, and abruptness of address belong to their formal effects” (157). My approach is a proposed reading practice and a considered rejoinder to the critical tendency to over-formalise all “undefined” aspects of Dickinson’s poetry.

language, yet it also reveals a strikingly conventional approach to what Noble terms "human contact."[54]

Dickinson's poems often characterise profound intimacy as impractical idealism. In "I tried to think a lonelier Thing," the fantasy of shared sympathy (a "Duplicate") is personified and vanquished. The poem laments social isolation by raising the spectre of "a lonelier thing"[55]:

I tried to think a lonelier Thing
Than any I had seen –
Some Polar Expiation – An Omen in the Bone
Of Death's tremendous nearness –

I probed Retrieveless things
My Duplicate – to borrow –
A Haggard comfort springs

From the belief that Somewhere –
Within the Clutch of Thought –
There dwells one other Creature
Of Heavenly Love – forgot –

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[54] See "I think the longest Hour of all" (CM 277; FR 607) for a more frequently discussed poem in which social obligations intrude upon, but ultimately constitute, a poem's speaker and their relationship to time. "After great pain, a formal feeling comes –" (CM 198; FR 372) is another well-known Dickinson text that documents, and ultimately embraces, a conventional social ritual — a funeral.

[55] Fludernik suggests that this poem is "perhaps echoing [Emily] Brontë's 'The Prisoner'" (239), a poem also recalled in, for example, "Let Us play Yesterday –" (CM 378) and "No Rack can torture me –" (CM 327). A possible additional narrative allusion is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which Dickinson would almost certainly have encountered.

I plucked at our Partition –

As One should pry the Walls –

Between Himself – and Horror's Twin –

Within Opposing Cells –

I almost strove to clasp his Hand,

Such Luxury – it grew –

That as Myself – could pity Him –

Perhaps he – pitied me – (CM 260; FR570)

This is a poem about loneliness (possibly, but not necessarily, the loneliness of religious doubt) and about strangers. It details the meeting of the speaker with a stranger, during which their conversation brings "Haggard comfort." Like "We talked with each other about each other," the poem's images of conventional social exchange are extravagant and misleading: "Of Heavenly Love – forgot –," "Horror's Twin." But, after a precarious, and ultimately withheld, moment of physical contact — "I almost strove to clasp his Hand" — images of impending horror transform into the "Luxury" of "Perhaps," or the luxurious possibility of incompletely sympathetic social contact.[56] By the concluding lines, the speaker does not need to identify, or even particularly understand, the stranger, but can enact social engagement simply "as Myself." What begins as an attempt to imagine a meaningful relationship with a kindred spirit — ("pity Him" / "pitied me") — becomes a reflection that social ties must always be subjected to "Perhaps," at the very least due to the inherent ambiguity of

[56] Dickinson slyly deploys this idea in a letter to Mabel Loomis Todd, in which she extols their distant relationship: "[t]he parting of those that never met, shall it be delusion, or rather, an unfolding snare whose fruitage is later?" (*Letters* 716).

conversation. The poem describes being interested in making contact with others as both a "Luxury" and as probing retrieveless things; furthermore, the speaker's negotiation between alienation and connection becomes a necessary part of socialising.

Fragmentation in these poems becomes a contested space between self and society that Dickinson's speakers must learn to navigate and resolve to accept, much like characters in realist novels. As evidenced by the large quantity of poems that incorporate dialogue and/or are written as conversations, social interaction repeatedly provides a structure for Dickinson's poetic representations of conventional socialising.[57] "I could suffice for Him," for example, is typical of how Dickinson integrates social dialogue and formal fragmentation:

I could suffice for Him, I knew –
He – could suffice for Me –
Yet Hesitating Fractions – Both
Surveyed Infinity –

"Would I be Whole" He sudden broached –
My Syllable rebelled –
'Twas face to face with Nature – forced –
'Twas face to face with God –

Withdrew the Sun – to other Wests –
Withdrew the furthest Star
Before Decision – stooped to speech –

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[57] For additional examples, see: "Sweet – You forgot – but I remembered" (CM 321, FR 635); "Just to be Rich" (CM 458, FR 635); "On this wondrous sea – sailing silently –" (CM 41, FR 3); "'They have not chosen me' – he said –" (CM 66, FR 87); "I came to buy a smile – today –" (CM 127, FR 258); and "They called me to the Window, for" (CM 269, FR 589).

And then – be audibler

The Answer of the Sea unto

The Motion of the Moon –

Herself adjust Her Tides – unto –

Could I – do else – with Mine? (CM 348; FR 712)

This poem has the same structure as "We talked with each other about each other," and it also emphasises co-existence, if not quite sympathy, between two speakers. The uncertainty of this text rests on a rebelling syllable, or a state of seemingly irreconcilable inarticulacy: the unwillingness to speak, or to speak honestly. "I could suffice for Him, I knew –" reflects on a dissatisfying social encounter or relationship and resolves to maintain it nevertheless: "Could I – do else –." The speaker allows another "Hesitating Fraction" to aspire to becoming "Whole," hyperbolically likening the "Decision" to humour the poem's "Him" — surrendering to social convention — to the sea being pulled by the moon, a recurring image in many Dickinson poems. In this context, "Survey[ing] Infinity" functions similarly to probing retrieveless things: to acknowledge and abandon the desire for a transcendent social connection.[58] The speaker placidly acknowledges the illusion of sympathetic completeness, but nevertheless upholds the vision for the sake of social harmony.[59] Dickinson's

[58] In later life, Dickinson's letters are much more likely to include remarks that similarly acknowledge the value of formulaic social acts. To Elizabeth Holland, she writes, "Thank you for your sweet note – the clergy are very well. Will bring such fragments from them as shall seem me good" (*Letters* 330), and to Mary Bowles, after the death of Samuel Bowles, "I am glad if the broken words helped you" (601). To Susan Dickinson: "[t]o the faithful Absence is condensed presence. / To others – but there *are* no others –" (632). In each case, Dickinson uses the language of fragmentation, gaps, absence, and even brokenness to assert the firmness of each of these social ties, and, in the case of Mrs. Bowles, the sufficiency of a social act of condolence that is necessarily inadequate in its expression.

[59] Dickinson uses a similar image in an 1880 letter to Loo Norcross: "[t]his is but a fragment, but wholes are not below" (*Letters* 671).

fragmentariness thereby becomes a strategy to relinquish complete self-expression in favour of a conventional social connection.

A poem sent to Susan Dickinson offers a particularly striking example of a text actively utilising fragmentary form to document the fraught possibility of honest self-expression co-existing with functional social intimacy:

What mystery pervades a well!
That water lives so far –
A neighbor from another world
Residing in a jar

Whose limit none have ever seen,
But just his lid of glass –
Like looking every time you please
In an abyss's face!

The grass does not appear afraid,
I often wonder he
Can stand so close and look so bold
At what is awe to me.

Related somehow they may be,
The sedge stands near the sea
Where he is floorless
And does no timidity betray –

But nature is a stranger yet;
The ones that cite her most
Have never passed her haunted house,
Nor simplified her ghost.

To pity those that know her not
Is helped by the regret
That those who know her, know her less
The nearer her they get. (CM 602; FR 1433)

The use of "pity" in the final stanza recalls the type of "pity" in "I tried to think a lonelier Thing": complacent and, like "the regret" that follows, low stakes. The poem's "mystery" is not an implicit aesthetic function, but an explicit theme. Before being sent to Susan Dickinson, the line "But nature is a stranger yet" was altered to "But Susan is a stranger yet." This clarifies what is suggested in the third stanza of the fair copy: that the poem is preoccupied with the "awe" of facing others, and the fathomless depths (so clearly articulated by the central image of the well) impossible to apprehend no matter the degree of intimacy. Everyone is, to some extent, "a stranger yet."

That Dickinson substitutes "nature" for "Susan" not only clarifies the interchangeableness of nature and society in Dickinson's poetic lexicon, but also the playful way this poem refutes its own premise of complete social alienation. Interpolating Susan, famously Dickinson's closest correspondent, editor, and confidant, into the poem both literalises the "neighbor from another world" and reframes the "abyss's face." With "What mystery pervades a well!" Dickinson once again troubles mysteriousness as an intimate act:

"those who know her, know her less / The nearer her they get."[60] If Susan is a "stranger yet," the implication is clear that she will remain so. This representation of the social utilises fragmentary mystery to move beyond the totalising demands of an independent self. The final line — "The nearer her they get" — suggests that speaker does not unravel any mystery, but simply moves literally closer to "the neighbor from another world / … Whose limit none has ever seen," just as sending the poem to Susan brings the two women literally, concretely, into contact. The speaker thus models a mode of sociality that relies upon retaining, rather than resolving, the poem's fragmentariness.[61]

Casual Simplicity: Social Encounters

"We talked with each other about each other," "I tried to think a lonelier Thing," "I could suffice for Him," and "What mystery pervades a well!" describe the most fundamental social ritual: conversations with others. Dickinson also wrote many poems that represent social encounters by personifying natural landscapes. These poetic accounts of social conformity and agency challenge a critical consensus that reads Dickinson's speakers as aggrieved and, as Paríac Finnerty puts it, "neglected" ("If fame belonged to me" 44). Dickinson's poetic descriptions of social contact instead regularly centre meetings, greetings, and casual associations.

The sexual incorporation of "Wild nights – Wild nights!" — "could I but moor tonight in thee" (CM 133; FR 269) — is one notable example of Dickinson's invocation of

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[60] Elsewhere, Dickinson uses the well image to describe incomplete literary (or epistolary) labours. A prose fragment reads: "[t]he little sentences I began and never finished – the little wells I dug and never filled –" (*Letters* 725). The poem suggests that social intimacy might operate the same way: to be constituted by "little wells dug but never filled."

[61] Many critics have noted Dickinson's poems' vexed relationship to closure. See "I could die – to know –" (CM 294; FR 537) for another apposite example of this trajectory in the depiction of a fleeting engagement with the external social world.

natural landscapes as a metaphor for human contact and social negotiation.[62] Dickinson's sea imagery, a locus of uncertainty and potential, is itself somewhat analogous to the intersection between poetic fragmentation and social conformity. The sea's ability to absorb other bodies is a recurring image:[63]

> My River runs to thee –
>
> Blue Sea – Wilt welcome me?
>
> My River waits reply.
>
> Oh Sea – look graciously!
>
> I'll fetch thee Brooks
>
> From spotted nooks –
>
> *Say* Sea – Take Me! (CM 107; FR 219)

The river makes itself larger and more expansive by collecting smaller bodies of water, "Brooks" from "spotted nooks," then gleefully gives itself entirely away to the sea: "Take Me!" Yet "My River runs to thee" is a caricature of individuality. The poem is accompanied by a letter to Mary Bowles, an acquaintance rather than a close friend. The letter makes clear

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[62] Finnerty notes that "Dickinson's parading of the interiorities of her retiring 'supposed persons' is accompanied often by her promotion of the sequestered, unrecognized, and secreted within the natural world," gesturing to a distinction between the public-facing human world and "sequestered" natural world ("If fame belonged to me" 42). Many of Dickinson's poems fail to make this distinction.

[63] Dickinson's absorptive sea image also recurs as both correspondent and site of anticipatory meetings, when she writes to Todd (who was in Europe): "I am glad you cherish the Sea. We correspond, though I never met him" (*Letters* 882).

the partial and infrequent nature of their relationship, and it also emphasises the poem's social context, a request for an epistolary response ("My River waits reply"):

> I do not know of you, a long while – I remember you – several times – I wish I knew if you kept me? The Dust like the Mosquito, buzzes round my faith. We are all human – Mary – until we are divine – and to some of us – that is far off, and to some [of] us – near as the lady, ringing at the door – perhaps that's what alarms – I say I will go myself – I cross the river – and climb the fence – now I am at the gate – Mary – now I am in the hall – now I am looking your heart in the Eye! (*Letters* 377)[64]

The letter undermines the poem's purported anxiety about social alienation and emphasises its overtones of sexual surrender. "I wish I knew if you kept me" allows the "me" (like, perhaps, "my river") to refer to both Dickinson herself and the poetic and epistolary objects she offers. In this way, the act of surrender in the poem is literalised in the impossible wish of the sender: just as Dickinson cannot force Mary to respond, she cannot determine the actual longevity, or sentimental value, of the relationship itself or the poem (and letter) that act as its representation. Dickinson's claim that she is now "at the gate," "in the hall," and "looking your heart in the Eye" is, despite its excesses, sharply limited in imaginative scope. The fantasy visit is similarly oriented to the poem: observational, speculative, and one sided, breaking off before any actual contact takes place. The poem's fantasy, for "My River" to be absorbed by and therefore transformed into the "Blue Sea," parodies sympathetic contact rather than yearning for it.

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[64] A letter to Susan similarly anticipates a long wait before a return letter by fragmenting its clauses to create a series of hyperbolic images that ironise the necessary pains and pleasures of social intercourse: "[y]ou need not fear to leave me lest I should be alone, for I often part with things I fancy I have loved, – sometimes the grave, and sometimes to an oblivion rather bitterer than death – thus my heart bleeds so frequently that I shant mind the haemorrhage, and I only add an agony to several previous ones, as at the end of day remark – a bubble burst!" (*Letters* 306).

Dickinson wrote a significant number of poems requesting responses from correspondents, and she retained "My River runs to Thee –" in fascicle nine, despite its brevity and the specificity of its social context. This is one example of Dickinson treating nineteenth-century epistolary conventions as an independent poetic subject. The subject of both poem and letter is the desire for fulfilling and consuming social contact — to be "received" like a brook by a sea or a letter by a correspondent. Crucially, however, neither is invested in the realisation of that desire, particularly given the unlikeliness of Mary Bowles as an object. Dickinson exploits a hyperbolic poetic image and a conventional exchange with an acquaintance to ironise the tension between fantasy and reality in social exchange.

Much later (c. 1872), in a poem circulated among her correspondents, including Susan Dickinson and T.W. Higginson, and which she also kept as an unbound fair copy, Dickinson rewrites the same scenario as a poetic conversation between brook and sea, dramatising the precipice between independence and sympathetic incorporation:

The Sea said
"Come" to the Brook –
The Brook said
"Let me grow" –
The Sea said
"Then you will be a Sea" –
"I want a Brook –
Come now" –
The Sea said
"Go" to the Sea –
The Sea said
"I am he

You cherished" –

"Learned Waters –

Wisdom is stale to me" – (CM 515–16; FR1275)

An evolution in social vision takes place between this text and "My River runs to Thee –." Where the latter concludes at the moment of anticipation, the former's "Come now" seems to pick up where "Take Me!" (or even the anticipatory final line of "Wild nights!") left off. The second stanza of "The Sea said" details the unsatisfactory nature of the meeting between the brook and the sea, from which they emerge so perfectly mingled their connection becomes "stale," each unrecognisable to the other.[65] The poem pointedly resists a resolution to the incoherence of the brook's and sea's attempt at incorporation.[66]

The poem's description of a failed attempt at connection, brook meeting sea, acts as an analogy for the way existing (social) structures reproduce themselves. The sea first encourages the brook to "Come," believing that the brook will remain a brook when it arrives. Then, brook and sea become one: "The Sea said / 'Go' to the Sea." The pathos of the former brook's line, "'I am he / You cherished,'" is also a sarcastic commentary on the "Learned Waters," whose demands for intimacy lead to conformity at the expense of desire. The conversation between sea and brook literally breaks down, and their dialogue becomes chaotically interspersed as they merge into a single sea. The poem collapses the binaries of

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[65] Dickinson is routinely characterised as the poet of "difference," and more recent studies have continued to use human difference as a framework through which to understand her texts. Vivian R. Pollak, for instance, describes "Dickinson's achievement as an extended meditation on the risks of social, psychological, and aesthetic difference" (3) and Erica Fretwell incorporates Dickinson into a broader study "of how human difference became a sensory (auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and visual) experience" (2). Part of what distinguishes my study, then, is rediscovering investments in similarity across Dickinson's poetry. See the introduction for further discussion of the political implications of associating a writer (or an interpretative process) with forms of "difference."

[66] In an 1873 letter to Perez Cowan, Dickinson once again relies upon the sea to describe social ties: "to multiply the harbours does not reduce the Sea" (503). As in the poem, the unknown is necessary, inevitable, and irreducible.

self and other, sameness and difference, to represent what is possible instead of what is desired. It's a bleaker vision than Dickinson's earlier sea and brook poem, but the brook's conformity to the sea does neutralise the sea's attempt at domination: "I want a Brook." Dickinson reconfigures the subject of "The Sea said" in a letter to Susan Dickinson, referring to "parting" rather than meeting: "[o]ur parting was somewhat interspersed and I cannot conclude which went" (*Letters* 508). Here, the interpretative problem of "The Sea said" is made explicitly social: the inability to determine the precise nature of an encounter.

As Dickinson's brooks, rivers, and seas demonstrate, the rhetoric of individual determination erodes as these poems surrender to the conformist pressures of social intimacy. One of Dickinson's most striking tributes to unexceptional socialising is also the poem she circulated to the greatest number of people; on at least one occasion, Dickinson sent the poem with a pebble, and it was circulated to at least four separate recipients in 1882:

> How happy is the little stone
> That rambles in the Road alone
> And doesn't care about careers –
> And Exigencies never – fears
> Whose Coat of elemental Brown
> A passing Universe put – on
> And independent as the sun
> Associates – or basks alone –
> Fulfilling absolute Decree
> In casual simplicity – (CM 635; FR 1570)

"How happy is the little stone" is a more direct descendent of the ballads, hymns, nursery rhymes, and occasional poems that frequently provide the structural basis for Dickinson's poetic forms. The speaker seems to be celebrating social retreat and even the type of financial

freedom Dickinson herself experienced: exemption from "careers" and other "Exigencies" to focus on an alternative "absolute Decree." The poem ties desire to an "absolute Decree" that its speaker refuses to define, even as they gesture to the potential of sustainable freedom and pleasure. Ironically, the poem's real-world social mobility transforms the stone's decree into an indiscriminate social tool.

"How happy is the little stone" utilises "Exigencies" and "careers" as topics of conversation, objects of "care" and rationales for social experience, as much as states of being. The speaker describes self-sufficiency but not social isolation: the stone associates *or* basks alone. The poem marvels at the stone's spectacular and seemingly unimpeachable self-containment but suggests that freedom from "fears" and "cares" is central to expansive sociality — successful association — rather than providing an exemption from it. As the poem progresses, a perfect rhyme ("stone," "alone") leads to the repetition of the latter term in line eight, where it is left alone, without any corresponding rhyme. The text is bookended by couplets that break down in the middle four lines: "Brown," "on," "sun," "alone." It is no coincidence that the term "alone," around which the poem seems to thematically revolve, finalises the breakdown of these offbeat rhymes. Couplets themselves suggest association, and the "passing Universe" — the first act of social cooperation in the poem — precipitates an "independent" shift in the poem's structure. The final feminine rhyme ("Decree," "simplicity") then offers the irresolute epiphany that characterises the trajectory of so many Dickinson poems: the confidence of solitude transforms into the simple, independent, awareness of the necessity and potential of associations. Rather than a testament to the glories of solitude, then, this happy little stone is a highly functional social agent that, unlike Dickinson's bodies of water, maintains independence, self-sufficiency, and identity without struggle. The poem then externally facilitates this mode of socialising by remaining

linguistically stable, despite the variety of messages it accompanies, and correspondents it greets.[67]

Cumulatively, these poems demonstrate Dickinson's ongoing investment in poetically representing social encounters. Moreover, they reveal that Dickinson's poems associate natural landscapes with social contact rather than with solitude. Noble paraphrases Dickinson's social vision with the statement that "to know a living human being is to accept uncertainty; living beings have inaccessible depths, they change over time, they behave differently with different people, their commitments to various identity constructs change" (218). Dickinson's poems are, however, often less concerned with depths than with shallows, with modes of socialising that negate and overcome the individual desire to be fully known to others. Her speakers are consistently compelled to accept the limited potential of human connection and thus of their own expressive powers.

I have read these poems as part of a real-world social ecosystem (letters to friends) and as constructing an internal social network. Attending to both social modes, and the ways the poems reflect on and engage with the border between poetic speakers and real-world social exchange, provides a re-encounter with Dickinson's poetic "I." Alexandra Socarides has recently summarised over a century of Dickinson criticism regarding the formal and historical slipperiness of Dickinson's poetic speakers:

> All readers and critics of Dickinson's poems make certain decisions about who the "I" of her poems is. As I see it, there are three ways that this speaker is interpreted: first, critics read along purely biographical lines and assume that Dickinson (the actual person writing the poem) is the "I," giving voice to her innermost thoughts and

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[67] See "To see her is a Picture –" (CM 642; FR 1597) for similar diction, and a similar tension between association and independence.

> communicating her knowledge and experience to those who are both historically situated and purely imagined; second, they assume that when Dickinson writes "I," that "I" can be appropriated (and voiced) by anyone reading the poem, such that Dickinson is actually writing about you; and third, they understand the "I" to be someone other than the writer or the reader — an imagined figure whose history, desires, and motivations drive the poem. (17)[68]

"My river runs to Thee –," "The Sea said," and "How happy is the little stone" all offer an alternative to Socarides' definition of the "I" that "can be appropriated (and voiced) by anyone reading the poem, such that Dickinson is actually writing about you."[69] The "I" in these poems acts as a generic speaker, rather than a specific persona or character, and addresses the reader, rather than writing about them.[70] The challenge to readers is to accept the interpretative limits of the poem, just as the poems' speakers and internal interlocutors accept the limited state of their relations. The necessity of existing within an imprecise yet conventionally determined social landscape underscores and situates the "I" of these poetic speakers.

Ignoble Trifles: Social Relationships

Friendship is a recurring subject in Dickinson's letters and in nineteenth-century American writing more generally. The lack of definite social boundaries around the term is one reason the elevation of friendship became a major philosophical preoccupation for the

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[68] François, in a useful counterpoint, notes that the poems tend to be populated by "numerous figures … who keep themselves quiet and exert ways of being in the world without seeming to make demands" (3).

[69] Gnomic you, in second-person narration.

[70] See Phillips and Finnerty ("It Does Not Mean Me"), discussed in the interlude, for work on Dickinson's use of characters or "personae" as poetic speakers.

Transcendentalists.[71] Dickinson, by contrast, celebrates a version of friendship that is far more conventional.[72] Her poems repeatedly take the formation and maintenance of interpersonal intimacy for granted.[73] The speakers tend, in turn, to reflect on the state and longevity of human relationships by reconciling the need for social inclusion with the inevitability of being misunderstood by others. Jackson describes "[Dickinson's] writing's acute concern with — even paranoia about — the ways in which what she wrote would or would not be read, who would read her, when and where" (204). The term "paranoia" suggests that Dickinson's unconventional subjectivity poses a challenge to unsympathetic audiences and requires protection from misreading. Critics have tended to assume that the poems uphold what Paul Crumbley has called an "intransigent self" (30). In many poems, however, social relationships are sustained by conscious maintenance rather than transcendent sympathy.

Two variants of the same poem are a compelling example of Dickinson's poetic ease with — rather than "paranoia" about — the extent to which one might be read, received, and understood by others:

He showed me Hights I never saw –

"Would'st Climb –" He said?

I said, "Not so" –

"With me –" He said – "With me"?

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[71] Crucially, as Elizabeth Addison puts it, motivated by an impatience "with the ordinary forms of social life" (527).

[72] In the letters, Dickinson tends to bear out this resistance to philosophical idealism by focusing on the spatial and temporal limits of friendship. She wrote to Mary Bowles in 1859 that "I have a childish hope to gather all I love together – and sit down beside and smile" (358), and to Maria Whitney of "those melodious moments of which friends are composed" (862) in 1885.

[73] See, for instance, "You love me – you are sure –" (CM 106, FR 218) and "Is it too late to touch you, Dear?" (CM 735, FR 1674).

He showed me secrets – Morning's Nest –

The Rope the Nights were put across –

"And now, Would'st have me for a Guest"?

I could not find my "Yes" –

And then – He brake His life – And lo,

A light, for me, did solemn glow –

The steadier, as my face withdrew –

And could I further "No"? (CM 182, FR 346)

This is another instance of a poem structured around dialogue between two speakers. In the variant sent to Susan Dickinson, however, Dickinson reverses not only each speaker's pronoun, but the social orientation of the poem's "I":

I showed her Hights

she never saw –

"Would'st Climb," I said?

She said – "Not so" –

"With *me* –" I said –

With *me*?

I showed her Secrets –

Morning's Nest –

The Rope the Nights –

were put across –

And now –"Would'st have me for a Guest"?

She could not find her Yes –

And then, I brake
my life – And Lo,
A Light, for her,
did solemn glow,
The larger, as her
face withdrew –
And *could* she, further,
"No"? (F346A)

Both versions demonstrate Dickinson's allegiance to what François might call "open secrets," given the apparent arbitrariness of the secrets revealed in each case. Despite never receiving their own entries in any edited collection of Dickinson's poems to date (the version to Susan is generally presented as a variant, rather than a separate poem, as Dickinson only retained the first version), the same poetic framework produces two unmistakeably different socio-poetic encounters. In the first iteration, a hesitant speaker recoils from social intimacy until the last possible moment. The shift from the repeated "He said" in the first version to "I said" in the second socially reorients the poem. Each speaker navigates the risks, rewards, and demands of interpersonal intimacy from the opposite perspective to the other. The shift in the speaker's outlook, and the direction of the dialogue, seems prompted only by the poem's use in an alternative social context: in this case, a letter to Susan. Read together, the poems demonstrate the way in which identical experiences can be perceived and internalised differently.

Furthermore, "I brake / my life" might refer to death, but in the context of these poems, seems closer to social withdrawal. The repetition of "with me" is also suggestive, marking an ambiguity about whether, in both poems, each speaker says the line and asks the

same question. The poems posit intimacy as a choice: one that is not determined by particular conditions, particular "Hights" of understanding, but a simple willingness to say yes or no. Despite the characteristically sensational images of "secrets," "a Light," and "Hights" never seen, the poems address conventional social vacillations with much lower stakes, the kind of routine, conversational socialising described in "We talked with each other about each other." The routineness of this particular poetic scenario is underscored by how it is so easily re-appropriable from "he and I" to "I and she." Again, a specifically fragmentary image, not just the dashes and gaps in syntax, propels the poem: the space between a "yes" that cannot be found and a "brake" from the other speaker, a conversational breakdown that actually precipitates, ultimately, social connection: "And could I further 'No'?" and "And *could* she, further, / 'No'?" Dickinson's poem imagines and manipulates social roles between each variant with playful ease.

Also evident in Dickinson's poetry is a similar flexibility about the social function of memory. Several poems take up the subject of being forgotten by others and the uncertain space between knowledge and ignorance, presence, and absence. In a poem transcribed by Susan Dickinson (and therefore almost certainly sent to her), and not retained by Dickinson herself, a speaker speculates on the difference between how social experience relates to others, and how it relates to the self:

> That she forgot me was the least
> I felt it second pain
> That I was worthy to forget
> Was most I thought upon
>
> Faithful was all that I could boast
> But Constancy became

To her, by her innominate

A something like a shame (CM 671, FR 1716)

The speaker reflects on becoming invisible to a friend or lover to whom they had been "Faithful." Though the poem's logic is clear enough — "That she forgot me" pales in comparison to the "shame" of being a person "worthy to forget" — the speaker's shame stems from having invested in the virtues of faith and "Constancy" only to be discarded. The poem's bitterness is aptly summed up by its most forceful rhyme: pain becomes shame. Shame is an emotion determined by, and strongly associated with, social laws. The poem plays on the idea of sexual transgression to describe social invisibility or insignificance as a "something like a shame." The poem is, however, also self-critical, interrogating the motivation to seek intimacy in the first place and punishing its self-involved speaker and what they "most … thought upon." The text can thus be read as a reflection on how social experience so often turns inward, rather than outward towards its supposed object. The poem peters out, and the speaker's hesitancy belies the apparently steadfast "Constancy" they brought to maintaining the social relationship. The speaker reveals their own hypocrisy, encapsulated in the ambiguity of "her innominate" — both a bitter cry against another's indifference and a revelation of the speaker's own.[74]

Though these poems also suggest literary fame, publication, and visibility, their themes develop more legibly in the register of actual social experience, rather than the conveyance of meaning between artists and their audiences. A particularly evocative prose fragment demonstrates the extent to which Dickinson takes up being forgotten by others as an aesthetic interest:

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[74] See "To be forgot by thee" (CM 643; FR 1601) for a treatment of similar themes and "*Oh* if remembering were forgetting –" (CM 40; FR 9) for an example of these themes intersecting with the floral gift poems discussed in the next section.

> Nothing is so resonant with mystery as the [friend] one that forgets us – and the boundlessness (wonder) of her – [him so far transcends heaven and hell that it makes them tepid] so dwarfs heaven and hell that we think – (recall) of them if at all, as tepid and ignoble trifles (or if we recall them it is as tepid) (or we recall) (and trifles ignoble) (it's intricacy is so boundless that it dispels heaven and hell). (*Letters* 926)

The variants in the passage are suggestive: friend, one, boundlessness, wonder, intricacy, think, recall. The text traverses the same fragments of barely articulable social experience as the poems, including being forgotten by a friend, the nature of friendship itself, and, ultimately, whether the more dangerous form of forgetfulness is that which annihilates the presence of other people in favour of introspection. A social snub is, the text reveals, paradoxically so trifling, so "ignoble" that it "dwarfs heaven and hell." Forms of social intimacy that are explicitly fleeting and transitory become ludicrous and excessive. The cumulative "ifs" of the passage conspire to consider the destructive ways the "mystery" of another person can be readily absorbed into a solipsistic focus on the mystery of the self. These reflections are, however, still suffused with reverence for social experience: being forgotten is "resonent with mystery" and contains "boundless intricacy."

The reverence that emerges in these prose fragments coheres in a remark Dickinson makes to Mary Higginson in 1876: "[t]he tie to one we do not know, is slightly miraculous, but not humbled by test, if we are simple and sacred. Thank you for recollecting me" (*Letters* 555). Dickinson expresses the appealing "mystery" of being bound socially to "one we do not know" echoing her reflections on being known and then unknown, or, put differently, the mysterious social passage between being "regarded" (as she writes in "To be forgot by thee") and being (as she writes in "That she forgot me") "innominate." She also straightforwardly fulfils the nineteenth-century epistolary convention of thanking an acquaintance for a letter. Dickinson's friendship poems are less about striving than about settling. Participating, being

"worthy to be forgot," is ultimately a stronger impulse than rejecting the realities of a social economy in which one's individual significance is always insecure.[75] The "intricacy" and "mystery" Dickinson finds so compelling about human relationships is again directed at their fragmentary qualities: their tendency to coexist with the gaps, silences, and potential breakdowns that form "ignoble trifles," like a conventional thank you note.

Satin Cash: Social Flowers

Dickinson also makes extensive use of a more comprehensive nineteenth-century social and literary convention: floriography, "a code in which flowers function as manifest emblems" (Beam 40).[76] Dickinson's poems enacting and describing floral gift-giving engage with the same aesthetic questions and literary traditions that were central to the writings of her more formally conventional and widely published contemporaries.[77] Floriography, as Elizabeth Petrino notes, "developed flowers into a linguistic system" by "creating dictionaries that codified floral meanings" (140). Jack Goody observes that the preponderance of "floral dictionaries" in nineteenth-century France, England, and America documented a fundamentally fictional social practice: "while this language can be considered part of 'popular culture,' it is largely a product of the urban literary world that is 'imposed' upon or taken up by the rest of society" (206).[78] Almost every commentator on the language notes

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[75] As Catherine Gallagher, Elaine Hadley, Deidre Lynch, Mary Poovey, and many others have outlined, the nineteenth century is a period in which literature and economics, both emerging disciplines, become highly implicated in one another, and in the fictional representation of society.

[76] "Commentary on enclosed flowers" is one of the items in a list Jackson makes of "what Dickinson's texts might have been" *other than* poems (116). What emerges from the substantial pattern of Dickinson's poems regarding floral gift-giving, however, is that the act of enclosing and sending flowers was itself a poetic subject.

[77] Richards points to the early 1860s, both the Civil War years and the years of Dickinson's most concentrated poetic production, as a period when a generation of female writers plagued by "boredom with conventions" and haunted by "the violence of the Civil War" collectively "renovated" the language of flowers (261).

[78] Cohen's study on the social lives of poems is a sustained recent attempt to survey the various ways in which poetry in nineteenth-century America had social functions and implications

that there is little evidence to support the use of these "symbolic lists" (Seaton 2) in the actual social lives of their nineteenth-century readers and that the meanings associated with particular flowers were far from fixed.[79] Dickinson's floral gifts thus bring to life a communal social practice that rarely left the pages of ornamental books.

Of all Dickinson's real-life social encounters, her meeting with Thomas Wentworth Higginson is perhaps most infamous. After leaving the Dickinson homestead, Higginson immortalised the visit, and Dickinson's social affect, in a letter to his wife: "I never was with any one who drained my nerve power so much" (*Letters* 476). Dickinson's unconventionality suffuses accounts (and dramatic re-enactments) of this historic social call, during which the poet presented Higginson with day lilies and declared, "These are my introduction" (*Letters* 473).[80] Madeleine Olnek's recent film *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018) instead stages the scene as a thwarted professional meeting between a young Dickinson pursuing publication opportunities and a mentor anticipating an eccentric recluse. Olnek's representation of the

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beyond what Jackson calls "the occasion of its reading" (7). As Blake notes, however, the social power of poetry was also inflected by the idea that poems could perform particular, profound, social functions that "prose" or other objects could not: "[i]n the growing secularism of the United States, poetry often appeared as a special discourse, a mode of expression set off from the prose surrounding it. Men and women read poems at weddings, ceremonies, and funerals. They chiseled lines onto gravestones and monuments commemorating the dead. They put their favorite poems to music and copied out passages into elegantly bound scrapbooks and portfolios containing other cherished thoughts" (111). Flowers had a similar status in the nineteenth century, their social role and power emerging from an idea that they could — like poems — succeed expressively where other forms of address may fail.

[79] See Seaton (1–2), Beam (40), Petrino (142), and Richards (250), who all agree that ambiguity was built into the language of flowers. Seaton also claims that "[t]here is almost no evidence that people actually used these symbolic lists to communicate, even if the parties agreed upon what book to use for their meanings" (2).

[80] Petrino surveys the representation of day lilies in nineteenth-century American floral dictionaries to provide the following reading of this particular floral gift: "[b]esides its association with contradictory behavior and false appearance, the day lily conveys mortality, as suggested by its habit of blossoming for a single day. If her gift was an intentional act of self-presentation, she meant to offer the flowers as her metonymic substitute. She thus transformed the common habit of enclosing flowers in a note or presenting them to others into a more complex mode of self-presentation" (147). See Gordon for another, more conventional, reading of this encounter (150–52).

collision between Dickinson's social awareness and Higginson's misplaced expectations is representative of a more general turn in the innumerable biographic representations that have always informed Dickinson's poetic reputation. The misunderstood social outcast has become an expert curator of queer intimacy and a confident advocate of her literary powers.[81] As mainstream biopics of Dickinson have celebrated the poet's queer sociality, the poetry has nevertheless retained its reputation as a protest against the stifling norms of nineteenth-century social life, and as a product of solitary introspection.

Smith's series *Dickinson*, like *Wild Nights*, portrays Dickinson's cultivation of an expansive, queer, social life. In episode eight of the first season, however, Dickinson's father announces he is building a greenhouse "for Emily, who thinks flowers are nicer than people" (24:45). Smith's portrayal of Dickinson's turn away from society and into nature betrays one way in which her deliberately unconventional Dickinson is in league with a more conventional reception history that reads the poet's (and the poetry's) representation of nature as a resistance to social norms. Mary Kuhn, for instance, characterises Dickinson's ecological engagement as a pursuit of radical alternatives to existing social practices:

> [T]he domestic garden has a long history of service as an educational trope for normative social behavior. Yet for Dickinson the relationship between human socialization and plant life could at times produce more eccentric results. That the speaker shares a sympathetic contract not with other humans, but with nature, revises our thinking about sentimental politics. Dickinson's sensible plants and feeling

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[81] Olnek's intervention is to undermine the momentousness and synchronicity of the meeting. Rich, for instance, extrapolates from Higginson's own account to imagine Dickinson's "unnerving" effect on the journalist: "[f]rom this room she glided downstairs, her hand on the polished banister, to meet the complacent magazine editor, Thomas Higginson, unnerve him while claiming she herself was unnerved" (180). Olnek instead portrays Higginson's behaviour as socially inappropriate and emotionally unnerving: in her version, it is Higginson who undermines the meeting's potential as a professional introduction.

> environment present a natural order that refuses the rigid separation of human, animal, and plant that shaped nineteenth-century conceptions of personhood. (161)

Kuhn claims that Dickinson challenges human social normativity by embracing non-human social organisation (plant life), offering an updated version of Sabine Sielke's claim that "Dickinson approaches dominant cultural rhetoric to invest it with new meanings" (17).[82] But Dickinson's flowers challenge the notion that her poetry opposes "dominant cultural rhetoric." Rather than retreating into nature as an escape from, or alternative to, "normative social behavior," I read Dickinson's poetic appropriation of floriography as a participation in, and poetic representation of, an established set of social and literary conventions.

It is impossible to determine how many of Dickinson's poems accompanied floral gifts, but, like the quantity of poems sent to others, the number is almost certainly far higher than the available evidence. Daniel Tiffany describes Dickinson's poems as riddles by remarking that "again and again she voices her preference for the secret that resists disclosure" (78). Dickinson's poems about and that accompanied flowers, however, are not only uncomplicated to decipher, but often involve (by the presence of the flowers described)

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[82] Interestingly, Renée Bergland's forthcoming study of Darwin and Dickinson makes a comparable move to Gillian Beer's similarly structured argument about Darwin and George Eliot, more than thirty years earlier. There is a significant body of scholarly work on Dickinson's scientific engagement and education, but I deliberately focus here on a much more mainstream, and less organic, tradition of engagement with the natural world.

secrets willingly and prematurely disclosed.[83] "I pay – in Satin Cash –" reflects explicitly on the economics of this disclosure:[84]

> I pay – in Satin Cash –
>
> You did not state – your price –
>
> A Petal, for a Paragraph
>
> Is near as I can guess – (CM 289; FR 526)

Despite there being no record of this text circulating among Dickinson's correspondents (though it was retained in fascicle twenty-eight), "I pay – in Satin Cash –" proposes a gift of flowers as a currency to ensure longer letters. Dickinson's interconnected composite gifts — flowers and poems — thus use the language of flowers to prioritise collectively legible social acts (including requesting a response to a letter) over original self-expression.[85]

"'Tis Customary as we part" explicitly addresses floral gift-giving as a social custom:

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[83] Many scholars have noted that Dickinson sent poems to friends, sometimes with accompaniments, but arguments about the poet's epistolary habits have tended to centre on the way the exchange of letters, and Dickinson's formation of a poetic "gift economy" (as Crumbley terms it), might constitute a form of publication. Interest in this aspect of Dickinson's poetic correspondence is most boldly articulated in Marietta Messmer's argument that "owing to their audience orientation, it is [Dickinson's] letters and letter-poems — rather than her (fascicle) poems alone or in isolation — which seem to be most representative of Dickinson's fundamental choices about literary production" (3). Messmer's claims elevate the letters to a body of literature, negating the possibility that poems sent to Dickinson's correspondents might have had any, or even primarily, *non*-literary functions. Most recently, Miller and Mitchell speak to my emphasis on conventional socio-literary nineteenth-century practices as a framework for Dickinson's poetic and circulatory habits by observing that "Dickinson's practice of sending poems to friends may have been encouraged by her youthful participation in sending valentines" (6).

[84] Significantly, this quatrain does not obviously depart from the many poems on similar themes that appeared in floral dictionaries. Seaton quotes one example, "Thoughts in My Garden" by American poet George W Bungay (1818–92), that bears a particularly striking resemblance to Dickinson's:

> Flowers are the sylvan syllables,
> In colors like the bow,
> And wise is he who wisely spells
> The blossomed words where beauty dwells,
> In purple, gold, and snow. (36)

[85] See Rappoport's argument about the relationship between gift-giving and female social participation in Victorian Britain.

’Tis Customary as we part

A Trinket – to confer –

It helps to stimulate the faith

When Lovers be afar –

’Tis various – as the various taste –

Clematis – journeying far –

Presents me with a single Curl

Of her Electric Hair – (CM 309; FR 628) [86]

This poem was retained by Dickinson in the fascicles and no record exists of its circulation, though it closely resembles other poems Dickinson did send with flowers.[87] The speaker relies on a “Customary” social procedure to manage a separation.[88] By choosing clematis, which one nineteenth-century floral dictionary describes as symbolising “artifice” (Osgood

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[86] Dickinson wrote several similar poems playing on the signification of different floral gifts, including “My nosegays are for Captives –” (CM 54; FR 74), in which the small bouquets (signifying “gallantry,” according to Osgood 262) are received by those “patient till paradise.” See also, for instance, “I could bring You Jewels – had I a mind to –” (CM 364; FR 726) and “Their dappled importunity” (CM 735; FR 1677).

[87] See, for instance, “Baffled for just a day or two –” (CM 50; FR 66). As Petrino notes, the longstanding and distinctive use of “fascicle” by Dickinson critics to describe the manuscripts itself derives from floral rhetoric (142).

[88] This poem’s invocation of pining “Lovers” is a reminder that many studies of both the language of flowers generally and Dickinson’s floral imagery in particular focus on flowers as a tool for the exploration and expression of what Beam calls “transgressive sexualities” (38). The erotic imagery of “All the letters I can write” (CM 202; FR 380), for instance, has ensured it remains one of few frequently discussed poems in which Dickinson refers to the language of flowers. Rather than, as Margaret Homans argues, constructing “a rhetoric of female pleasure to replace the silencing rhetoric of male desire” (576), Dickinson’s floral poems are particularly adept at imagining forms of address outside the apprehension or gratification of individual subjectivity and desire. Many of these poems unmistakably eroticise their floral subjects (see, for instance, “If she had been the Mistletoe” [CM 48; FR 60]). Nevertheless, I am arguing that these texts — often sent to multiple recipients, including distant acquaintances — position their speakers as willing participants in a form of social exchange that is more conventionally promiscuous. Their exploration of sexuality and sexual coding is as a feature of social exchange more broadly: the poems draw an analogy between fantasies of sexual consummation and the idealism of totalising social connection.

258), however, the text playfully gestures to the unreliability and pervasive uncertainty of people, flowers, and poems. Floriography is appealing to the speaker precisely because the language of flowers is, like flowers themselves and the social relationships they represent, "various – as the various taste –."[89] "'Tis Customary as we part" enacts the language of flowers as a conventional social tool, rather than reimagining or questioning floral gift exchange.[90]

The link between floral ephemerality, fragmented language, and the unreliable transience of social life also forms the basis of a poem believed to have been sent to Susan:

To love thee Year by Year –
May less appear
Than sacrifice, and cease –
However, dear,
Forever might be short, I thought to show –
And so I pieced it, with a flower, now. (CM 304; FR 618)

This prototypical example of a commentary on a floral gift conspicuously relies upon syntactical omission to represent the comparative transience of social relationships. The perfect rhyme of the first two lines is swiftly undone as the poem becomes progressively

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[89] The various significations of floriography and their analogousness to the ambiguity and variety of social relationships is also explored in the two versions of "I hide myself within my flower" (CM 56, 408; FR 63), which each appropriate another common feature of nineteenth-century floral dictionaries: codifying the placement of flowers. The first version refers to a flower the recipient is "wearing on your breast" and the second to a flower "fading from your Vase." As Petrino notes, a flower worn "upon the breast" signifies "ennui," and "upright" (as in a vase) "expresses a thought" (142). Formally and syntactically complimentary, these two texts, like most of Dickinson's floriographic poems, suggest that passing a flower between two people is simultaneously intimate and insouciant.

[90] Similarly, "I tend my flowers for thee –" (CM 194; FR 367) uses the premise of an absent lover to actually describe (by way of fuchsias, geraniums, daisies, cactuses, carnations, hyacinths, roses, and even the bees who uphold their ecosystem) a complex social network containing the potential for manifold social codes.

socially discordant. The promise of continuity — "Year by Year" — is replaced by an uncertain present moment: "I thought to show / … now." The poem, though, looks outward rather than inward. It affirms the "love" that endures, though it may "less appear" with the qualifier "However, dear," a return to rhyme that also returns to the present gesture, a gift of a flower. The poem is less cynical than it first appears: rather than violently "pierced" in desperation, the social gesture, and the relationship it sustains, is delicately "pieced." Uncertainty about the outcome or reciprocity of a social connection, the reality of the feebleness of a social gesture so routine as to be almost (but, crucially, not quite) emotionally stagnant, are not barriers to the social function of this poem's flower.

Floral dictionaries commercialise, domesticate, and socialise flowers as a peculiarly appropriate vehicle to "to explore private sentiments" (Richards 250) and thereby identify the exploration of private sentiments as conventional social behaviour. Elaine Scarry addresses this premise in her meditation on the longstanding "kinship" between flowers and the poetic imagination, as well as the conventionality and commonness of flowers and their figurative counterparts (102). Scarry's description of "the imagination's aspiration to lift us above the material world, to disencumber us of given restraints" could easily pass as a response to Dickinson's poetry and its imaginative power (92). Nevertheless, Scarry primarily associates flowers with an aspect of the imagination infrequently accounted for in Dickinson criticism:

> The flower, no doubt, makes visible the opposite movement of the imagination, its wilful re-encumbering of itself, its anchoring of itself in the ground — its aspiration, in other words, to rival material reality in its vicinity. (92)

By using both literal flowers and the mainstream popularity of the language of flowers, Dickinson's poetic flowers become firmly lodged in the "material reality" of social life and its most artificial forms of exchange. The powerful and conventional association between

flowers and poetry attests to the way these poems sustain an interest in conventional social exchanges.

The private domestic spaces and contained social ecosystems floriography was designed to interpret have long acted as fictional arenas for the development of individual subjectivity. This idea is perhaps most plainly articulated in the forward to D. A. Miller's seminal Foucauldian reading of realist novel form, which cites "the private and domestic sphere on which the very identity of the liberal subject depends" (*The Novel* ix). The poems examined in this chapter are all occupied with social behaviour that is far less isolated and cryptic than it first appears and contain figures that bear limited correspondence to individuated liberal subjects. Dickinson's poetic representations of social conventionality thus resonate, as the remainder of this dissertation will show, with socially conventional characterisation in realist novels. I have proposed a counterintuitive reading of Dickinson, and her poetry, as socially conformist. This interpretation explains a widely overlooked counterintuitive energy in the poems: though Dickinson's speakers often parody social conventions, they reject sublime solitude to become reconciled with the world and others. Dickinson's inscrutably conventional speakers, inconclusive social encounters, and misleading emphasis on heightened emotions all resonate with the narrative functions of the conventional realist characters taken up in the forthcoming chapters.

Interlude: Socialising Generically

Emily Dickinson wrote several poems about the pleasures of novel reading ("Those fair – fictitious People –" [CM 196; FR 369], "Unto my Books – so good to turn –" [CM 250; FR 512], "I never saw a Moor." [CM 532; FR 800]), but accounts of her affinity for the Brontës and George Eliot have tended to focus on the writers, rather than the novels.[91] Karl Keller suggests that Dickinson's "interest in their gender seems to have overshadowed her interest in what they wrote" (328), and Jane Donahue Eberwein claims that Dickinson viewed these "contemporary authors" as "personal resources even more than as literary inspirations" (84–75). Dickinson certainly wrote poems honouring her favourite writers: "Pass to thy Rendezvous of Light" (CM 729; FR 1624) and "Her Losses make our Gains ashamed" (CM 727; FR 1602) celebrate Eliot, and "All overgrown by cunning moss," (CM 86; FR 146) mourns the death of Charlotte Brontë.[92] But there remains ample, largely unexplored, evidence that Dickinson's engagement with Victorian realism was primarily formal and fictional. Here, I provide a brief overview of Dickinson's habit of reimagining scenes from realist novels as poetic subjects before commencing my discussion of conventional characterisation in the Victorian realist novel.

Emily Brontë is the nineteenth-century fiction writer most frequently aligned with Dickinson. Scholars tend to base these comparisons on Brontë's and Dickinson's shared thematic interest in "physical and psychic torment and visionary experience" (Moon 243), as well as a vaguer sense of both authors themselves as inimitable outsiders. Susan Howe's

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[91] Lyndall Gordan notes that between 1857 and 1858, Dickinson acquired *Wuthering Heights, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* and *Villette*, and she makes a conventional connection between Dickinson and the Brontë sisters by describing these novels as "certain reclusive voices of authentic womanhood and spiritual trial" (85).

[92] One instance of Dickinson associating the Brontës with Eliot is an 1883 exchange with Thomas Niles, in which she thanks him for a copy of Mathilde Blind's *Life of George Eliot* by sending him her copy of the Brontës' poems (Dickinson, *Letters* 768–89).

study *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) — an allusion to Dickinson's remark '*My* George Eliot' (*Letters* 700) — makes this comparison vividly: "out of Brontë's Self, out of her Myth, the younger woman chose to pull her purity of purpose" (61). Brontë and Dickinson have thus been associated using the emphasis on interiority, originality, and individuation, which this thesis methodologically challenges.[93] Conversely, Betsy Erkkila describes Dickinson's relationship with Eliot as having the impure basis of professional envy. Erkkila suggests that Dickinson's engagement with Eliot's biography sought to negate fears that Eliot's success exposed her own position as "unsuccessful, unproductive, and unremunerated" (84). Dickinson's corpus, as I argued in chapter one, is a body of formally experimental poetry that integrates many conventional features of realist fiction. Yet Dickinson is one of the last poets anyone would think to describe as realist.[94] Studies of nineteenth-century American literature still tend to isolate Dickinson's, Walt Whitman's, and Herman Melville's poetry from the period's mainstream poetic culture and its realist tradition.[95]

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[93] Michael Moon goes on to describe Brontë and Dickinson as pedagogues of "extreme experience" and "overwhelming affects": "emboldening themselves and other readers, especially woman readers, to think, read, and write about extreme experience and the often overwhelming affects associated with it" (247). For another example, see Gezari's study of Brontë's poems, which begins with a comparison between the two poets and quotes Dickinson's poetry frequently.

[94] Nancy Mayer, for example, takes the preferred route of associating Dickinson and the Victorian realists she admired with Romantic solitude and subjectivity instead:

> Emily Dickinson, a lyric poet whose subject is subjectivity and whose natural habitat is solitude. In spite of the truncated, elliptical, and introspective nature of both her poetry and her letters, Dickinson read and extravagantly admired the populous, multi-plotted Victorian novels of Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. In re-reading those novels in close conjunction with Dickinson's poems, I find female characters who not only represent female subjectivity but also confront subjectivity as an existential problem. (2)

[95] See Cohen (12). Elizabeth Renker notes that "since the 1990s in particular, a robust scholarship on poetics has stressed the historical errors entailed in reductive accounts of nineteenth-century U.S. poetry as a story of Whitman and Dickinson surrounded by hacks" (10) but still conspicuously excises Dickinson from her argument about the "alternative storyworlds of literary historiography" represented by Melville's, and others', realist poetics (15).

There is also a comparative scarcity of literary studies, particularly formal studies, that read prose and poetry together. Current disciplinary approaches suggest Monique Morgan's remark that "lyric and narrative" are "two seemingly antithetical modes" still stands (2). Theodor Adorno's joke about lyric transcendence and bourgeois culture encapsulates a critical history that has understood the novel as social and the lyric as singular: "can anyone, you will ask, but a man who is insensitive to the Muse talk about lyric poetry and society?" (59). Adorno describes the lyric as a site of "unrestrained individuation" and though he argues that poetry is essentially social in nature, his distinction between novelistic society and poetic muses has persisted. Anne-Lise François has more recently described the conventional distinction between engaging with the world (narrative) and turning away from it (lyric) in similar terms: "in framing the difference between narrative and lyric as a choice between referentiality and abstraction, transformative purpose and intentionless abandonment, formalist and historicist critics alike have often seemed to hear in the singularity of the lyric's voice a protective withdrawal into a world apart" (141). As both Adorno and François demonstrate, the divide between referentiality and singularity is socially oriented and ethically inflected, reflecting the socio-political associations with writing and reading poems versus novels.

Nevertheless, several critics have integrated Dickinson's conspicuous literary allusiveness into their analysis of her poetic form. Elizabeth Phillips and, more recently, Páraic Finnerty offer the most comprehensive overview of Dickinson's engagement with Victorian literature and use of fictional characters as poetic speakers, while Cristanne Miller observes more generally that "almost all [Dickinson's] poems provide at least some narrative, epistemological, or psychological point of reference" (13). Finnerty relies primarily on Victorian poetry (particularly Robert Browning) to argue convincingly that Dickinson's principal poetic genre is the dramatic monologue. Phillips, however, not only reminds us that

one of Dickinson's "first enthusiasms was for the *fiction* of the great women novelists of nineteenth-century England" (100, my emphasis), but she is also one of the poet's only critics to make an extended argument that Dickinson's poetic speakers and scenarios are drawn from specific Victorian novels.[96] Phillips provides concrete examples of Keller's general claim that "several of [Dickinson's] love poems may actually derive from *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*" (331). She identifies "Before I got my eye put out –" as a "dramatic monologue" spoken by Mr Rochester (100), "It would have starved a Gnat –" as a poem about Jane Eyre starving at Lowood school (101), and "Deprived of other Banquet" as a description of Jane's experience as a child in Mrs Reed's house (103). Phillips also argues that Jane Eyre is the speaker of "I rose – because He sank –" (104) and "You said that I 'was Great' – one Day –" (107). I propose that "We talked as Girls do –" (CM 209; FR 392), in addition, is based on a scene in *Jane Eyre*. The poem recalls Jane's last conversation with Helen Burns, and its representation of talking "as Girls do" and the social "contract" resonates with many of the poems I discussed in chapter one, as well as with my forthcoming discussion of conventional realist characters.

Dickinson's poems therefore exhibit an interest in the ways people talk to each other in novels, as well as on conventional social occasions. Phillips also claims that Dickinson wrote several poems referencing Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), particularly "What Soft – Cherubic Creatures –" (109) and "Me prove it now – Whoever doubt" (110). The former demonstrates Dickinson's engagement with the mode of conventional feminine characterisation I discuss in chapters three, four, and five, and perhaps with Eliot's essay

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[96] Interestingly, Phillips is also at pains to emphasise Dickinson's originality, even as she argues for her allusiveness: "reading a Brontë, George Eliot, Hawthorne, the Brownings, or Shakespeare, the parochial young American poet did not seem overtly anxious about their influence on her imagination. She blithely transposed their language, characters, and plots, as well as their delineations of behaviour, attitudes, and moods into poems of her own" (99).

"Silly Novels by Lady Novelists."[97] Phillips's observation that Eliot and Dickinson "shared a similar sense of satire and social criticism, as well as a talent for characterizing people" (109), is the closest any extant critical study comes to associating Dickinson with the novelistic features that organise *Just Like Other Girls*.

Dickinson's poems about marriages ("The World – stands – solemner – to me –" [CM 530; FR 280]), governesses ("I was the slightest in the House –" [CM 236; FR 473]), and deathbeds ("The last Night that she Lived" [CM 491; FR 1100) reflect the conventional plot points of nineteenth-century fiction. Phillips does not discuss *Wuthering Heights*, but perhaps the greatest number of Dickinson poems seem to reference Emily Brontë's novel. "Till Death – is narrow Loving –" (CM 409; FR831) and "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes –" (CM 335; FR 693) credibly indicate Heathcliff and Catherine as poetic characters and speakers. More ambitiously, I find it possible to argue that every poem in fascicle fifteen is related to *Wuthering Heights*. "The first Day's Night had come –" (CM 168; FR 423) and "I never felt at Home – Below –" (CM 175; FR 437), for instance, read convincingly as dramatic monologues spoken by Catherine Earnshaw. The reference in "If I may have it, when it's dead," (CM 172; FR 431) to "'Tis Bliss I cannot weigh – / For tho' they lock Thee in the Grave, / Myself – can own the key –" then produces a set of images with striking similarities to Heathcliff's pilgrimage to Catherine's grave, as well as his final speech to Nelly: "my soul's bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself" (Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 296). There is limited scholarly speculation regarding Dickinson's selection process in binding the fascicles together, but it is plausible that a whole fascicle could be drawn from a single fictional text.[98]

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[97] Erkkila describes Eliot's essay as "a virtual checklist of Dickinson's own high cultural notion of the artist's work" (80).

[98] Dorothy Huff Oberhaus and, more recently, Eleanor Heginbotham make the most sustained arguments that Dickinson's fascicles are thematically, and even, in Oberhaus's case, sequentially,

The poems in fascicle fifteen seem to focus primarily on Cathy and Heathcliff, but "A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be –," an unbound poem, has a wider possible field of reference:

A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be –

Sunrise – Hast Thou a Flag for me?

At Midnight – I am yet a Maid –

How short it takes to make it Bride –

Then – Midnight – I have passed from Thee –

Unto the East – and Victory.

Midnight – Good night – I hear them Call –

The Angels bustle in the Hall –

Softly – my Future climbs the Stair –

I fumble at my Childhood's Prayer –

So soon to be a Child – no more –

Eternity – I'm coming – Sir –

Master – I've seen the Face – before – (CM 338; FR 185)

The poem could be referencing the first Catherine's marriage to Edgar, but "Daybreak" and "How short it takes" are more resonant with the younger Catherine's imprisonment at the Heights and forced marriage to Linton, particularly given that the line "Eternity – I'm coming – Sir –" suggests Edgar Linton's impending death, and the pressure to return to him that prompts Catherine's concession to the marriage. The poem could also refer to Isabella

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organised. Most recently, several prominent Dickinson scholars have contributed to a collection dedicated to re-examining the fascicles (Heginbotham and Crumbley, *Dickinson's Fascicles*). Miller's emphasis on Dickinson's preservation methods in her collection is also evidence of a growing sense, bolstered by the increasing reliance on the manuscripts to study the poems, that Dickinson's own arrangement and organisation of the poems might have a thematic logic.

Linton's marriage to Heathcliff. Isabella is spotted "two miles out of Gimmerton, not very long after midnight" (Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 117) after evading several bustling angels in the halls of the Grange. Imagining Isabella, whose infatuation with Heathcliff leads Doctor Kenneth to describe her as "a real little fool" (115), as the speaker of "A Wife – at Daybreak – I shall be –" casts the poem's physical and temporal journey as literal descriptions, and its references to Eternity, Sir, and Master as the hyperbolic metaphors of a naïve and infatuated runaway.

Furthermore, many Dickinson poems could plausibly be drawn from *Villette*.[99] An early text, "I got so I could hear his name –," features a "box" of "his letters" and a "Thunder – in the Room –" that persuasively recall Lucy's passionate description of her attachment to Graham Bretton's letters and the apparition of the nun that interrupts her as she reads them in the garret:

> I got so I could hear his name –
> Without – Tremendous gain –
> That Stop-sensation – on my Soul –
> And Thunder – in the Room –
>
> I got so I could walk across
> That Angle in the floor,
> Where he turned so, and I turned – how –
> And all our Sinew tore –

[99] Dickinson quotes from *Villette* in a letter to her cousins, Louise and Frances Norcross, in 1875 (*Letters* 543).

I got so I could stir the Box –
In which his letters grew
Without that forcing, in my breath –
As Staples – driven through –

Could dimly recollect a Grace –
I think, they called it "God" –
Renowned to ease Extremity –
When Formula, had failed –

And shape my Hands –
Petition's way,
Tho' ignorant of a word
That Ordination – utters –

My Business – with the Cloud,
If any Power behind it, be,
Not subject to Despair –
It care – in some remoter way,
For so minute affair
As Misery –
Itself, too great, for interrupting – more – (CM 137–38; FR 292)

Stanzas four and five become, much like Lucy's narration, comically overwrought descriptions of *Villette*'s cross-dressed nun interrupting a "grovelling, groping, monomaniac" (246) as she pours over letters that began as "vital comfort" but in "after years" become

reduced to simply “kind letters enough” (253). The poem, like the novel, associates the “Stop-sensation” in Lucy’s soul at the sight of the ghost (*Villette*’s most sensational plot point) with melodramatic symptoms, the “Despair” and “Misery” she self-consciously experiences for the duration of her secret, hopeless passion for Graham.

Dickinson is unambiguous about her appreciation for Eliot’s novels, especially *Middlemarch*: “‘What do I think of *Middlemarch*?’ What do I think of glory” (*Letters* 506). In 1872, the year after the novel was published, Dickinson sent “He preached about Breadth till it argued him narrow” to T.W. Higginson, with whom she often discussed her reading. The poem’s arch meditation on counterfeit idealism and inner narrowness condenses the characters and fates of many Middlemarchers, including Lydgate and Mr Brooke:

> He preached about Breadth till it argued him narrow
> The Broad are too broad to define
> And of Truth until it proclaimed him a Liar
> The Truth never flaunted a sign –
> Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
> As Gold the Pyrites would shun
> What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
> To meet so Religious a man – (CM 564–65; FR 1266)

More specifically, the poem conjures a startlingly Casaubon-like figure. Casaubon, a clergyman who has no hope of attaining simplicity in thought or language, preaches about the “Truth” of his broad scholarly research, and is primarily defined by “proud narrow sensitiveness” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 262). The poem’s most pointed reference, though, suggests the Bulstrode subplot. Bulstrode preaches his own identity as “so Religious a man” before being literally exposed as “a Liar.” The poem narrowly invokes specific incidents and descriptions in *Middlemarch* but also, more broadly, reflects on a character type Eliot’s novel

develops and examines with thoroughness. “He preached about Breadth till it argued him narrow” is a particularly convincing instance of Dickinson’s use of Eliot as source material, and a striking example of her use of realist characterisation as a poetic subject.

Similarly, in 1876, when Dickinson wrote frequently of her absorption in *Daniel Deronda* (“to wake so near it overpowered me –” [*Letters* 551]), she wrote and retained another poem about an unsavoury male character:

> His Heart was darker than the starless night
>
> For that there is a morn
>
> But in this black Receptacle
>
> Can be no Bode of Dawn
>
> Can be no Bode of Dawn (CM 594; FR 1402)

The poem’s description of heartless characterisation evokes the dead-ended villainy of Grandcourt’s character construction in *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot’s novel frequently relies on the vocabulary and concept of darkness to explain Grandcourt’s dangerously enigmatic character (“Gwendolen had no sense that these men were dark enigmas to her” [Eliot, *Deronda* 100]) and the horrors of Gwendolen’s marriage, within which she is “all but lost in a pit of darkness” (662). Gwendolen is afraid of the dark, and Grandcourt, Mrs Glasher, and the casket of diamonds all evocatively materialise in the poem’s “black Receptacle.” Mrs Glasher is herself described in the novel as a black receptacle (“a lost vessel after whom nobody would send out an expedition of search” [279]), and she describes Grandcourt’s heart in similar terms in the threatening letter she sends to Gwendolen with the “poisoned gems” (296): “[t]he man you have married has a withered heart. His best young love was mine: you could not take that from me when you took the rest. It is dead: but I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine” (295). With *Daniel Deronda* as a reference point, this brief, little-discussed poem can transform into a realist character study.

A cross-generic conversation between Dickinson, the Brontës, and Eliot is another way of revisiting the process of representing ordinary lives using the generic figures of realist fiction. These poems all demonstrate that Dickinson's frequent references to death, wives, lovesickness, and spiritual crises read very differently when the writers and novels discussed elsewhere in this dissertation are considered as possible sources. My examples are necessarily speculative and have been selected, like many of the poems in chapter one, for both their inscrutability and for their failure to generate significant critical interest. It is probable that Dickinson regularly drew on material from realist novels in her poetry, but regardless of the poet's actual sources of inspiration, my brief conjectures reveal the extent to which thematic and generic expectations can limit and predetermine interpretative outcomes. The remainder of this thesis now turns to deconstructing deeply engrained, and therefore often predetermined, readings of the Brontës' and Eliot's most conventional characters.

Part II: Socialising Superficially with the Brontës

As with chapter one's conformist Emily Dickinson, I position Nelly Dean (*Wuthering Heights,* 1847), Gilbert Markham (*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 1848), and Ginevra Fanshawe (*Villette,* 1853) as the most interesting characters in the Brontës' fiction for the sake of both a serious argument and an intentional provocation. My treatment of these characters disrupts conventional interpretations of three very familiar texts, as well as some particularly tenacious assumptions about the relationship between literary character and social ideology. A major narrative feature of all three novels is that their more socially rebellious protagonists (Catherine, Heathcliff, Helen Huntingdon, Lucy Snowe) direct readerly attention away from characters who wield different — and arguably more — social and narrative influence. Nelly and Gilbert are narrators and social mediators, and Ginevra's social network determines every major event in *Villette*. Yet Nelly, Gilbert, and Ginevra are counterintuitive examples of major realist characters because they never seek alternative methods of self-definition, their desires do not conflict with their social circumstances, and the novels avoid examining their inner lives. In each case, Nelly's, Gilbert's, and Ginevra's apparent mediocrity as realist characters and social agents has informed a longstanding reputation for limited interpretative potential and general unlikability, yet the unlikability conferred by each character's normativity has obscured the complexity of their respective iterations of social conventionality.

Nelly, Gilbert, and Ginevra are all characterised as poor interpreters of others and have, in turn, been poorly interpreted. They conspicuously lack what Audrey Jaffe has called the "specialness" of realist character (8), and their respective reception histories are a reminder that readers routinely make assumptions about who, or what, is worthy of further scrutiny. One of Nancy Armstrong's central arguments about the Brontës' construction of fictional subjectivity is that their novels seek "to make the language of social behaviour

reveal the ordinary self at its truest and deepest" (200). The problem with Nelly, Gilbert, and Ginevra seems to be that they are too ordinary to be true and too shallow to be deep. The various "silences" of the Brontë novels have long provoked critical commentary, most of which has associated novelistic fragmentariness with social deviance[100]: John Kucich, for example, links the "symbolic" and social "logic of transgression" to a fragmentary "narrative strategy" in which transgressive secrets are "found in the nooks and crannies, fissures, cracks, and silences of the plot" (*Power of Lies* 5). *Wuthering Heights, Tenant*, and *Villette* would seem to be exemplars of Kucich's claim that "the novel, given its traditional interest in sexual relations, seems to be especially sensitive to the way desire in Victorian culture was fundamentally affiliated with outcast behaviour, including dishonesty" (*Power of Lies* 31). I argue instead that these novels' interest in "outcast behaviour" is comparatively superficial.

Wuthering Heights, *Tenant*, and *Villette* all focus on the difficulty of representing and accounting for individual experiences in which the demands of the self and the requirements of the world do not conflict. Nelly and Gilbert have been consistently associated with the negative space around each novel's most important social commentaries. Ginevra has mostly been read as a normative foil for *Villette*'s more distinctive narrator, Lucy Snowe. Nelly is the only servant character in this dissertation and her social relationships in *Wuthering Heights* are informed by her class position. I will show, however, that conventionality is a more, and differently, decisive feature of Nelly's socialising by comparing her character construction and narrative function to this dissertation's only male conventional character, Gilbert. Ginevra's characterisation then anticipates my discussion of George Eliot's

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[100] See Kaiser's description of *Wuthering Heights*'s "queasy irresoluteness" (102) or Stockton's account of Lucy's transgressively reluctant narration in *Villette*: "[w]hat Brontë, along with her culture, cannot say or speak directly — either because she knows it unconsciously or because it would be too risky to say — becomes visible in *Villette* as the unconscious of Lucy Snowe as narrator. *Villette*, then, begs a psychoanalysis of the narrating character because of the way it foregrounds Lucy's seductive disjunctions" (103).

conventional wealthy women in chapters four and five. Nelly's, Gilbert's, and Ginevra's strikingly outsized roles in each novel and comparatively one-dimensional critical presence show that a text's allocation of character space is no guarantee of proportionate scholarly interest. Taken together, all three provide a forceful case for reassessing our conventional interpretations of which characters in a novel matter most.

I conclude chapter one with the claim that Dickinson's poetry satirically punctures the fantasy that an individual can transcend conventional social life. The Brontës' novels draw similar conclusions. Nelly, Gilbert, and Ginevra ostensibly function as a normative backdrop against which the independent selfhoods and private desires of more rebellious protagonists emerge, yet the novels' more socially unconventional characters are highly dependent upon these conventional interpreters. The way each novel aligns narrative influence with conventional characterisation should begin to redefine for contemporary critics what Anna Henchman has described as "a moral problem that is central to nineteenth-century novels: one character's inability to perceive another's interior world" (14–15). In the following two chapters, I will argue that moralising about interpersonal perceptiveness might be a more prominent feature of contemporary reading practices than of nineteenth-century novels.

2. Two Bad Narrators

Nelly Dean and Gilbert Markham have more often been studied as (bad) narrators who tell us about other characters rather than as characters in their own right. *Wuthering Heights* (1847) allocates over half of its narration to Nelly and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) allocates a similar proportion to Gilbert. While the two novels are often compared for their uncompromising depictions of domestic violence, the more formally distinctive feature they have in common is unlikeable narrators who awkwardly translate unconventional behaviour into conventional frameworks. Nelly appears to be an inconvenient and faulty bridge between an outside observer (Lockwood) and the text's central couple (Heathcliff and Catherine), yet I contend that *Wuthering Heights* instead directs attention away from the excesses of its principal characters and towards Nelly's anticlimactic responses, including her dogged insistence on reincorporating violent behaviour into a familiar and normative social order. Similarly, Gilbert's melodramatic narration of his predictable and comfortable social world is a jarring framing structure for Helen Huntington's measured account of a domestic life threatened by oppression and violence. Indeed, both first-person narrators seem to routinely misinterpret the plots and characters they describe.

Gilbert's "self-conceit" (*Tenant* 10) leads to major interpretative failures throughout *Tenant.* He presumes and enacts a demonstrably absurd equivalence between his own paltry emotional difficulties and Helen's materially (and legally) dire circumstances. Nelly's interpretative failures are also based on conceited self-definition: "I went about my household duties, convinced that the Grange had but one sensible soul in its walls, and that lodged in my body" (*WH* 107). Nelly rigidly persists in acting as "a model of patience," in an equally absurd effort to "attract [Heathcliff's] absorbed attention from its engrossing speculation" (295) and to implore the elder Catherine to "be merry and like yourself!" (70). While Nelly is disproportionately imperturbable and Gilbert is disproportionately agitated, they both impose

their own limited experiential and emotional range onto other characters. Readers of *Wuthering Heights* and *Tenant* have tended to assume they know Nelly and Gilbert better than they know themselves, but Nelly's and Gilbert's interpretative gaze undermines the relationship between self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and fulfilling and functional social experience.

As Henchman notes, nineteenth-century realist novels tend to categorise failures of interpretation as "a moral problem" (14). Nelly's and Gilbert's inability to either comprehend or anticipate the interior experiences of those around them can read like an analogue for the studied apathy of "society" towards individual difference. Critics of *Wuthering Heights* have consistently contravened Lockwood's assertion that Nelly is "on the whole, a very fair narrator and I don't think I could improve her style" (*WH* 137). Martha Nussbaum's dismissive introduction of "the pious Ellen Dean" (363) and Daniela Garofolo's reference to "Nelly's demeaning claims" (832) also conform almost exactly to Nelly's own account of the relationship between her narration and its audience: "you'll not want to hear my moralising, Mr Lockwood: you'll judge as well as I can, all these things; at least, you'll think you will, and that's the same" (*WH* 163).[101] Nelly's assessment of the low stakes of her narratorial role has remained remarkably intact throughout *Wuthering Heights*'s reception history. Peter Kosminsky's 1992 film adaptation, for instance, relegates Nelly to a minor servant character and inserts Emily Brontë as the film's narrator.[102]

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[101] These descriptions also recall, almost exactly, Lockwood's monikers for Nelly: "the good woman" (136), "the worthy woman." (30; 265).

[102] Andrea Arnold's 2011 film adaptation similarly sidelines Nelly's narrative role and, like most adaptations of Brontë's novel, centres Catherine's and Heathcliff's relationship and narrative perspective. Most recently, Frances O'Connor's 2022 biopic of Emily Brontë interpolates many of *Wuthering Heights*'s plot points and recalls Alena Smith's *Dickinson* by depicting Brontë drinking, taking opium, socialising, and forming a sexual relationship, but ultimately associating the novel's creation with a socially unconventional author's retreat into solitude.

Tenant also provides diegetic commentary on its unlikely choice of narrator. Helen describes Gilbert's self-defeating adherence to social propriety:

> "If you loved as *I* do," she earnestly replied, "you would not have so nearly lost me — these scruples of false delicacy and pride would never thus have troubled you — you would have seen that the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathising hearts and souls." (413)

This scene, however, is one of the most ironic in the novel. Helen's distinction between authentic feeling ("truly loving, sympathising hearts and souls") and the shallow preoccupations of society ("rank, birth, and fortune") is both uncharacteristically hyperbolic and directly contravenes her own experience of the extent to which emotional attachments are determined by social forces. Here, a character associated with clear-sighted — even jaded — social commentary exhibits a naive idealism that resembles Gilbert's own narratorial persona. Rather than being disillusioned by Gilbert's conventionality, Helen has bought into the fantasy that sustains it.

Tess O'Toole closely recapitulates Helen's assessment:

> the assumption of his own correct insight into Frederick's attitude, steadfastly maintained in the face of a lack of evidence, and the callous indifference toward the unhappy Jane Wilson are both powerful indicators of Gilbert's self-satisfied nature and the limits of his imagination and his empathy. (722)

O'Toole's remarks are typical of the extent to which Gilbert's characterisation has provoked negative psychological commentary from contemporary critics. Her lexicon ("callous," "self-satisfied," "imagination," "empathy") resembles a disparaging assessment of an unlikeable acquaintance as much as the examination of a fictional character, speaking to the peculiar capacity of characters like Gilbert to reveal the shaky distinction between fictional character

analysis and systemic moral judgement. In *Wuthering Heights* and *Tenant*, superficial narration is associated with conventional character construction and interpretative weakness, but it also produces lasting relationships and social stability.

Nelly Dean: Out of Patience with Folly

Social relationships in *Wuthering Heights* are defined by what Maja-Lisa Von Sneidern calls "the impotence of polite discourse" (176). Nelly is characterised by a steadfast refusal to depart from polite discourse. So profoundly is *Wuthering Heights* associated with social transgression that Kent Puckett defines his interest in Victorian "social rules" (4) against its influence: "if [*Bad Form*] were a book about transgression, about passions strong enough to shatter the self, the social, and the very structure of the literary, it might address novels by Thomas Hardy, Emily Brontë, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky" (4–5). Yet it is Nelly's obedience, not the other characters' transgressions, that *Wuthering Heights* upholds. The restoration (and narration) of *Wuthering Heights*' social world relies upon its narrator's limited ability to understand others. This is often acknowledged implicitly in commentary on the novel, as when Claire Jarvis parenthetically references "the circuitous, gap-filled tale-telling that Lockwood, Nelly, and their various interlocutors engage in" (27). Interrogating Nelly's character and unusual narratorial lens reveals the extent to which *Wuthering Heights* is preoccupied with the representation of its own extremes as "circuitous" obstacles to a functioning fictional society.

Amidst the fraught social landscape of *Wuthering Heights,* Nelly's inadequate credentials as a confidante are somewhat perplexing. When Catherine Earnshaw delivers the novel's most famous speech, crying "Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff," Nelly responds with characteristic unimaginativeness: "I was out of patience with her folly!" (*WH* 73). This scene between Nelly and Catherine also demonstrates the anticlimactic effect of Nelly's narration on the plot of *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine's impassioned outburst ends with an unfinished

sentence that reverberates through the novel: “so, don’t talk of our separation again — it is impracticable; and —” (73). The dash is a plea for a sympathetic listener, standing in for the moment Catherine buries her face in Nelly’s lap, on the brink of a revelation about Heathcliff. The exchange humorously plays Catherine’s and Nelly’s characters against each other, hinting that Catherine may indeed have reconsidered her ill-fated marriage to Edgar if only she had poured out her soul to a more sensitive listener. Underscoring the interpretative failure of this scene is a clash between Nelly’s well-regulated emotions and Catherine’s extremes of feeling.

Nelly’s alienation from the violent passions that determine the social experiences of her numerous interlocuters is a consistent feature of both *Wuthering Heights* itself and of critical responses to the novel. Nora Gilbert remarks upon a similar scene between Nelly and Isabella, describing Isabella’s account of her escape from the Heights as a collision between “the raw pleasurableness of female rebellion”[103] and the “moralistic lecture” with which “Nelly tries to interrupt [Isabella’s] narration” (280).[104] Talia Schaffer’s description of *Wuthering Heights* as a novel that “can be read as an anthropological document, a contact zone where the ethnographer Lockwood discovers a tribe and finds a native interpreter, Nelly, to explain its ways” (“Reading on the Contrary” 168) is one recent example of the way Nelly has been understood more like an underwhelming reader than a defined realist character. Nelly’s narration has proven so disappointing that I may be the first to argue that she is an effective interpreter of the novel’s events. Nelly’s rounds of interviews do ultimately “explain” the “ways” of a social world that is both alienating and realistic. By

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[103] Talia Schaffer describes Lucy’s characterisation in *Villette* using similar terms, associating Lucy’s “authentic self” with “the momentary pleasure of private rebellion” (*Communities* 108).

[104] Isabella herself shares many features with the conventional characters I discuss in this thesis.

moving between the Grange and the Heights without complication (the only character able to do so), by remaining implacably conventional in the face of generations of violent "folly," and by managing to avoid death itself, Nelly's conspicuous exemption from the consequences of participating in the violent social world of *Wuthering Heights* comically and insistently undermines the novel's momentum. Nelly embodies a mode of discrete, polite, and conventional social existence from which all the novel's other characters, even the more orthodox Lockwood, Edgar, and Isabella, deviate.

Nelly's characterisation as the very antithesis of pleasurable female rebellion ensures the stable social relationships on which her narrative role depends. Brontë's novel begins with Nelly's indiscreet willingness to take Lockwood into her confidence, but its ensuing contents almost entirely depend upon the willingness of every character — from Cathy to Isabella, Edward to Hareton, and, most significantly, the allegedly private Heathcliff — to select Nelly as their confessor. Yet Nelly's curious position as both the text's primary narrator and the character who seems least capable of affectively engaging with its contents has provoked surprisingly little critical commentary. Nelly, unlike Lockwood (the other outsider), is never haunted. When Jarvis matter-of-factly remarks that Heathcliff "recounts his graveside thoughts to Nelly" (42), she follows a longstanding critical tendency to import Nelly's narrative role as a confessional vessel, a conventional reporter of the unconventional experiences and emotions of others, into the process of scholarly interpretation. In fact, one of the great mysteries of *Wuthering Heights* is *why* Heathcliff recounts his graveside thoughts to Nelly in the first place.

The novel offers no satisfactory explanation for either this confessional impulse or Heathcliff's choice of conversational companion. There are also few hints as to how Nelly might narrate "Heathcliff's history" (*WH* 54) to Lockwood if she carried out her threat to use only "half-a-dozen words" (54). What might those words be? "He loved her, then she died"?

That compressed history would also conveniently apply to the histories of Edgar Linton and Hindley Earnshaw. Speculating on Nelly's sentence-length version of *Wuthering Heights* may seem somewhat facetious, but the hypothetical six-word synopsis sets up Nelly's comparative lack of interest in other characters and her insistence that the novel's events aren't especially remarkable. It also poses a question about Nelly's ultimate judgement on "Heathcliff's history" that the full-length novel leaves open to speculation.

One of the only ways to explain the continued willingness of characters to unburden themselves to Nelly is a social faculty Nelly calls "a wondrous constancy to old attachments" (58). This formulation informs much of the socialising in *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly, for instance, dispassionately marvels at the elder Catherine's continued affection for both herself and Heathcliff:

> she never took an aversion to me, though. She had a wondrous constancy to old attachments, even Heathcliff kept his hold on her affections unalterably, and young Linton, with all his superiority, found it difficult to make an equally deep impression. (58)

Later, Nelly returns to the question of "attachments" in her characterisation of the younger Catherine, "that capacity for intense attachments reminded me of her mother" (167). Interestingly, in a little-remarked-upon scene between these two observations, Nelly reveals her own "constancy to old attachments," making a rare narrative interruption to confess her own emotional experience when Dr Kenneth informs her of Hindley's death:

> "Hindley Earnshaw! Your old friend Hindley," he replied, "and my wicked gossip: though he's been too wild for me this long while. There! I said we should draw water. But cheer up! He died true to his character: drunk as a lord. Poor lad! I'm sorry, too. One can't help missing an old companion: though he had the worst tricks with him that ever man imagined, and has done me many a rascally turn. He's barely twenty-

> seven, it seems; that's your own age: who would have thought you were born in one year?"[105]
>
> I confess this blow was greater to me than the shock of Mrs Linton's death: ancient associations lingered round my heart; I sat down in the porch and wept as for a blood relation, desiring Mr Kenneth to get another servant to introduce him to the master. (163–64)

Dr Kenneth's brusque and formulaic offer of condolence — "cheer up! He died true to his character: drunk as a lord. Poor lad! I'm sorry, too. One can't help missing an old companion" — recalls Nelly's own manner of advising and responding to other characters in moments of crisis. Indeed, despite the great "blow" of Hindley's death, and Nelly's response to it resembling the death of "a blood relation," Nelly introduces Hindley's demise with characteristic matter-of-factness: "the end of Earnshaw was what might have been expected" (163). Nelly's camaraderie with Dr Kenneth, like her occasional conversations with Zillah, also provides a glimpse of normative social behaviour that persists in the wake of the novel's more dramatic plot points.

Dr Kenneth's reference to Hindley Earnshaw dying "true to his character" is a reminder that Hindley's character, like Heathcliff's and unlike Nelly's or Dr Kenneth's, has undergone a significant alteration. Hindley's successful marriage, apparently both passionate and socially functional, is rarely remarked upon within the novel or by its critics, despite how strikingly Frances Earnshaw's narrative entry resembles Heathcliff's: "Mr. Hindley came home to the funeral; and — a thing that amazed us, and set the neighbours gossiping right and left — he brought a wife with him. What she was, and where she was born, he never

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[105] The reference to Nelly's age is also one of very few times her physical body is described. Her description of herself as "stout" (239) is the other.

informed us: probably, she had neither money nor name to recommend her" (39). Her exit also resembles Catherine's: "I was very sad for Hindley's sake. He had room in his heart only for two idols — his wife and himself: he doted on both, and adored one, and I couldn't conceive how he would bear the loss" (56).[106] Frances, like Hareton and the second Catherine, models the compromise between strong passion and social conformity, complicating the linear progression towards increasingly conventional coupledom between generations. *Wuthering Heights*, like *Tenant*, is known for concluding with an anticlimactic marriage plot. Schaffer's description of Cathy and Hareton as "disappointingly quaint, conventional, old-fashioned types" ("Reading on the Contrary" 172) encapsulates the tendency for Hareton's engagement to the younger Catherine to be read as a failure of the first Catherine's rebellious energy. What the established critical habit of comparing the two generations (and inevitably finding the second a disappointingly watered-down version of the first) overlooks is that the novel is filtered through Nelly's "mainstream" gaze from the outset. Though Nelly's class is the primary factor that excludes her from a realist marriage plot, it is her socially conventional behaviour that the novel's only successful marriages most closely replicate. If Cathy and Hareton are quaint and conventional types, Nelly is their original model.

Frances's virtual absence in critical accounts of the novel is also anticipated by Nelly herself, who declares that she "had no impulse to sympathise with her. We don't in general take to foreigners here, Mr. Lockwood, unless they take to us first" (39). Nelly permits readers to forget about Frances by identifying her as an outsider within the novel's insular social world and indirectly acknowledges that Heathcliff, the text's other "foreigner," took to

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[106] Nelly repeats this reflection almost verbatim when she cautions Catherine regarding Heathcliff: "As soon as you become Mrs Linton, he loses friend, and love, and all! Have you considered how you'll bear the separation, and how he'll bear to be quite deserted in the world?" (72).

Nelly first and is strongly attached to her. Nelly never reflects upon or explains her obviously reciprocal sympathy with Heathcliff. Nelly's lack of sympathy for the consumptive Frances also anticipates her stance during the first Catherine's final illness: "I should not have spoken so, if I had known her true condition, but I could not get rid of the notion that she acted a part of her disorder" (107). It is characteristic of Nelly that her harsh, even inaccurate, judgement of both characters is unapologetic.

Inevitably, the social dysfunction of *Wuthering Heights* has been mapped onto analyses of the novel's non-linear structure. Margaret Homans illustrates this process when she remarks that:

> The boundaries of identity are dissolved by the repetition of the generations and the recombination of family traits resultant from intermarriage. And the diffuse narrative structure dissolves this dissolution even further. There is no single controlling point of view that might preserve a remnant of stability. (130)

Wuthering Heights operates by forcing readers to interpret, fill in, and question Nelly's narrative. Her narration invites speculation by raising tantalising patterns that Nelly either fails to notice or declines to comment on. Nevertheless, Nelly is the sole point of access to every character except Lockwood. *Wuthering Heights*'s characterisation is, then, at the mercy of Nelly's impressions. Nelly's role is to seek cohesion in chaos and to resist the novel's tendency to dissolve into its own diffuse narrative structure.

Nelly's resistance is revealed in a surprising incident that takes place when Nelly examines Catherine's body:

> I shouldn't have discovered that he had been there, except for the disarrangement of the drapery about the corpse's face, and for observing on the floor a curl of light hair, fastened with a silver thread, which, on examination, I ascertained to have been taken from a locket hung round Catherine's neck. Heathcliff had opened the trinket and cast

> out its contents, replacing them by a black lock of his own. I twisted the two, and enclosed them together. (148)

The scene anticipates the novel's concluding tableau, in which Catherine, Edgar, and Heathcliff are "enclosed together" in adjacent graves, and is also an effective analogue for Nelly's style of narrative intervention. She persistently attempts to tame and domesticate the novel's unstable social relationships, here represented by the act of re-enclosing locks of hair into a locket, entwining the husband with the lover, and thereby acting as the novel's first integration of its central love triangle into that most Victorian of conventional social rituals: mourning. The scene articulates a distinction between Christian morality and social conventionality to which Nelly herself never quite admits. Nelly's preoccupation is less with the moral propriety of Catherine's relationship to Heathcliff than with its disruptiveness to the rhythms of conventional domestic life.

Wuthering Heights's social world is defined by a link between forms of bonding and forms of bondage. Social ties — especially romantic and familial ties — tend to descend into literal or metaphorical imprisonment that corresponds with a highly eroticised and physically and verbally violent step outside normative social boundaries.[107] Heathcliff's and Catherine's relationship reveals, of course, that even a deep emotional bond unfettered by social convention can be a form of bondage. Nelly's ability to move comparatively freely between the Heights and the Grange is thus linked to a social philosophy that privileges weaker ties formed by the conventions of duty, proximity, and "ancient associations" (164). Nelly's stable, multi-generational presence in the novel gives her associations with the novel's other characters an exceptional status that contradicts her class position. Heathcliff's lawyer, Nelly

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[107] See Berry for an extensive discussion on custody and incarceration in *Wuthering Heights*.

notes, gives "all the servants but me, notice to quit" (251).[108] Whereas Heathcliff's arrival, departure, and return to Wuthering Heights are the novel's major structuring incidents, Nelly's own departure and return from the Heights, after being "sent out of the house" for her childhood cruelty to the newly arrived Heathcliff, is narrated so dismissively by contrast it barely registers: "coming back a few days afterwards (for I did not consider my banishment perpetual)" (32). Nelly's curt parenthesis belies the fact that she practices a normative and comparatively autonomous relationship with a place of residence (and employment) that most other servants are driven or sent away from, and whose volatile inhabitants are a significant source of tension for the novel's other major characters.

Most non-servant characters in *Wuthering Heights* can't imagine lives outside the Heights and the Grange, while Lockwood finds himself swiftly rejected by its rigid social ecosystem.[109] Nelly's willingness to remain seems to be more dispassionately based on the incidental circumstance of living in the area since childhood and considering its inhabitants her social network:

> The servants could not bear [Hindley's] tyrannical and evil conduct long: Joseph and I were the only two that would stay. I had not the heart to leave my charge; and besides,

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[108] Nelly laughs when Lockwood remarks, "I am sure you have thought a great deal more than the generality of servants think. You have been compelled to cultivate your reflective faculties for want of occasions for frittering your life away in silly trifles" (55). Nelly is disinterested in Lockwood's wish to exempt her from "the generality of servants" by elevating her interpretative skills and dismisses his prejudicial association between working class women and "silly trifles." Her subsequent reference to the "gossip's fashion" of her narration indicates the complex and self-referential way Nelly's conventionality both relates to and challenges the novelistic conventions associated with servant characters in nineteenth-century realism.

[109] Though Lockwood does voluntarily come to the Heights initially, he foreshadows his own flight to a more hospitable social life in the early wish that the residents of the Heights would make their own social banishment "perpetual" instead: "'Wretched inmates!' I ejaculated, mentally, 'you deserve perpetual isolation from your species for your churlish inhospitality'" (6).

> you know, I had been his foster-sister, and excused his behaviour more readily than a stranger would. (57–58)

Nelly never claims to truly know, or even love, the elder or younger Catherine, Heathcliff, Hindley, or Hareton, despite having grown up with the first three and having virtually raised Hareton and the second Catherine. Her description of weeping over Hindley's death "as for a blood relation" suggests that the comparative superficiality of Nelly's relationships is related to the way they exceed the boundaries of class, rather than solely determined by her status as a paid servant as well as a "foster-sister." Interestingly, when the elder Catherine self-consciously remarks, "I begin to fancy you don't like me. How strange! I thought, though everybody hated and despised each other, they could not avoid loving me'" (107), the position she describes, in which everybody could not *avoid* loving her, more accurately describes Nelly's ability to preserve the goodwill of those around her without forming strong attachments of her own.

Nelly's persevering yet comparatively superficial attachments provide a recurring counterpoint for the more highly wrought socialising that takes place throughout *Wuthering Heights*. Nelly's assessment that Catherine and Edgar "were really in possession of a deep and growing happiness," for instance, is based on Edgar's ability to cultivate "sympathising silence" (81). Rather than Nelly misreading a fundamental incompatibility of temperament, the assertion is largely reinforced by the novel's events and representation of marriage: a chasm of understanding between husband and wife does not preclude their domestic comfort, and in fact may be necessary to it. Edgar's comically polite reception of Heathcliff at the Grange, at Catherine's request, captures the collision of polite deference (or sympathising silence) and authentic (if very impolite) emotional outbursts: "Mrs Linton, recalling old times, would have me give you a cordial reception" (85). Like mourning, taking tea is one of the most exemplary settings for prescribed social behaviour in the Victorian novel. *Wuthering*

Heights abounds with tea parties gone wrong, most memorably Linton's bizarre reprimand to young Catherine following her imprisonment at Wuthering Heights and Heathcliff's announcement of her imminent forced marriage: "now, Catherine, you are letting your tears fall into my cup! I won't drink that. Give me another" (240). Nelly, however, insists on entertaining the possibility that everyone might learn to follow the rules. What would happen, she frequently muses, if Edgar was able to maintain the cordiality Catherine requested and if Heathcliff was able to conform to the laws of domestic social intercourse? While *Wuthering Heights* may seem to represent socialising itself as a risk, it ultimately proves to be about the risks of lawless socialising. Nelly's narration systematically dismantles the illusion that disregarding the laws of polite society is a pathway to more meaningful social experience. Edgar's awkward presence during Heathcliff's and Catherine's passionate embrace, for instance, comically skewers their attempt to transcend the domestic backdrop to their violent passion. Nelly's own description of the turbulent scene is also a comedic anti-climax: "I grew very uncomfortable, meanwhile" (142).

Throughout *Wuthering Heights*, characters consistently misunderstand and misinterpret one another, forming an ongoing analogy to the precarity of the reading process and Nelly's own unreliable narration.[110] Tabitha Sparks concisely defines "literary criticism" as "pattern recognition" (36), and the sheer number of times characters in *Wuthering Heights* try and fail to structure their social interactions around pattern recognition attests to an ongoing emphasis on the way actual social life resists narrative coherence. One particularly

[110] For example: Lockwood's ill-advised attempts to socialise with Heathcliff; Heathcliff missing Catherine's declaration of love; Heathcliff's inability to comprehend the pleasure Catherine takes in visiting the Grange; Catherine asking Nelly if Heathcliff knows what love is; Edgar's repeated failures to predict Catherine's behaviour and his later misreading of young Linton; Isabella's insistent and tragically failed reading of Heathcliff; the younger Catherine's misperception that Linton is the sole author of his love letters; and Heathcliff's belief he has degraded Hareton past the point of return.

striking example is the younger Catherine's attempt to use a distinctly literary form of reference (what Jaffe calls "the narrative magic of coincidence" [15]) to reanimate her intimacy with Linton:

> "This is something like your paradise," said she, making an effort at cheerfulness. "You recollect the two days we agreed to spend in the place and way each thought pleasantest? … Next week, if you can, we'll ride down to the Grange Park, and try mine." Linton did not appear to remember what she talked of. (231)

Linton's failure to either remember or register the significance of his and Cathy's argument about "the pleasantest manner of spending a hot July day" (218) is a moment of social breakdown that mimics Nelly's resistant mode of narration: her steadfast refusal to engage with dreams, feelings, or impressions that test her patience. Nelly's comparative lack of deep emotional ties to any of the characters confounds Jarvis's otherwise astute observation that "the interwoven plots of *Wuthering Heights* tend to produce the appearance of closer connections between characters than is strictly accurate" (32). In Nelly's case, her connection to all the characters is closer and more stable than any of her narration suggests.

Nelly's conformist social logic is most triumphantly realised in the concluding relationship between Catherine and Hareton. "I heard Hareton sternly check his cousin," Nelly claims,

> on her offering a revelation of her father-in-law's conduct to his father. He said he wouldn't suffer a word to be uttered in his disparagement: if he were the devil, it didn't signify; he would stand by him; and he'd rather she would abuse himself, as she used to, than begin on Mr Heathcliff. Catherine was waxing cross at this; but he found means to make her hold her tongue, by asking how she would like him to speak ill of her father? Then she comprehended that Earnshaw took the master's reputation home to himself; and was attached by ties stronger than reason could break — chains,

> forged by habit, which it would be cruel to attempt to loosen. She showed a good heart, thenceforth, in avoiding both complaints and expressions of antipathy concerning Heathcliff; and confessed to me her sorrow that she had endeavoured to raise a bad spirit between him and Hareton: indeed, I don't believe she has ever breathed a syllable, in the latter's hearing, against her oppressor since. (285)

The scene highlights the necessity of discretion and avoidance in social relations. The clause "in the latter's hearing" indicates that Catherine's silence on the subject of "her oppressor" is a calculated choice rather than an internal change. Nelly's definition of "a good heart" also evidently corresponds closely to the ability to make judicious social decisions. Here, Catherine and Hareton find themselves at an impasse of understanding that demands "revelation" be met with "avoiding both complaints and expressions of antipathy." In effect, this is the moment when Heathcliff's history might, at last, be reduced to the half-dozen words Nelly once claimed could capture it: *ties stronger than reason could break*. Nelly's mode of socialising, interpreting, and narrating thereby offers an alternative definition of "strong ties."[111] The concept of ties stronger than reason is, rather than an "ideal" that "resists representation," as Jarvis would have it (54), a fantasy to be overcome to survive, and to have any ties at all. *Wuthering Heights* finally reveals the relative impotence of passionate rebellion and vindictive rage against the social order — epitomised by the first Catherine's death and Nelly's placid narration of its peaceful aftermath (145) — and the effectiveness of diplomatic negotiation.

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[111] A definition that is also distinct from what Gage McWeeny refers to as "the apparently minor quality of weak ties" (40n33) as part of a claim that "what the literature in [the nineteenth century] discovers alongside sympathy, albeit in terms with little of the ethical purposiveness or psychic dramas of identification, is the power of thin social ties" (16). Nelly's ties are, qualitatively rather than quantitatively, weak.

Wuthering Heights therefore abandons the fantasy that transgressive individual desire has the power to alter collective social experience. In *Wuthering Heights*, truly knowing the self and others is not revelatory, transformative, or a path to salvation. The novel is extraordinarily cynical about both the trappings of social conventionality and the thinness of its veneer (think of the scene in which Heathcliff and Cathy catch the well-bred Linton children almost pulling a puppy "in two" [42]), yet it also repeatedly undermines the expectation that departures from convention are inherently liberating. Nelly's social standards are a frequent source of comedy in *Wuthering Heights,* but they are also, unlike the Linton's, so consistent, stable, and narratively essential that they undermine the novel's larger parody of polite society. Nelly, the most unkillable character in a novel littered with corpses, reveals in her narration, and in the social re-education of her two former charges, a survival strategy that ignores desire and vengeance in favour of an unimaginative commitment to long-term social ties. Nelly's conventionality acts as the kind of safe social space ostensibly represented by the Grange, but which fails to materialise within its walls. In a text famous for its acts of transgression, looking more closely at Nelly's characterisation reveals *Wuthering Heights'*s essential preservation of the boundaries between individuals and its account of a failed search for an alternative form of social life. Nelly's underdeveloped character and self-effacing narration have never been an inviting challenge to literary exegesis. Nevertheless, the novel's events ultimately conform to the mode of reticent socialising Nelly practises to narrate them, thereby identifying Nelly's character as the most promising model for future life in *Wuthering Heights*.

Gilbert Markham: By No Means a Fop

Gilbert Markham is a narrator-character even more frustratingly ill-suited to his task than Nelly Dean. *Tenant*'s reception history can be summarised by Lee A. Talley's remark that "the story about the difficult realities of [Helen's] marriage overpowers Markham's

lighter tale of an awkward bachelor's romance" (17). As with scholarly responses to *Wuthering Heights*, the widespread critical understanding of *Tenant* has authorised an understandable readerly impulse to take the "lighter" outer structure of the novel less seriously than the fraught middle. Selfish, hot-tempered, self-deluded, and painfully conventional, Gilbert has been read as a poor compensation for complex and spirited Helen. Gilbert is, like Nelly, the unimaginative and conventional social being to which the novel's other major characters (including its dissolute antagonist, Arthur Huntingdon) desperately seek an alternative. Yet also like Nelly, Gilbert's narrative importance is cemented by the fact that, ultimately, both his existence and his narration are the best available survival strategies within *Tenant*'s social world. *Tenant*'s engagement with masculinity and patriarchal power is most preoccupied with the Gilberts that define (and narrate) normative social life, rather than the Arthurs that disrupt it. In *Tenant,* strong social ties are formed and maintained by adherence to the norms of society, instead of by strong individual feelings.

Gilbert reports his lapses of judgement with disarming guilelessness, taking little account of their sometimes-disastrous consequences: "perhaps I had no right to be annoyed at him, but I was so nevertheless" (353). As with the marriage of the second Catherine to Hareton, critics once exerted themselves to demonstrate that Gilbert "is an oddly unsuitable partner for Helen" (O'Toole 715–16). Now, his disappointing unsuitability is largely taken for granted, along with the cynical implications of his watered-down version of Arthur Huntingdon's characteristics (which resembles the second Catherine's relationship to the first). Nevertheless, his marriage to Helen at the novel's conclusion realises Gilbert's dreams even more conventionally and decisively than Nelly's.[112] He orchestrates his own marriage

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[112] Interestingly, too, Lowborough's successful second marriage is to a woman whose brief characterisation almost precisely corresponds to Nelly's:

> Some wondered at his taste; some even ridiculed it — but in this their folly was more apparent than his. The lady was about his own age — i.e., between thirty and forty —

plot, rather than someone else's. It is Helen who, to go through with the marriage, must overlook narrative patterns that generate increasing tension between her idealised (and ultimately unrealised) desire for profound and equitable social relationships.

If Gilbert is *Tenant*'s Nelly Dean, the novel also has a silent Lockwood: Jack Halford, Gilbert's brother-in-law. Halford is as unlikely a reader for Helen's story as Gilbert is a narrator. Despite structuring the epistolary narration of *Tenant*, the relationship between Gilbert and Halford is a startlingly overt example of telling rather than showing. A stable and sincere male friendship is seemingly too conventional to require narrative development, and yet the remainder of the text is filled with failed or compromised friendships between men. The narrative space given to developing the constellation of social failures within and between Arthur's circle of "friends" (Lowborough, Grimsby, Hattersley, Hargrave) attests to *Tenant*'s narrative preoccupation with conventional male socialising.

The most memorable failure of homosociality in *Tenant*, though, involves Gilbert and his other brother-in-law, Helen's brother Frederick Lawrence. Long before jealousy over Helen enters the equation, Gilbert describes his relationship to Lawrence by comparing him to Halford, a strange choice given Halford's character is never described:

> I (judging by the results) was the companion most agreeable to his taste. I liked the man well enough, but he was too cold, and shy, and self-contained, to obtain my cordial sympathies. … His heart was like a sensitive plant, that opens for a moment in the sunshine, but curls up and shrinks into itself at the slightest touch of the finger, or the lightest breath of wind. And, upon the whole, our intimacy was rather a mutual predilection than a deep and solid friendship, such as has since arisen between myself

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remarkable neither for beauty, nor wealth, nor brilliant accomplishments; nor any other thing that I ever heard of, except genuine good sense, unswerving integrity, active piety, warm-hearted benevolence, and a fund of cheerful spirits. (*Tenant* 389)

> and you, Halford, whom, in spite of your occasional crustiness, I can liken to nothing so well as an old coat, unimpeachable in texture, but easy and loose. (34–35)

Gilbert's description of his most "deep and solid friendship" as "an old coat" whom he "may use as he pleases" is both a comic example of Gilbert's characteristic tactlessness and a revealing articulation of how this novel, and its Victorian vision of the British Regency social world, conventionally defines "cordial sympathies."

Gilbert's description of Lawrence's "heart" as "a sensitive plant, that opens for a moment in the sunshine, but curls up and shrinks into itself at the slightest touch" corresponds to many of his own early failures to establish intimacy with Helen. One example is Gilbert's interpretative discombobulation when Helen snubs his smile:

> I smiled. … [S]he suddenly assumed again that proud, chilly look that had so unspeakably roused my corruption at church — a look of repellent scorn, so easily assumed, and so entirely without the least distortion of a single feature that, while there, it seemed like the natural expression of the face, and was the more provoking to me, because I could not think it affected. … I returned home, angry and dissatisfied — I could scarcely tell you why — and therefore will not attempt it. (23)

His comparison of Lawrence to Halford thereby de-romanticises precisely the misreadings and misadventures that characterise Gilbert's "awkward bachelor romance." Furthermore, Gilbert's ultimate refuge in the security and complacency of his "easy and loose" intimacy with Halford undermines the apparently straightforward contrast between Gilbert's "dissatisfied" encounter with Helen and his more predictably pleasurable (and therefore more superficial) visit with the Millwood sisters, narrated immediately afterwards: "I went home very happy, with a heart brimful of complacency for myself, and overflowing with love for Eliza" (24). When Gilbert describes his intention to recount "the most important event of my life — previous to my acquaintance with Jack Halford at least" (10), it is difficult to know

how to read the excessive status accorded to Halford. The fact that Gilbert continues to defer to social convention and to have social experiences he regards as meaningful and life-defining acts as another anti-climax to the novel's introduction of an almost sensationally forbidden and transgressive love story.

Crucially, Gilbert's character development is also told rather than shown. Readers are to understand his development through his own accounts of his relationships with Lawrence and Halford:

> You see Lawrence and I somehow could not manage to get on very well together. The fact is, I believe, we were both of us a little too touchy. It is a troublesome thing, Halford, this susceptibility to affronts where none are intended. I am no martyr to it now, as you can bear me witness: I have learned to be merry and wise, to be more easy with myself and more indulgent to my neighbours, and I can afford to laugh at both Lawrence and you. (387)

In a text that is, like *Wuthering Heights*, thematically preoccupied with rage, it is significant that *Tenant*'s many incidents of startling interpersonal violence come to be distilled by Gilbert into a phrase reminiscent of Nelly's jarring use of the term "folly": "a little too touchy." Within *Tenant*, he barely evolves at all and calls on a "witness" who never appears in the text to verify his subsequent progress. Like Nelly, Gilbert is thus never more than superficially individuated because he functions as a stand-in for "society" and its codes of thought and conduct. However, whereas Nelly's narration is defined by a lack of patience for folly, the comedy of Gilbert's narratorial voice comes from his insistence that he experiences particularly potent emotional extremes. Gilbert repeatedly describes himself in the hyperbolic terms of "an agitated, burning heart and brain … conflicting hopes and fears" (65) or "stormy thoughts … a chaos of conflicting passions" (84) and even resorts to "a paroxysm of anger and despair" in which "like a passionate child, I dashed myself on the ground" (91). When it

comes to narrative action, however, he is socially calculating and consistently well-aware of the bounds of propriety.

Gilbert's acquaintance with Helen conforms to social custom from the moment his sister Rose proposes a visit to Wildfell Hall's new tenant: "'We should call some time, mamma,'" Gilbert says. "'[I]t's only proper, you know'" (13). A strong sense of what is "proper" is the primary factor in Gilbert's management of all his social relationships:

> Though my affections might now be said to be fairly weaned from Eliza Millward, I did not yet entirely relinquish my visits to the vicarage, because I wanted, as it were, to let her down easy; without raising much sorrow, or incurring much resentment, — or making myself the talk of the parish; and besides, if I had wholly kept away, the vicar, who looked upon my visits as paid chiefly, if not entirely, to himself, would have felt himself decidedly affronted by the neglect. (65–66)

In isolation, Gilbert's cool calculation of the social negotiations that determine his relationship to Eliza might read as an effect of "affections … fairly weaned," but this reluctance to become "the talk of the parish" is preceded by a remarkably similar and even more alienating calculation on how he might — and indeed does — deploy the tools of social propriety to get close to Helen:

> At first, indeed, she had seemed to take a pleasure in mortifying my vanity and crushing my presumption — relentlessly nipping off bud by bud as they ventured to appear; and then, I confess, I was deeply wounded, though, at the same time, stimulated to seek revenge; — but latterly finding, beyond a doubt, that I was not that empty-headed coxcomb she had first supposed me, she had repulsed my modest advances in quite a different spirit. It was a kind of serious, almost sorrowful displeasure, which I soon learnt carefully to avoid awakening. "Let me first establish my position as a friend," thought I — "the patron and playfellow of her son, the sober,

> solid, plain-dealing friend of herself, and then, when I have made myself fairly necessary to her comfort and enjoyment in life (as I believe I can), we'll see what next may be effected." (62–63)

It is tempting to read Gilbert's unscrupulous emotional manipulation as a sinister indicator that he is, in fact, a sort of composite of the dissolute Arthur Huntingdon and the conniving Mr. Hargrave. That reading certainly has its merits. What I would suggest, though, is that *Tenant* is far more invested in what Puckett would call "a represented social mistake that falls short of scene-shattering intensity" (4). It is Gilbert's unshakeable confidence in his own merits, his conviction that he is not "that empty-headed coxcomb she had first supposed me," that causes Gilbert's failings to fall short of scene-shattering intensity. If Helen's first husband is an experiment in how badly a character with society entirely on his side (white, male, rich, heterosexual, extroverted, charming, physically attractive, appropriately married) has to behave to fail according to its laws, her second is an experiment in the extent to which social advantages can make up for, and make a success of, a character with a less scene-shattering set of personal failings.

Social cynicism, however, insufficiently explains Gilbert's characterisation and the extent to which he constructs, edits, propels, and provides the occasion for, and the happy ending of, *Tenant*. Gilbert's persistent, unfounded, and comically disproved belief that Helen's story is about him might contain some truth. The convention and conformity Gilbert symbolises and practises, rather than the psychic extremes of Helen or Arthur, are the social problems that structure the novel. This is ironic, since Gilbert frequently believes himself to be a victim of the conventional imaginations of others:

> reviewing the matter in my sober judgment, I must say it would have been highly absurd and improper to have quarrelled with him on such an occasion. I must confess, too, that I wronged him in my heart: the truth was, he liked me very well, but he was

> fully aware that a union between Mrs Huntingdon and me would be what the world calls a mésalliance; and it was not in his nature to set the world at defiance. (384)

In fact, it is Gilbert who, like Nelly, finds himself in a plot that puts his own disinclination to "set the world at defiance" to the test.[113]

Tenant is thus preoccupied with the limits of human relationships and how individual feeling is determined by, and must be adapted to, existing social circumstances. Nora Gilbert's palpable resentment of Gilbert's character encapsulates a long history of affective responses to the novel's frame and its "dulling" effect on Helen's more interesting story:

> Helen is certainly treated like a fallen woman by all of her Wildfell Hall neighbours, including the man who professes to love her. The idea that a young, attractive, genteel woman could really be working to support herself (as a professional artist, no less) and living on her own without any sexual strings attached is simply too much for Gilbert Markham and the other neighbourhood gossips to believe — until, that is, Anne Brontë gives Helen the authorial power to tell her own story. … As many readers have noted with frustration, however, Helen's self-reliant, fugitive lifestyle lasts only so long; the latter sections of the novel see her both returning to the husband

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[113] His plan to write to Helen after her husband's death, for instance, exhibits exactly the combination of modest action, social calculation, and naïve idealism that characterises Gilbert's particular brand of conventionality:

> I would wait, however, till the six months after our parting were fairly passed (which would be about the close of February), and then I would send her a letter, modestly reminding her of her former permission to write to her at the close of that period, and hoping I might avail myself of it — at least to express my heartfelt sorrow for her late afflictions, my just appreciation of her generous conduct, and my hope that her health was now completely re-established, and that she would, some time, be permitted to enjoy those blessings of a peaceful, happy life, which had been denied her so long, but which none could more truly be said to merit than herself — adding a few words of kind remembrance to my little friend Arthur, with a hope that he had not forgotten me, and perhaps a few more in reference to bygone times, to the delightful hours I had passed in her society, and my unfading recollection of them, which was the salt and solace of my life, and a hope that her recent troubles had not entirely banished me from her mind. (385)

> she has fought so hard to leave and, after his death, marrying a relatively dull, unlikeable replacement. (279)

This character assessment and its association with Gilbert's social artifice is strikingly reminiscent of Helen's response to Mr Hargrave:

> He seemed bent upon doing the honours of his house in the most unexceptionable manner, and exerting all his powers for the entertainment of his guest, and the display of his own qualifications as a host, a gentleman, a companion; and actually succeeded in making himself very agreeable — only that he was too polite. — And yet, Mr Hargrave, I don't much like you; there is a certain want of openness about you that does not take my fancy, and a lurking selfishness at the bottom of all your fine qualities, that I do not intend to lose sight of. (*Tenant* 212)

Helen's "and yet" skewers Mr Hargrave's social performance in the manner of a well-trained and suspicious critic. Her resistance to Mr Hargrave's "polite" efforts and sense of his "lurking selfishness" is precisely the kind of "prejudice" Nora Gilbert's characterisation invites.

Both Nora Gilbert's loaded and disdainful "professes to love her" and her reference to Helen's "authorial power to tell her own story" also exemplify the "rhetoric of critical feminism" (158) that, as Sparks has recently highlighted, maintains a striking hold on even contemporary interpretations of Victorian novels by women. This rhetoric, as Sparks describes, "is so informed by the importance of a woman's self-expression that proposing an alternative way to read women's novels can feel like heresy" (158). Gilbert Markham's literally inhibiting effect on both Helen's narration (which he bookends) and her social life (once he marries her) has thus been used to silo his character as a kind of existential threat to feminist progress, an enemy of female self-reliance and self-expression. Suggesting that Gilbert's dull, unlikeable, and naïve characterisation is the centre of the novel's social forces,

and perhaps its most significant site of interpretation, is my own heretical inclination. It might be unpalatable that Gilbert's story (and his misogyny) could compete with Helen's for narrative dominance, but the novel insists that it does. Indeed, while Gilbert's direct incorporation of Helen's diaries render her experience an open book for readers, his own narration is adapted from "a certain faded, old journal of mine" (*Tenant* 10) that lies beyond our reach. Gilbert's journal, an absent guidebook to social survival, acts as a vague "assurance that I have not my memory alone — tenacious as it is — to depend upon" (10), as well as an emblem for the fundamental unknowability of his interior experience and the unimportance of interior experience to the events he narrates and to his character itself.

Gilbert, like Nelly, irreverently interrupts one of *Tenant*'s most famous and oft-quoted speeches. Helen is just reaching the climax of her merciless critique of gendered double standards in the education and upbringing of children, in response to criticism about her approach to raising her son, when her speech is cut short by a dash and Gilbert's relieved interjection that "I interrupted her at last" (30). Though Helen is, like Catherine, ultimately permitted to continue, her thoughts lose their rhetorical momentum and are brought back to the level of drawing room conversation, reinforced by Gilbert's observation that Helen's son has returned to her side and must experience her arguments as "incomprehensible discourse" (31). Gilbert is an unrepentantly ignorant reader of the complex emotional experiences of others, and frequently mocks Helen's reticence with him and evasion of his company with remarks like "in spite of her prejudice against me … I was perfectly harmless, and even well-intentioned" (44).

This strategy of wilful ignorance is nowhere better evidenced than in the characterisation of Mary Millwood, a woman Gilbert mercilessly and misogynistically writes off as "not very … charming" (60) and even "little better than a nonentity" (66), and whose bond with Helen he makes no attempt to penetrate. Crucially, his strategic ignorance is also

demonstrated when Helen's sharp criticism, "such as you," is allowed to pass without remark, question, or interpretation:

> "Miss Millward has the art of conciliating and amusing children," I carelessly added, "if she is good for nothing else."
>
> "Miss Millward has many estimable qualities, which such as you cannot be expected to perceive or appreciate." (59)

Gilbert, in other words, shares with Nelly a disinclination to introspection that makes him unapologetic about his prejudicial responses to others.[114] Both characters are presumed to have an inner world that is entirely coherent with their external behaviour. Following my attempt to imagine Nelly's six-word *Wuthering Heights,* it can be instructive to consider the difficulty of imagining any secrets or revelations that Gilbert's diary might contain. Gilbert's narration is, like Nelly's, characterised by his willingness to impose social harmony and normality on absurd circumstances: "we were all very merry and happy together — as far as I could see — throughout the protracted social meal" (57). *Tenant* provides no shortage of reminders that as far as Gilbert can see is not very far at all.

Helen's passion for Arthur — and the youthful naivety with which it is associated — is reconstituted in Gilbert's fixation on Helen and refusal to listen to warnings or gossip about her. The comparison neutralises the role of social prejudice and knowledge (and the distinction between them) in making judicious individual choices. Similarly, while Helen's marriage acts as a particularly violent corrective to the social narrative of positive female influence, she exhibits a hypocrisy not unlike Gilbert's by failing to relinquish her sense that

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[114] This is also revealed in his blasé reference to Helen's superior judgement concerning Mary Millward, "whose sterling worth had been so quickly perceived and duly valued by the supposed Mrs. Graham, in spite of her plain outside; and who, on her part, had been better able to see and appreciate that lady's true character and qualities than the brightest genius among them" (371).

her friend Millicent's marriage could be improved by the bolder application of good influence:

> far be it from me to blame poor Millicent for his delinquencies — but I do think that if she had the courage or the will to speak her mind about them, and maintain her point unflinchingly, there would be more chance of his reclamation, and he would be likely to treat her better, and love her more, in the end. (241–42)

Not only does this passage reveal Helen's own allegiance to existing social narratives, but it also is borne out "in the end," at least provisionally, when we learn that Millicent's "last letter was full of present bliss, and pleasing anticipations for the future" (323).

Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Tenant* resolves its social problems by returning to the restoration of good manners rather than investing in moral transformation. The ten-page passage between Gilbert's two handshakes with Helen, the first "spiteful" and the second "cordial," encapsulates this mode of resolution:

> She laughingly turned round, and held out her hand. I gave it a spiteful squeeze; for I was annoyed at the continual injustice she had done me from the very dawn of our acquaintance. Without knowing anything about my real disposition and principles, she was evidently prejudiced against me, and seemed bent upon showing me that her opinions respecting me, on every particular, fell far below those I entertained of myself. I was naturally touchy, or, it would not have vexed me so much. Perhaps, too, I was a little bit spoiled by my mother and sister, and some other ladies of my acquaintance; — and yet, I was by no means a fop — of that I am fully convinced, whether *you* are or not. (31–32)

> When a lady condescends to apologize, there is no keeping one's anger of course; so we parted good friends for once; and *this* time I squeezed her hand with a cordial, not a spiteful pressure. (43)

Gilbert's conviction that he is "by no means a fop" and his oblique reference to "my real disposition and principles" thus inadvertently reveal the strange inaccessibility of a "real" Gilbert. His disposition and principles fail to feel "real" precisely because they do not and cannot deviate from either the model of socially conditioned masculinity, both complacent and violent, that the text critiques or from a related commitment to upholding the standards of polite society that curb and moderate that violence.

Despite having profoundly different social positions (class, gender) and status within the character network (Gilbert is, of course, one half of a marriage plot), Nelly Dean and Gilbert Markham operate strikingly similarly as characters and as narrators. Helen's love for Gilbert is as inexplicable, and unexplained, as the cast of *Wuthering Heights*'s willingness (particularly Heathcliff's) to confide their innermost thoughts to Nelly. Nora Gilbert singles out *Tenant*'s Annabella as "the closest we come to a traditional fallen woman narrative" in the Brontës' fiction, but when she quotes the following passage, she attributes Gilbert's "cursory description of the fate that befalls Annabella Lowborough" to the fact that "Anne [Brontë] cannot resist calling the verisimilitude of such a trajectory into question" (275):

> Sometime before Mr. Huntingdon's death, Lady Lowborough eloped with another gallant to the continent, where, having lived awhile in reckless gaiety and dissipation, they quarrelled and parted. She went dashing on for a season, but years came and money went: she sunk, at length, in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery; and died at last, as I have heard, in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness. But this might be only a report: she may be living yet for anything I, or any of her relatives or former

> acquaintances can tell; for they have all lost sight of her long years ago, and would as thoroughly forget her if they could. (*Tenant* 388)

The implications of this passage are significant beyond their familiar repetition of the fallen women in a misogynistic society. If Helen has a considerable amount in common with Gilbert in her bouts of righteous rage and unwillingness to give up on social narratives of progress, Gilbert's willingness to deploy his knowledge of social codes to serve his own ends gives him a considerable affinity with Annabella. In this passage, Gilbert's admission that Annabella "might be living" (and its implication that she might yet be thriving) echoes the outro *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe will give to Ginevra Fanshawe.[115] Gilbert, like Lucy, resents the idea that Annabella's strategy for social ascension could lead to fulfilment as easily as punishment.

Both *Wuthering Heights* and *Tenant* are, at the level of plot, fundamentally optimistic. Their optimism, however, is circular: each novel concludes with a return to the social conduct exemplified by their primary narrator from the outset. In this respect, Arthur Huntington's deathbed speech provides a perceptive commentary on Helen's and Gilbert's narration:

> "Death is so terrible," he cried, "I cannot bear it! *You* don't know, Helen — you can't imagine what it is, because you haven't it before you! and when I'm buried, you'll return to your old ways and be as happy as ever, and all the world will go on just as busy and merry as if I had never been; while I — " He burst into tears. (381)

Arthur's fear of mortality distils the novel's plot structure: the world *will* go on, Helen will return to wealthy married life, and Gilbert's narration from a future of domestic comfort with her provides a continuous reminder that Arthur may as well have never been. The passage

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[115] Annabella, like Isabella in *Wuthering Heights*, is *Tenant*'s example of the young, frivolous conventional woman character epitomised in the Brontë's fiction by Ginevra Fanshawe, and which I will go on to discuss in more detail in George Eliot's novels.

also references the fact that Arthur's, Gilbert's, and Helen's "ways" differ only in the extent of their departures from acceptable social behaviour. Gilbert has enough in common with Arthur that *Tenant*'s first and second marriages resemble the two major marriages in *Wuthering Heights*, but his narration, like Nelly's, also provides the model for social conventionality that informs *Tenant*'s representation of society. Neither Nelly nor Gilbert ever fear death, but they both use social conventionality to avoid it. Helen's experiences might be the novel's more coherent and satisfying plot, but it is Gilbert's lighter tale that ultimately organises *Tenant* and ensures the continuity of its social world. These two bad narrators hold their fictional social networks together with conventional social behaviour, rather than deep individual attachments.

3. One Bad Friend

Narrative omissions and undeclared attachments permeate *Villette*. As much existent criticism of the novel focuses on, the narrator, Lucy Snowe, spends more than half the text consumed by a tacit romantic passion for Dr John Bretton. I argue that *Villette*'s most significant subnarrated social relationship is Lucy's friendship with Ginevra Fanshawe.[116] This relationship has been occluded, in part, by a literal interpretation of Lucy's words. For instance, Lucy frequently makes hyperbolic asides asserting her social isolation: "if life be a war," she announces, melodramatically and only half-ironically, "it seemed my destiny to conduct it single-handed" (296).[117] But *Villette*'s plot revolves around socialising and social networks as the novel surveys forms of inevitable dependence on others. Lucy refuses to acknowledge, yet repeatedly reveals, a significant attachment to her social antithesis, a young woman who specialises in "fighting the battle of life by proxy" (478). The connection between this literary odd couple is characterised by familiarity and durability rather than longing and absence. Lucy's exasperated accounts of Ginevra's cheerful dependence provide a consistent and revealing comedic foil for her own performance of defensive solitude. Ginevra — "that unsubstantial feather, that mealy-winged moth" (270) — is Lucy's closest friend and the recipient of her most unforgiving barbs. Lucy's acts of narratorial concealment have been widely discussed, but her negative and dismissive account of her friendship with

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[116] Robyn R. Warhol refers to Gerald Prince's definition of "the normal" in her definition of the subnarratable as "events that fall below the 'threshold of narratability' because they 'go without saying,' events too insignificant or banal to warrant representation" ("Neonarrative" 222).

[117] Christopher Lane describes the same quote as a straightforward "realization" that "provokes [Lucy] into asking, with superb clarity, 'But, oh! What is the love of the multitude?' … For important conceptual reasons, none of Brontë's four novels can answer this question, an outcome that's extraordinary, given the pressure of novelistic conventions facing Brontë." In the same paragraph that discusses these two lines, Lane makes his first and only reference to "the facile Ginevra" (105). This is one powerful instance of the extent to which overlooking Ginevra continues to determine arguments about the relationship between socialising in *Villette* and "novelistic conventions."

Ginevra, with whom she shares the longest and most substantial social relationship in the novel, has never been seriously questioned.

Wuthering Heights and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* each place the bulk of their narration in the hands of flawed and socially conventional (and flawed *because* socially conventional) "interpreters." Lucy is by contrast one of the most lonely and alienated narrator-protagonists in Victorian fiction.[118] She is also infamously reticent and deceptive. Lucy's narration involves frequent ruminations on precisely the kind of conventional masses that characters like Nelly and Gilbert represent. She resents society's shallow displays of feeling — "But, oh! what is the love of the multitude?" (443) — and reflects with a mingling of "gratitude" and bitterness that "the multitude have something else to do than to read hearts and interpret dark sayings" (448). To become "the multitude" incarnate, Nelly and Gilbert unsympathetically defer to social convention and thereby ensure each novel's stable, if somewhat banal, conclusion. In turn, the only real challenge to Lucy's biased and evasive narration of social life in *Villette* is Ginevra's "unsparing selfishness" (57).

Like Nelly and Gilbert, Ginevra's narratorial and introspective abilities are lacking. According to Lucy,

> she could not describe: she had neither words nor the power of putting them together so as to make graphic phrases. She even seemed not properly to have noticed [Graham]: nothing of his looks, of the changes in his countenance, had touched her heart or dwelt in her memory — that he was "beau, mais plutôt bel homme que joli garçon," was all she could assert. … I informed her very plainly that I believed him much too good for her, and intimated with equal plainness my impression that she

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[118] Elisha Cohn goes so far as to say that "*Villette* locates fulfillment not in narrative development but in the negation of the social" (857).

> was but a vain coquette. She laughed, shook her curls from her eyes, and danced away as if I had paid her a compliment. (87)

Lucy's description of Ginevra links poor narration, having "neither words nor the power of putting them together," to external and internal shallowness: not only being "a vain coquette," but also being immune to the moral judgement the moniker implies and lacking the capacity to feel deeply. Lucy characterises much of Ginevra's speech, the time they spend together, and Ginevra's character itself as what Robyn R. Warhol calls "unnarratable," or that which is "too tedious or obvious to say" ("Narrating" 79), giving the misleading impression that Lucy talks about, thinks about, and socialises with Ginevra much less than she really does.[119] Yet Ginevra is, narratively speaking, *Villette*'s connective tissue: her cross-continental travels, family affiliations, and romantic intrigues actively link her to practically every major event in the novel's plot. And as I argue throughout this chapter, the battle of wills between Ginevra and Lucy obscures their similarity as well as their intimacy.

Lucy narrates her struggle with the experience of feeling like a Catherine and being read like a Nelly. Ginevra's conventionality is one of Lucy's primary strategies for articulating her sense of social alienation but Ginevra also provides a functional alternative to Lucy's stringent demands for meaningful social relationships and emphasis on survival, self-reliance, and a private, carefully cultivated inner life. In Anne and Emily Brontës' novels, conventional characters like Ginevra are distinguished by their capacity to survive social life

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[119] Warhol relies on *Villette* to define "the unnarratable," which she divides into categories based on the cause of a subject's narrative absence. Lucy's unnarratable friendship with Ginevra is unusual because the reason the friendship cannot be narrated confounds Warhol's classifications. The first of Warhol's forms of the "unnarratable" — "that which is too tedious or obvious to say" — operates in pronounced opposition to the other two, "that which is taboo, in terms of social convention, literary convention, or both, and that which purportedly cannot be put into words because it exceeds or transcends the expressive capacities of language" ("Narrating" 79). The final two categories denote extremes of feeling and the implication that what exceeds "social convention" must also exceed "literary convention."

with maximum security and minimal loss. Yet Ginevra is a striking socially conventional subject within the Victorian novel because her association with ignorant conformity has attracted so much vitriol from critics that it has diverted critical attention from Lucy's reluctant narration of not only a significant social relationship, but also a highly narratively consequential construction of a normative female character. Ginevra is apparently too obvious and too tedious to occupy Lucy's attention, but closeness with Ginevra also, in Lucy's narration, becomes taboo. *Villette*'s plot revolves around secrets and spying, and its narration has become notorious for "keeping Lucy's secrets from us" (May 57). Ginevra, for all her lack of subtlety, is Lucy's most shameful secret of all.

Ginevra Fanshawe: A Fair but Faulty Associate

Lucy's social trajectory throughout *Villette* reveals that she is well liked, well connected, and able to successfully traverse a range of social classes and contexts. Ginevra is the only character who perceives this. Leila Silvana May describes Ginevra's remark "who *are* you, Miss Snowe" (*Villette* 307) as simultaneously "impolite" and "the deepest question in the novel," as well as a question posed "unknowingly and uncharacteristically" by "a frustrated, angry, annoyingly superficial acquaintance" (May 40). But Ginevra's question, in its "undisguised and unsophisticated curiosity" (307), reveals a relationship that is much deeper than it first appears. Ginevra pursues Lucy for confidences about money, fashion, and courtship while despairing over Lucy's unsatisfactory responses, ignoring her advice, and needling her with nicknames that reference her moral severity. Lucy, in turn, incredulously ironises her own continued attraction to Ginevra:

> Notwithstanding these foibles, and various others needless to mention — but by no means of a refined or elevating character — how pretty she was! How charming she looked, when she came down on a sunny Sunday morning, well-dressed and well-

> humoured, robed in pale lilac silk, and with her fair long curls reposing on her white shoulders. (86)[120]

The sardonic intrusion of Ginevra's conventional attractions — "how pretty she was" — is both a commentary on Lucy's alleged indifference to Ginevra's surplus of physical charms and her frustrated awareness that they act as a social corrective for Ginevra's corresponding deficit of anything resembling "a refined or elevating character." In her sarcasm, Lucy attempts to claim that she is immune to the appeal of Ginevra's beauty and the social deference it facilitates, but events prove otherwise.[121] Crucially, the dash between character and prettiness signals Lucy's self-censorship when it comes to Ginevra's characterisation and stands in for the unanswered question of why Lucy does repeatedly expose herself, "like all Miss Fanshawe's friends" (88), to her companion's "foibles."

Ironically, it is Lucy herself who inadvertently undermines Ginevra's supposed "annoying superficial[ity]" (May 40). When M. Paul announces that "the Englishwoman would play in a vaudeville," the force of Ginevra's reaction (the sincerity of which is revealed in the on-stage chemistry between the two that follows) forces Lucy's familiar narration of Ginevra's shallow pleasures to be punctured by a dash that precedes a genuine sensation of wonder: "in the highest spirit, unperturbed by fear or bashfulness, delighted indeed at the thought of shining off before hundreds — my entrance seemed to transfix her with amazement in the midst of her joy" (138). The sentence structure replicates Ginevra's

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[120] While Ginevra's and Lucy's relationship certainly has an erotic charge, I am reluctant to side with Sharon Marcus's reading in *Between Women,* which takes these asides about Ginevra's physical beauty in earnest. Lucy parodies the way she observes Ginevra to be perceived, and how Ginevra's herself perceives the powers of her prettiness, to avoid a declaration about her own attraction to Ginevra and its basis.

[121] Lucy's repeated concessions to Ginevra's beauty would thus seem to complicate Jeanne Fahnestock's assertion that Lucy's "harsh, quick judgements" about other characters are informed by "a conviction of the fixed principles of correspondence between the face and character" (348–49).

frequent tendency to both defy and cheerfully accede to Lucy's low expectations. Lucy's unforgiving narration of her young friend's "joy" and "amazement," however, reads as the earned and affectionate disapproval of an intimate rather than the indifferent judgement of an acquaintance.

In fact, Ginevra is Lucy's most constant and reliable source of social interaction. In a typical aside, Lucy claims: "I lived in a house full of robust life; I might have had companions, and I chose solitude. Each of the teachers in turn made me overtures of special intimacy; I tried them all" (126). But instead of fully committing to the choice of solitude, Lucy repeatedly experiences that "special intimacy" in the company of Ginevra. She admits that it is on herself that Ginevra elects to bestow "a large portion of her leisure" (129), and the novel is replete with Lucy's caustic jokes about trying to get rid of her: "it was imperatively necessary my apartment should be relieved of the honour of her presence" (92). Yet Ginevra is actively connected to nearly every major plot event in *Villette*: she is Paulina's cousin;[122] she leads Lucy in the direction of both Villette and Madame Beck's school; and her courtship with De Hamal is responsible for the mysterious nun that plagues Lucy's nightmares and interrupts her jealous agonies. Ginevra is also the co-star of *Villette*'s most famous scene, the school play, and is the architect of both Dr John's eventual marriage to Paulina and many of his early interactions with Lucy. She is the intended recipient of the billet-doux in another of *Villette*'s most memorable incidents. Furthermore, Ginevra acts as a physical barrier between Lucy and M. Paul Emmanuel, the latter of whom gets close to Lucy by physically "establish[ing] himself between me and Miss Fanshawe" (329). Finally, Ginevra's "plaints about her own headaches —" (449) then lead to the climactic scene at the

[122] Paulina's mother, Ginevra's aunt, as "silly and frivolous a little flirt as ever sensible man was weak enough to marry" anticipates Ginevra's introduction and acts as her prototype (7).

novel's conclusion, in which a drugged Lucy leaves the Rue Fossette and finds herself "with the suddenness of magic, plunged amidst a gay, living, joyous crowd" (452).

Ginevra also has a significant linguistic presence in Lucy's narration. *Villette* was originally titled *Choseville*, a reference to Ginevra's entrance scene, in which she describes herself being "at chose" (55).[123] Lucy explains that *chose* "in this instance, stood for Villette," reinforcing other structural evidence that the novel's "world" is more Ginevra's than Lucy's. "Chose," which comes "at every turn in [Ginevra's] conversation" as "the convenient substitute for any missing word in any language" (55), is also an appropriate descriptor for Lucy's and Ginevra's intimacy and its ambiguous narration, the curious and persistent way their relationship resists clear categorisation.

One of Ginevra's regular duties as a narrative agent is to encroach upon Lucy's solitude. After many weeks without contact from the Brettons, Lucy makes the melancholy observation that "those who live in retirement, whose lives have fallen amid the seclusion of schools or of other walled-in and guarded dwellings, are liable to be suddenly and for a long while dropped out of the memory of their friends, the denizens of a freer world" (266). At just the moment Lucy is "sorrowing over the disillusion" that her friends have missed her, Ginevra's entrance restores a scene of domestic familiarity comically at odds with Lucy's self-declared "seclusion": "suddenly a quick tripping foot ran up the stairs. I knew Ginevra Fanshawe's step: she had dined in town that afternoon; she was now returned, and would come here to replace her shawl, &c. in the wardrobe" (268).

Ginevra's unlikely and singular endurance thereby confounds one of Alex Woloch's distinctions between major and minor characters. He ascribes "the strange significance of

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[123] Schaffer notes that Choseville ("thing-city") is an "even more typifying term" than Villette ("little city") without mentioning the connection to Ginevra (*Communities* 94).

minor characters" to the fact that "every minor character does — by strict definition — disappear," arguing that the power of minorness resides "largely in the way that the character disappears, and in the tension or relief that results from this vanishing" (38). Lucy repeatedly tries to make Ginevra "minor" by downplaying the extent of their relationship, establishing distance between them by means of excessive moral disapproval, and, finally, making her disappear.[124]

Ginevra's disappearance (and therefore minorness), however, has been consolidated much more firmly by the novel's critics than by *Villette*'s narration itself. Looking more closely at Ginevra's narrative exit provides a small, but significant, corrective to Tabitha Sparks' summary of the novel's temporality: "it has been narrated by a much older Lucy, looking back on this time in her life; but beyond a general reference to her success with her school, no bridge is constructed between the period of the story and the later, undisclosed time and place of its writing" (59). As Sparks notes, that *Villette* is narrated decades after its events take place is made explicit in an early parenthesis: "(for I speak of a time gone by: my hair which till a late period withstood the frosts of time, lies now at last, white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow)" (51). There is one moment, however, when Lucy does concretely situate herself in the mysterious intervening years otherwise left open to readerly conjecture, creating a small but significant "bridge … between the period of the story and the later, undisclosed time and place of its writing." Ginevra's ongoing maintenance of the

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[124] Buzard draws attention to the irony of this when he notes that:

> as the starlet of the salon, the creature positively made to be looked at and to generate plots of courtship and intrigue, Ginevra embodies the essence of fictional characters in general, those figures whose movement across the story-space of narrative we watch as we read; Lucy, even though assigned the role of a character, cannot help withdrawing into the powerful invisibility of a narrator who watches characters and enables our watching of them. (271)

Lucy's apparent social rejection of Ginevra can thus be read as a realist rejection of her qualifications as a fictional character, one the novel's criticism has upheld.

relationship between Lucy and herself provides the novel's sole glimpse into Lucy's future life:

> *I thought she would forget me now, but she did not*. *For many years*, she kept up a capricious, fitful sort of correspondence. *During the first year or two*, it was only of herself and Alfred she wrote; then, Alfred faded in the background; herself and a certain new comer prevailed; … *In due course of nature* this young gentleman took his degrees in teething, measles, hooping-cough: *that was a terrible time for me* … I was frightened at first, and *wrote back* pathetically; but *I soon found out* there was more cry than wool in the business, and relapsed into my natural cruel insensibility. As to the youthful sufferer, he weathered each storm like a hero. *Five times* was that youth "in articulo mortis," and *five times* did he miraculously revive. *In the course of years* there arose ominous murmurings against Alfred the First … ignoble plaints and difficulties *became frequent.* Under every cloud, no matter what its nature, Ginevra, *as of old*, called out lustily for sympathy and aid. (472–78, my emphasis)

The terms "capricious" and "fitful," so typical of Ginevra's characterisation throughout the novel, bely the fact that this is the furthest into the future that Lucy's narration ever ventures.

The accumulation of temporal indicators in the passage — "for many years," "during the first year or two," "in due course of nature," "that was a terrible time for me," "I soon found out," "five times … five times," "in the course of years," "became frequent," "as of old" — serve to explicitly locate Lucy in the years subsequent to *Villette*'s events, and even trace a brief pathway through those years. Receiving, and writing back to, Ginevra's letters is, beyond the writing of *Villette* itself, the only concrete action Lucy admits to undertaking in the period after M. Paul's shipwreck at the end of the novel. At *Villette*'s conclusion, then, there is only one thing we know for certain about the remainder of Lucy's life: she stays in touch, *frequently*, with Ginevra. Ginevra, as of old, is a more significant presence in Lucy's

social life than Lucy is willing to admit. This way of "winding up Mistress Fanshawe's memoirs" (476) is also a joke at Lucy's expense. Earlier in the novel, when Graham Bretton, infatuated with Ginevra, asks Lucy if she and Ginevra "correspond," Lucy icily quips, "'It will astonish you to hear that I never once thought of making application for that privilege'" (188). Ginevra's non-exit enshrines her as the strongest and most enduring of Lucy's social ties: the only character present in the temporal space between the events of the novel and their narration.

Far from being fitful and capricious, then, Ginevra's presence in *Villette* is characterised by its constancy. To take Lucy's inflated contempt for, and disapproval of, Ginevra seriously is to misread the novel's most robust evidence of Lucy's tendency to inaccurately narrate her social life.[125] Moreover, Lucy's relationship with Ginevra reveals the extent to which Ginevra's appetite for the emotional and material benefits of social inclusion reflects Lucy's own insatiable (if repressed) appetite for the privileges of conventional social experience. Schaffer has described "desire" and "social and familial repair" as opposing forces ("Reading on the Contrary" 167): this is also how Lucy understands them. Lucy guards her independence and rejects social and familial duties to provide a platform for the expression and development of desire for these modes of contact. In part, then, what Lucy resents about Ginevra is her ability to unite superficial desires (for money, admiration, "amusement") with socially acceptable behaviour and the kind of "repair" that ensures her continued access to her own social network (most often represented by "unequivocal applications for cash" 188). Lucy can only understand desire as a transgressive force that

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[125] Lucy admits that Ginevra is not prone to "lying" and "always speaks quite candidly" (224), drawing attention to her function as a counterpoint to Lucy's secretive narration, as well as the novel's most overt challenge to Lucy's own claim that "I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate to the real truth" (465).

makes an outsider of her. Ginevra's conventionally sought and received pursuit and expression of desire thus provokes Lucy's most intense moral condemnation.

This condemnation is frequently eroticised. Given that so much has been said about *Villette*'s queerness — particularly about the school play, in which Lucy acts out a masculine role in order to win the hyper-feminised Ginevra — it is surprising that queer readings have remained almost solely focused on Lucy, as a character who "deviates from the norm" (Shim 250).[126] Yet Lucy's excessive deprecation of Ginevra's conventionality exposes her own exceptionality as self-declared and overstated. Ginevra knows this, revealing that knowledge in both her familiar and abrupt style of interrogation — such as when she notes that she saw Lucy at the opera "dressed, actually, like anybody else" (235) — and her sly appellations like "Timon" and "Diogenes." The queerness of *Villette*'s social landscape extends well beyond Lucy. Rather than being isolated by her deviations from the norm, Lucy actively participates in a world that treats all gendered socialising as a theatrical spectacle. Despite Lucy's passion for character interpretation (phrenological and otherwise), character in *Villette* is less an innate quality that reveals itself under observation than a performance for the benefit of others that is highly dependent on costume (Lucy devotes a lot of time to descriptions of clothes). Comparatively little attention has been paid to Ginevra's role in creating the conditions for *Villette*'s scenes of gender play and queer desire.[127] Lucy's experiment with

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[126] While I am inclined to agree with Marcus's reading of Lucy's lesbian desires, her understanding of Ginevra's and Lucy's relationship as one of anachronistic feminine rivalry is, I am suggesting, closer to how Lucy characterises the relationship than to what actually takes place in *Villette*. While Marcus suggests that Lucy's demeanour toward "the capricious Ginevra" (105) is "contradictory, but the openness with which she expresses attraction to her suggests that Lucy's scorn is not the negation of an erotic desire she is barred from articulating" (103), I contend instead that the more interesting aspect of their relationship is that Lucy is more open about her superficial attraction to Ginevra than she is about the extent of their social connection.

[127] Kathryn Bond Stockton is one of few critics who identifies and discusses the "unacknowledged likeness" between Ginevra and Lucy that *Villette* repeatedly betrays (140), but her reading of Lucy's queerness, her relationship to "coquetry," and her "attraction" to Ginevra stops

partial drag only serves to highlight that *Villette*'s real drag queen is Ginevra, who, in her role as "the heroine of the piece, acts nothing but herself when she flirts with Lucy" (Duncker 74). Ginevra's hyper-femininity and her embrace of a mode of flirtation that moves effortlessly from ballroom to stage, and across genders, is affirmed and accentuated by her attraction to her eventual husband De Hamal, the "cross-dressed visiting Nun" who "is extravagantly feminine in appearance" (Duncker 74). Indeed, Ginevra and her future husband, "that divine de Hamal!" (*Villette* 236), are one of the campiest couples in Victorian literature.

De Hamal is so queer coded that his introduction incites a homophobic rant from Lucy, during one of her most savage railleries with Ginevra about "taste" (146):

> I observed, too, with deep rapture of approbation, that the colonel's hands were scarce larger than Miss Fanshawe's own, and suggested that this circumstance might be convenient, as he could wear her gloves at a pinch. On his dear curls, I told her I doated: and as to his low, Grecian brow, and exquisite classic headpiece, I confessed I had no language to do such perfections justice. (147)

In this scene, De Hamal becomes the human embodiment of Ginevra's passion for "sweets, and jams, and comfits, and conservatory flowers" (147), all associated with femininity, transience, and superficiality. Lucy's command over the scene, however, dissolves when it is revealed that Ginevra's other suiter is none other than Dr John:

> "The doll — the puppet — the manikin — the poor inferior creature! A mere lackey for Dr John his valet, his foot-boy! … You are only dissembling: you are not in earnest: you love [Dr John]; you long for him; but you trifle with his heart to make him more surely yours?"

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short of considering Ginevra's reciprocal attraction to Lucy, or expanding on the broader significance of the way the "novel insists on [Lucy's and Ginevra's] embraces" (141).

> … "Him you call the man," said [Ginevra], "is bourgeois, sandy-haired, and answers to the name of John! — cela suffit: je n'en veux pas. Colonel de Hamal is a gentleman of excellent connections, perfect manners, sweet appearance, with a pale interesting face, and hair and eyes like an Italian. Then too he is the most delightful company possible — a man quite in my way; not sensible and serious like the other; but one with whom I can talk on equal terms — who does not plague and bore, and harass me with depths, and heights, and passions, and talents for which I have no taste. There now. Don't hold me so fast." (148–49)

Lucy, in one of her infrequent public outbursts, resents Ginevra's ability to inspire devotion. She also reveals a streak of naivete (not unlike Helen's speech to Gilbert about loving truly) and an interpretative blind spot by failing to consider that Ginevra might be able to subject Graham's "sensible and serious" character to an ironic gaze very similar to the one Lucy turns on De Hamal. Hamal's "perfect manners" and queer shapeshifting reveal what it means to be "a man" in quite the same pattern as Ginevra's performed femininity. By forcing the comically conventional line — "You are only dissembling: you are not in earnest: you love him; you long for him; but you trifle with his heart to make him more surely yours?" — this scene turns the joke on Lucy, revealing the sincere challenge Ginevra's shallowness poses to Lucy's narratorial authority and rigid character system.

The physical intensity of the scene, in which Lucy forcibly directs and holds Ginevra, also introduces the physically violent socialising of both *Wuthering Heights* and *Tenant* into *Villette*'s much more subdued social encounters. Indeed, while Lucy's love affair with M. Paul is ostensibly built on the simmering erotic violence of his unique ability to rattle Lucy into passionate outbursts and break down her habitual reserve, Lucy is frequently just as

passionate with Ginevra, who is also the only character Lucy regularly touches.[128] Ginevra, rather than M. Paul, first and most decisively manifests the ability of bringing out "the worst dregs of [Lucy]":

> An explosion ensued: for I could be passionate, too; especially with my present fair but faulty associate, who never failed to stir the worst dregs of me. It was well that the carriage-wheels made a tremendous rattle over the flinty Villette pavement, for I can assure the reader there was neither dead silence nor calm discussion within the vehicle. Half in earnest, half in seeming, I made it my business to storm down Ginevra. She had set out rampant from the Rue Crécy; it was necessary to tame her before we reached the Rue Fossette: to this end it was indispensable to show up her sterling value and high deserts; and this must be done in language of which the fidelity and homeliness might challenge comparison with the compliments of a John Knox to a Mary Stuart. This was the right discipline for Ginevra; it suited her. I am quite sure she went to bed that night all the better and more settled in mind and mood, and slept all the more sweetly for having undergone a sound moral drubbing." (321–22)[129]

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[128] The violence of Lucy's touch mirrors her repeated descriptions of Ginevra's substantial physical presence: that bright young creature was not gentle at all, and would certainly have pulled me out of my chair, if she had meddled in the matter" (360); "the dear pressure of that angel's not unsubstantial limb — (she continued in excellent case, and I can assure the reader it was no trifling business to bear the burden of her loveliness; many a time in the course of that warm day I wished to goodness there had been less of the charming commodity)" (379). It also acts as a counterpoint to the only other pronounced descriptions of Lucy's voluntary physical touch: carrying Madame Beck's daughter Georgette (reported by Ginevra herself, 307), and comforting Paulina as a child: "I warmed her in my arms" (34).

[129] Kucich uses this scene as an example of "Lucy's calculated displays of contempt for Ginevra" ("Passionate Reserve" 917–18), despite the fact that the earlier scene regarding Graham Bretton and De Hamal is far less calculated. Indeed, Kucich inadvertently illustrates the problem of sincerity that has plagued readings of Lucy's relationship to Ginevra by going on to describe Lucy's "great contempt for those who, like Ginevra Fanshawe, 'sour in adversity'" (925) as a concrete trait rather than a calculated performance.

This battle between Lucy and her fair but faulty associate is a battle fought between equals and with pleasure on both sides.[130] The two halves of Lucy's passionate performance, "earnest" and "seeming," maintain *Villette*'s emphasis on social theatrics yet also conspire to form a holistic honesty and forthrightness that is characteristic of Lucy's and Ginevra's reciprocal relationship and profoundly unlike the "curious one-sided friendship" between Lucy and Graham Bretton, which Lucy describes as "half marble and half life; only on one hand truth, and on the other perhaps a jest?" (362). This is Lucy's most direct admission that her most freely "passionate" relationship is with Ginevra.[131] It is on Ginevra that Lucy can inflict "the worst dregs" of herself without consequence, and in whom she inspires attachment without any apparent effort.

Midway through the novel, one scene reveals most decidedly that Lucy's relationship with Ginevra is a defining feature of her social experience:

> She did not like the morning cup of coffee; its school brewage not being strong or sweet enough to suit her palate; and she had an excellent appetite, like any other healthy school-girl, for the morning pistolets or rolls, which were new-baked and very good, and of which a certain allowance was served to each. This allowance being

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[130] Indeed, their intimacy is characterised by a comic stability unique in the text. "Miss Fanshawe," Lucy notes, "always would be my neighbour, and have her elbow in my side, however often I declared to her, 'Ginevra, I wish you were at Jericho'" (329). In the same scene, Lucy describes her young companion's habit of being "gummed to me, 'keeping herself warm,' as she said, on the winter evenings, and harassing my very heart with her fidgetings and pokings, obliging me, indeed, sometimes to put an artful pin in my girdle by way of protection against her elbow" (329).

[131] Schaffer describes Lucy's relationship with M. Paul as follows: "Lucy's hunger for real feeling perhaps accounts for her attraction to the most natural, spontaneous person she knows, M. Paul. She is entranced by his utterly transparent emotional life, including his ebullitions of anger, his childish jealousies" (*Communities* 108). Despite Ginevra's strong association with artificiality, it is worth remembering that an "utterly transparent emotional life" involving "ebullitions of anger" and "childish jealousies" applies even more comprehensively to Ginevra, complicating Schaffer's summary of the apparently obvious dichotomy of Lucy's two love interests: "Graham correlates to Lucy's specious performative cover, while M. Paul's passion matches her own fiery, secret core self" (109).

> more than I needed, I gave half to Ginevra; never varying in my preference, though many others used to covet the superfluity; and she in return would sometimes give me a portion of her coffee. … I don't know why I chose to give my bread rather to Ginevra than to another; nor why, if two had to share the convenience of one drinking-vessel, as sometimes happened — for instance, when we took a long walk into the country, and halted for refreshment at a farm — I always contrived that she should be my convive, and rather liked to let her take the lion's share, whether of the white beer, the sweet wine, or the new milk: so it was, however, and she knew it; and, therefore, while we wrangled daily, we were never alienated. (233–34)

Here, an established friendship traverses domestic familiarity, erotic exchange, and acerbic raillery — the three conversational registers in which meaningful social experience tends to take place throughout the novel. Lucy's and Ginevra's mutually and actively nurtured *convivialité* reveals itself despite the excuse of a purely material and "convenient" (233) exchange. Lucy's abrupt reflective turn, "I don't know why," is a rare gesture to the way Ginevra confounds her narratorial insight. The exchange demonstrates that Ginevra's reference to Lucy's misanthropy in the appellation "Timon" is a shared joke about the two women's improbably extensive companionship: you must *really* dislike me to spend so much of your time telling me about it.

Lucy's description of her relationship with Ginevra as an economic transaction belies the fact that their friendship involves very limited material advantages on either side.[132]

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[132] Lucy's anxiety about Ginevra's association with an economic, as well as a social market, also gestures to the inherent fictionality of Ginevra's character by associating her with the post-seventeenth-century anxiety about literary writing as a related system to social relations and economics, as Mary Poovey describes: "one of the functions performed by imaginative writing in general was to mediate value — that is, to help people understand the new credit economy and the market model of value it promoted" (2–3). Thus, by performatively rejecting Ginevra's market value, Lucy associates her own selfhood with "a special type of value" (3).

Moreover, it makes explicit that the pursuit of financial security and material acquisition is one of the main characteristics that Ginevra and Lucy have in common.[133] Ginevra, Lucy notes parenthetically, "ever stuck to the substantial; I always thought there was a good trading element in her composition, much as she scorned the 'bourgeoise'" (476).[134] Lucy often unfavourably contrasts Ginevra with her more serious cousin, Paulina, who nevertheless must ask a much less interesting and penetrating "impolite" question than Ginevra's "who *are* you" to learn that Lucy teaches at Madame Beck's "chiefly … for the sake of the money I get" (285). Of Paulina, Lucy confesses: "I liked her. It is not a declaration I have often made concerning my acquaintance, in the course of this book: the reader will bear with it for once. Intimate intercourse, close inspection, disclosed in Paulina only what was delicate, intelligent, and sincere; therefore my regard for her lay deep" (371). It is presumably those three qualities — delicacy, intelligence, and sincerity — that Ginevra lacks, and which make it morally impossible for Lucy to make a similar declaration about her.[135]

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[133] Interestingly, as Schaffer notes, *Villette* "firmly places fond personal care communities into the nostalgic past and exemplifies the dismay many Victorians experienced regarding the emergence of paid care," and Lucy herself "is an early example of a modern migrant global caregiver in British fiction" (*Communities* 88). Lucy is aware of the extent to which her cultivation of personal relationships intersects with the paid labour she performs (and rejects the offer to be paid companion to Paulina on this basis), so her deployment of the language of economic exchange here acts as an ironic and significant reminder that her relationship with Ginevra, unlike most of her relationships in *Villette*, operates outside the marketplace of paid care because it is not an exchange that involves dependence or material advantage.

[134] Lucy's comment at another point that Ginevra "must have had good blood in her veins, for never was any duchess more perfectly, radically, unaffectedly *nonchalante* than she" (85) acts as an inadvertent admission that despite her more open desire for, and anticipation of, social ascension, the ambiguity of Ginevra's social position is not unlike Lucy's.

[135] Lucy's narration of her friendship with Ginevra, and Ginevra's character itself, is a particularly interesting example of what Lisa Zunshine has called literature's expression of "a particular mindreading ideology — that is, who gets to talk about people's mental states and who does not and which cultural institutions promote this kind of talk and which suppress it" (x). Lucy's assertion that Ginevra's mind is not worth reading is, I believe, self-reflexively ideological and

Meanwhile, Lucy must bury her liking for Ginevra in the evasive formulation "rather liked to." In the same scene, Lucy describes her relationship with Ginevra to Paulina:

> "If I thought you one whit like Madame Ginevra, I would not sit here waiting for your communications. I would get up, walk at my ease about the room, and anticipate all you had to say by a round lecture." (372–73)

If anything defines Lucy's relationship with "Madame Ginevra" it is that suggestive term, *ease*. Throughout *Villette*, Lucy is rarely at ease. When Ginevra uses the same term in reference to Lucy, she also playfully deploys Lucy's disdainful and now-familiar character profile:

> "I am far more at my ease with you, old lady — you, you dear crosspatch — who take me at my lowest, and know me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed to be a part of my character."
>
> "This is all very well," I said, making a strenuous effort to preserve that gravity and severity which ran risk of being shaken by this whimsical candour. (91)

Lucy is momentarily "shaken" by the transformation of her unfavourable character assessment into one of the novel's most straightforward and charming declarations of affection. Throughout *Villette*, Lucy's narration resembles a similarly strenuous effort to preserve "gravity and severity," a posture incompatible with Ginevra's status as unlikely confidante and constant companion.

Ginevra's pleasure in Lucy's willingness to take her at her lowest is also what attracts her to De Hamal:

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constitutes *Villette*'s most significant commentary on interpretation as a social, formal, and cultural phenomenon.

> My present business is to enjoy youth, and not to think of fettering myself, by promise or vow, to this man or that. When first I saw Isidore, I believed he would help me to enjoy it. I believed he would be content with my being a pretty girl; and that we should meet and part and flutter about like two butterflies, and be happy. Lo, and behold! I find him at times as grave as a judge, and deep-feeling and thoughtful. Bah! Les penseurs, les hommes profonds et passionnés ne sont pas à mon goût. Le Colonel Alfred de Hamal suits me far better. Va pour les beaux fats et les jolis fripons! Vive les joies et les plaisirs! A bas les grandes passions et les sévères vertus! (92)

For all her moralising to readers, Lucy is ultimately "content" to let Ginevra be "a pretty girl."[136] What Lucy's misreading of this speech reveals, though, is her inability to accept that Ginevra's tastes and behaviour might be the result of active choice, considered thought, and acquired self-knowledge, rather than the unfortunate consequences of a defective character incapable of development or introspection. Lucy's refuses, for instance, to narrate Ginevra's exit as the successful conclusion of a marriage plot.[137] Despite Ginevra's characterisation as a "vain coquette" in her reintroduction scene, and in all Lucy's accounts of the rivalry between her two suitors, Ginevra does love De Hamal and the marriage is apparently a success. When

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[136]As I have been arguing, readers have a long history of consuming realist novels the way Lucy consumes Vashti's performance and the painting of Cleopatra: with an attraction to exceptionality and extremes and in search of outsider experiences that affirm a sense of alienation from mainstream society, leaving less-interesting characters to be pretty girls. Lucy comes back to Ginevra's description of Graham as "deep and thoughtful" to advocate for her own superior capacity for artistic interpretation:

> Miss Fanshawe, with her usual ripeness of judgment, pronounced Dr. Bretton a serious, impassioned man, too grave and too impressible. Not in such light did I ever see him: no such faults could I lay to his charge. … [F]or what belonged to storm, what was wild and intense, dangerous, sudden, and flaming, he had no sympathy, and held with it no communion. (259)

[137] As Buzard notes, nationality plays a part in this reluctance: "Ginevra's ultimate destiny of being yoked to a profligate foreigner might have been taken straight from the pages of numerous Victorian magazine tales or even tourist guidebooks cautioning English maidens against the blandishments of Continental fortune-hunters" (267).

questioned on her feelings about "Isidore" (Graham), Ginevra has the following exchange with Lucy:

> "Mais pas du tout!" (she always had recourse to French when about to say something specially heartless and perverse). "Je suis sa reine, mais il n'est pas mon roi."
>
> "Excuse me, I must believe this language is mere nonsense and coquetry. There is nothing great about you, yet you are above profiting by the good nature and purse of a man to whom you feel absolute indifference. You love M. Isidore far more than you think, or will avow." (90–91)

But Ginevra makes herself perfectly clear: "'J'aime mon beau Colonel,' she went on, 'je n'aimerai jamais son rival'" (92). Lucy's understanding of Ginevra's preference for De Hamal as "heartless and perverse" is thereby associated with the fact that first, Ginevra makes the declaration of love in French and, second, that she does not make the declaration Lucy would have made.

May reads *Villette* as a straightforward fulfilment of Marcus's theory about the link between female friendships and the Victorian novel's marriage plot:

> One of the main claims of Marcus's book is that there is "[n]o female friendship without marriage in the Victorian novel … , no marriage without female friendship" (102). This thesis has a corollary: "the Victorian novel shows the paradigmatic importance of female friendship in courtship narratives" (2). *Villette* follows that rule: no female amity, no marriage (50).

As Ginevra's marriage reveals, however, *Villette*'s link between female friendship and marriage varies significantly depending on which character is the object of focus. Lucy's friendship does in fact enable and uphold Ginevra's marriage plot in precisely the way Marcus describes. When Lucy is first introduced to Ginevra, Ginevra foreshadows her tendency to articulate her own character most clearly in French when she informs Lucy that

"heureusement je sais faire aller mon monde" (56). The world of *Villette*, as I have been suggesting, is Ginevra's world, and she is indeed the one who knows how to move it along. It is no coincidence, then, that Lucy disparagingly compares Ginevra's apparently faulty French to Paulina's:

> I was charmed with her French; it was faultless — the structure correct, the idioms true, the accent pure; Ginevra, who had lived half her life on the Continent, could do nothing like it. Not that words ever failed Miss Fanshawe, but real accuracy and purity she neither possessed, nor in any number of years would acquire. (312–13)

When Lucy speaks of "real accuracy and purity," she may be referring as much to the contents as to the "structure." Lucy does not speak a word of French when Ginevra makes her first insightful remark, and *Villette* suggests that one of Lucy's problems is that no matter how much of Villette's language she acquires, she will never understand the French that Ginevra speaks.[138] It is Ginevra's dialogue, however, not Paulina's, that regularly incorporates French. Just as Ginevra's amity with Lucy contributes to her successful marriage plot, Lucy's liking for, and likeness to, Ginevra is reflected in her own narrative trajectory from romantic passion (with a French professor) to upward social mobility.

Lucy's reports of her interactions with Ginevra, as I have shown, very often barely conceal genuine attachment beneath their contemptuous disapproval:

> "There, again!" she cried. "I thought, by offering to take your arm, to intimate approbation of your dress and general appearance: I meant it as a compliment."
>
> "You did? You meant, in short, to express that you are not ashamed to be seen in the street with me? That if Mrs. Cholmondeley should be fondling her lapdog at some

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[138] Lucy's literal failure to understand Ginevra, and the way it is mapped on to the novel's two languages, thus provides a counterpoint to Schaffer's more familiar interpretation of Lucy as "a sociological case study who explains herself, even if the Ginevras of the world cannot comprehend her answer" (*Communities* 90).

> window, or Colonel de Hamal picking his teeth in a balcony, and should catch a glimpse of us, you would not quite blush for your companion?"
>
> "Yes," said she, with that directness which was her best point — which gave an honest plainness to her very fibs when she told them — which was, in short, the salt, the sole preservative ingredient of a character otherwise not formed to keep.
>
> I delegated the trouble of commenting on this "yes" to my countenance; or rather, my under-lip voluntarily anticipated my tongue: of course, reverence and solemnity were not the feelings expressed in the look I gave her. (308)

When Lucy mocks Ginevra for her attempt to "compliment" her, the contradictory claim that Ginevra is telling "fibs" with "an honest plainness" exposes Lucy's inability to untangle her own competing impulses regarding Ginevra. In the entire novel, Lucy, a reader of faces, makes no other action so childishly unguarded as sticking her tongue out at Ginevra, who affectionately responds, "as if one *could* let you alone."

Interactions like this provide a glimpse of a different, more abandoned way Lucy might socialise. This is most clearly articulated in the fact that Ginevra is the "heroine" of a revealing and extensive fantasy Lucy has during her first long, solitary, holidays at Madame Beck's:

> While wandering in solitude, I would sometimes picture the present probable position of others, my acquaintance. … There was Ginevra Fanshawe, whom certain of her connections had carried on a pleasant tour southward. Ginevra seemed to me the happiest. … Ginevra gradually became with me a sort of heroine. One day, perceiving this growing illusion, I said, "I really believe my nerves are getting overstretched: my mind has suffered somewhat too much a malady is growing upon it — what shall I do? How shall I keep well?" (158–59)

Lucy's satirical attempt to dismiss her daydreams about Ginevra as the product of mental illness belies a question the novel itself takes seriously: is Ginevra's heroism in fact an illusion? The more conventional, less reverent, less solemn form of attachment Ginevra offers might not involve being fully understood but would provide other forms of fulfillment: consistency, honesty, loyalty. In *Villette*, Ginevra's conventional characterisation is a narrative device that transgressively suggests that Lucy might be happier if she surrendered to being the "belle fate" to Ginevra's "jolie friponne," and embraced "les joies et les plaisirs" instead of "les grandes passions et les sévères vertus."

Nevertheless, Lucy characterises Ginevra as so selfish and conventional elsewhere that critics like May are compelled to describe her as "annoyingly superficial." When Lucy re-encounters Ginevra upon arriving at Madame Beck's, her damning character assassination links superficiality and shallowness to social unreliability:

> a weak, transient amaze was all she knew of the sensation of wonder. Most of her other faculties seemed to be in the same flimsy condition: her liking and disliking, her love and hate, were mere cobweb and gossamer; but she had one thing about her that seemed strong and durable enough, and that was — her selfishness. (85)

Scholars have taken up Lucy's characterisation and its hostile lexicon with striking readiness. Anna Clark, for instance, notes that "*Villette* makes room for the voices of women who are not Lucy" (361) but goes on to describe Ginevra as "a spoiled coquette and Lucy's occasional companion" (362). Schaffer describes Ginevra more bluntly as "Lucy's frenemy" (*Communities* 89), and James Buzard opts for "faithless turncoat" (260) and "wicked beauty" (272). Clark, May, Schaffer, and Buzard, like Lucy herself, equate Ginevra's "very fickle tastes" (*Villette* 86) with an inability to form lasting and meaningful interpersonal relationships and dismissively compare her to "Lucy's peculiar personality" (Schaffer, *Communities* 89). Lucy's scornful summary of Ginevra's capacity for "liking and disliking"

has thus been mapped onto a critical consensus that she and Ginevra are merely "acquaintances," co-conspirators in an "occasional" association necessarily lacking in emotional depth.

Schaffer argues that Lucy is "torn between a devastatingly false surface and a violently furious private self," and that her ability to "tell her story" depends upon her intimacy with M. Paul:

> Lucy develops a relationship with a person who will listen to her. She enters into a care relation outside economic exchange. It is true that her relation with M. Paul is tenuous, imperiled, and problematic and often includes what we would today identify as sexual harassment and verbal abuse. But bad care is better than no care. The fact that someone is trying to meet her needs — even bumblingly and dangerously — is profoundly meaningful for Lucy. … the key factor in this relationship is its voluntary, unpaid relationality. (*Communities* 113)

Ginevra, Lucy's bad friend, is also *Villette*'s better, more consistent, and more obvious bad carer. This instance of a contemporary critic identifying the abusive and misogynist character as a "profoundly meaningful" example of "unpaid relationality" while failing to consider Ginevra's far less problematic, if mundane, attempts at care is a productive illustration of a critical tendency to automatically eject normative female characters from meaningful roles in a novel's social network. Lucy undertakes the same doomed quest exemplified by Helen and the elder Catherine: for a new way to exist meaningfully in a limited social world. Also like Helen and Catherine, Lucy ultimately fails in this search. Unlike them, an alternative is right in front of her, in the unlikely shape of a frivolous schoolgirl.[139]

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[139] Ginevra's conventionality and the education that produced it is reinforced by the fact that Lucy's narration of her could be taken straight from Wollstonecraft's reflections on the corrosive effect of gendered social conformity: "like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty … the civilised women of the present century, with a few

If *Villette*'s concluding shipwreck functions as a future-negating metaphor for the obliteration of the novel's fragile social world, its white-haired narrator does not emerge from the wreckage alone. The much-maligned Madame Ginevra Fanshawe is with her. Lucy Snowe is famous for holding back, and despite almost two centuries of scrutiny, the nature and extent of her relationship with Ginevra has remained elusive. This is a friendship that has been hiding in plain sight: Ginevra has a substantial presence in *Villette*.[140] Like Nelly and Gilbert, Ginevra represents the tedious and unromantic work of social survival and exemplifies the mystery that lies on the other side of the rebellious impulse that individuates characters like Lucy. Ginevra, whose social position and connections prove to be much more closely aligned with Lucy's than either suspects, undermines Lucy's thesis that the existing world necessarily presents an obstacle to both complete self-expression and the fulfilment of desire. For Ginevra, the narrative world is eminently navigable and ultimately ordered to her satisfaction. What is difficult to the point of impossibility for Lucy, is, for Ginevra, almost effortless.

Ginevra's longstanding critical omission from accounts of *Villette*, a novel about the social power of omission, is worth taking seriously as we continue to question realism, character, and the political implications of fictional representations of individual psychology and social networks. The final novels of George Eliot, to which I now turn, are characterised by a series of Ginevra-types that even more rigorously test the power of social conventions to modify literary ones. *Villette* refuses to define Lucy's and Ginevra's unlikely friendship, but their intimacy nevertheless structures the novel's plot and provides its most counterintuitive

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exceptions, are only anxious to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect" (*Vindication* 23).

[140] A similar logic informs my argument about George Eliot's epigraphs elsewhere: the motivation to explain why a large portion of a much-analysed text has consistently failed to rouse critical interest.

social commentary. The link between liking and likeness that characterises Lucy's narration of Ginevra anticipates chapter five's argument about Gwendolen's more open attempt at a meaningful relationship with Daniel. *Deronda* contains the friendship double-plot in Victorian fiction that comes closest to making a full protagonist of what Schaffer calls "the Ginevras of the world" (*Communities* 90).

Part III: Socialising Artificially with George Eliot

In an 1856 essay, George Eliot describes "lady novelists" similarly to the way Lucy Snowe describes Ginevra Fanshawe: as "a composite order of feminine fatuity" (*Selected Essays* 140). Eliot's essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," famously laments a lack of realism in novels by and for women. However, Eliot's own realist fiction is shaped by a cast of "silly ladies" that progressively ascend in narrative importance. In *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), the characterisation and socialising of conventional women alters the parameters of realist representation. Arabella Transome, Rosamond Vincy, and Gwendolen Harleth take up the representational problem Lucy and Ginevra raised in *Villette*: the intimate relationships of those whose shallowness and egotism act as an analogue for society.[141] These Ginevras of Eliot's late fiction resemble what *Deronda*'s narrator cuttingly describes as a "feather-headed gentleman or lady whom in passing we regret to take as legal tender for a human being," yet whose "trivial sentences … petty standards … low suspicions … [and] loveless ennui" somehow become "our interpreters of the world" (558). Mrs Transome, Rosamond, and Gwendolen, whose feather-headed conventionality imposes upon their social relations with other characters, challenge the premise that realist narration can, and should, elevate any aspect of everyday life into a complex ethical subject. Instead, Eliot's late novels, culminating with Gwendolen in

[141] Leah Price argues that, in Victorian England, "what became less feminine in the course of becoming more serious was not the novel, but narrative discourse" (153). In this sense, my argument suggests that Eliot's characterisation of highly feminine, unserious, women in her late fiction registers a limitation with contemporary narrative discourse that her earlier essay on "lady novelists" overlooked.

Deronda, use conventional characterisation to imagine a realist form that represents ordinary social life by deploying narrators who operate like "passing" acquaintances.[142]

Mrs Transome, Rosamond, and Gwendolen are unusual in that they confound a well-established relationship between social rank and interiority in nineteenth-century novels. All three, despite being exemplary realist subjects in the sense of being "middle-class Victorian female character[s]" who have the "leisure to explore [their] own private feelings and wishes" (Schaffer 89), do not do so.[143] Instead, these conventional women represent a life defined by *Middlemarch*'s narrator as "that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse," (252) which constitutes "the lives of most girls" (*MM* 155). Their construction is anticipated by a network of similar characters in the earlier novels; Hetty Sorrel, Lucy Deane, Nancy Lammeter, Tessa, and Celia Brooke are clear examples of Eliot's novelistic investment in socially conventional women as a character type. The most conventional female characters in Eliot's late fiction are highly social but suspend the prototypically realist connection between individual actions and broader social experience by failing to form meaningful bonds with others.[144] Mrs Transome and Rosamond each have an uncharacteristically meaningful social encounter that nevertheless does not reveal any psychological depth. Meanwhile, Gwendolen and Daniel seek a meaningful social relationship in which their likeness to each other

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[142] My reading of the relationship between conventional characters and their narrators complicates Susan Sniader Lanser's argument about the authority of "remote" narrators in Eliot's late fiction (84).

[143] McAleavey claims that, in both Victorian fiction and Victorian society, "because marriage served as a cultural marker of stability and sociality, any disruption to its structure suggested a possible free-fall" (8). But Mrs Transome, Rosamond, and particularly Gwendolen all embody the stability of social conventionality while disrupting the conventional realist marriage plot.

[144] The characters I discuss in chapters four and five neither challenge nor fully enforce what Gage McWeeny describes as a preference for "the impersonal intimacy of strangers over those who are friends and acquaintances" (2) that "links the genre of the novel with a social impulse that is equal parts reclusive and promiscuous" (3).

ultimately fails as a source of intimacy because what they have in common is being just like everyone else.

Eliot's ethical repugnance for conventionality is so well-established that Kent Puckett refers to "the disembodied violence of the conventional expressed in the gossipy communal chorus that is so regular an aspect of Eliot's novels." Eliot's "best people," Puckett notes, are measured against "assorted slaves to fashion" (85):[145] "deep" individualists versus "shallow" fashionistas.[146] Mrs Transome's, Rosamond's, and Gwendolen's qualifications for Eliot's gossipy communal chorus are indicated by several common features: beauty, pride, self-control, witty conversation, an expensive education in ladylike accomplishments, riding horses,[147] secret reading of French novels, decorative needlework,[148] a dislike of tears, a liking for male homage, economic ignorance, a love of luxury, an acute awareness of rank,

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[145] James Buzard makes the same observation: "Eliot tends to represent her cultural insiders as enjoying the benefits but also exhibiting the limitations of a mainly subrational, animal existence of habit and custom" (290).

[146] When Grace E. Lavery tackles a definition of realism within its "overburdened" history of usage, she acknowledges that while Eliot "typifies the term," she also seems to be "temperamentally resistant to Romantic claims of either revolutionary or conservative types, but no less skeptical, finally, of the mid-Victorian celebration of 'reform' as a historical metanarrative" (xix). Conventional characterisation, I argue, is a significant and understudied site of this temperamental resistance to revolutionaries, conservatives, and reformers in Eliot's late novels.

[147] One early image for Gwendolen's vision of social success is "witching the world with her grace on horseback" (30). Mrs Transome and Rosamond are also passionate horsewomen: Mrs Transome "sat supremely well on horseback" (27), and "Rosamond, as we know, was fond of horseback" (547). *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea also likes being on horseback, but "she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it" (9–10). Dorothea describes riding as "pagan" and "sensuous" because riding represents the pleasures of an artificial social order she finds disappointing and shallow. Riding horses thus links Dorothea with her more conventional female counterparts, as well as indexing a fraught relationship, in all three novels, between the desire for freedom and independence and the pleasures of social display.

[148] It is typical of Gwendolen's especially self-reflexive conventionality and association with both conventional masculinity and the artifices of feminine self-presentation that she "had always disliked needlework" but "had taken to it with apparent zeal since her engagement, and now held a piece of white embroidery which, on examination, would have shown many false stitches" (268).

and a taste for exerting their will, particularly over social or economic subordinates.[149] Eliot's final three novels, however, pay close and ethically dispassionate attention to superficial socialites otherwise destined to be overlooked by serious readers, writers, and party attendees.

All three characters are also associated with sensitivity. Mrs Transome's former lover, Jermyn, cannot recognise or comprehend her "intricate meshes of sensitiveness" (*Felix* 97). Lydgate over-invests first in Rosamond's sensitivity, then in her insensibility, leading the narrator to remark that, "after her own fashion, [Rosamond] was sensitive enough, and took lasting impressions" (*MM* 556). These "intricate meshes" and "lasting impressions" are precursors to Gwendolen's bouts of superstitious dread. *Deronda* singles out sensitiveness more directly as a formal indicator of limited character development and as a social strategy for excusing (and elevating) conventional forms of selfishness and ambition:

> To her mamma and others her fits of timidity or terror were sufficiently accounted for by her "sensitiveness" or the "excitability of her nature"; but these explanatory phrases required conciliation with much that seemed to be blank indifference or rare self-mastery. Heat is a great agent and a useful word, but considered as a means of explaining the universe it requires an extensive knowledge of differences; and as a means of explaining character "sensitiveness" is in much the same predicament. (51)

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[149] Matthew Jockers' and Gabi Kirilloff's computational study of "trends and behavior associated with male and female characters in 3329 nineteenth century novels" (2) suggests a significant correlation between verbs and gendered agency in nineteenth-century fiction. Their top three verbs associated with male pronouns include "rode," while "wept" is one of the top three verbs associated with female pronouns. Eliot's conventional women, my research demonstrates, are one example that representations of social conventionality in Victorian novels do not necessarily correspond to the gender conventions of Victorian novels.

Gwendolen's character is constituted by the type of social conventionality presumed to be artificial, and which leads other characters to anticipate the revelation of a more authentic inner life.

The narrators' parodic use of sensitivity in each novel hints that diegetic speculations about the "real" characters of these conventional women are irrelevant to their actual narrative function. Eliot's final novels all conclude with their most conventional character seeking refuge in a social encounter that parodies the possibilities of sympathetic social bonds by almost achieving them, an echo of the irresolute epiphanies of Dickinson's poetic closure.[150] Like Dickinson's poetic speakers, Mrs Transome's, Rosamond's, and Gwendolen's external performances take precedence over their internal experiences; they each uncritically experience a crisis of confidence that undermines realism's thematic emphasis on hidden psychological depths and ethical potential.[151] The next two chapters argue that contemporary and indeed conventional readings of these realist texts privilege an interpretive framework that overlooks the influence of conventional characterisation on the novels' plots and fictional societies — a politically consequential oversight in Daniel's case, whose conversion to Zionism is comprehensively aligned with Gwendolen's social conventionality.

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[150] These encounters resist what McWeeny describes as "the novel's structural orientation toward conscripting every social encounter into plot-producing ends, producing significant 'connexion' out of the briefest of encounters" (24).

[151] Audrey Jaffe describes this "emphasis on disillusionment" as one of "the most commonly agreed-upon features said to define realist fiction," but these characters' disillusionments cannot advance the novels' plots or morally improve their respective characters (6).

4. Normative Youth and Normative Age

In *Felix Holt*, Arabella Transome's haughty social performance is accompanied by repeated references to the unremarkable misery and loneliness of old age. In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond becomes an embodiment of the youthful ambition haunting Mrs Transome's later years: to be socially important and widely admired. Usually, when the author of *Middlemarch* is accused of being infatuated with one of her characters (a surprisingly common critical speculation), the subject is Dorothea Brooke. The "peculiarities of Dorothea's character" (*MM* 10) have provoked some critics into claiming Eliot's modern Saint Teresa constitutes an abandonment of the realist ideal of comprehensive moral scrutiny and balanced representation. If any character exerts disproportionate force over *Middlemarch*, though, it is Rosamond, whose "refined manners" (148) compete with Dorothea's "lofty conception of the world" (8).[152] Rosamond, a woman who "diligently attended to that perfection of appearance, behaviour, sentiments, and all other elegancies" (156), also diligently and pragmatically turns rigged and rigid social circumstances to her advantage. The narrator's characterisation of Rosamond fluctuates, at least lexically, between the infatuation, disillusionment, alienation, and bewildered adjustment of expectations that characterise Lydgate's disappointing experience of courtship and romantic passion with such a coldly conventional type.

Both Rosamond's and Mrs Transome's narrative dénouements feature uncharacteristically intense and meaningful social encounters that nevertheless do not make them more psychologically accessible, nor do they alter their narrative trajectories. Mrs

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[152] Price calls this "Dorothea's poetic subplot" versus "Rosamond's prosaic one" (130). My argument also extends an observation Jonathan Farina makes about *Middlemarch*: "manner and character matter more in *Middlemarch* than do exactitude, scholarship, or scientific knowledge. Affable characters have a disinterested attitude to their knowledge — including even their self-knowledge" (145–46). While Farina's reference to Mr. Brooke associates affability with limited self-knowledge in Eliot's fiction, my analysis demonstrates that a preoccupation with manners operates more diversely across Eliot's character network.

Transome dies at Transome Court at an unspecified point in the novel's future: "Mrs Transome died there. Sir Maximus was at her funeral, and throughout that neighbourhood there was a silence about the past" (*Felix* 398). Rosamond "simply continue[s] to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem" (*MM* 781–82). Rosamond's narrative is a triumphant alternative to Mrs Transome's: Mrs Transome languishes miserably in the aftermath of a concealed affair and illegitimate child, while Rosamond gets the "reward" (782) of an ongoing and presumably fulfilling social life successfully playing the part of "so charming a wife" (781), despite a flirtation with Will Ladislaw and a brush with debt and scandal. While one dies in old age and the other lives on in perpetual youth, both characters exit their respective novels with the inflexibility of their social personae intact —both conventional characters represent, and reflect, the normative limits of Eliot's realist social worlds.

A parenthesis about Rosamond's response to Lydgate's gaze pointedly portrays her as a character actress. No deep character lurks beneath Rosamond's social performance; Rosamond *is* social performance:

> (Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.) (109)

The Rosamonds of fiction, as Lucy more viciously insists about the Ginevras of fiction, can be destructive social agents because their vapid ignorance and lack of inner consciousness renders them indestructible. Rosamond's musical prodigality (a recurring theme in *Deronda*) acts as a metaphor for this influential hollowness of character:

> It was almost startling, heard for the first time. A hidden soul seemed to be flowing forth from Rosamond's fingers; and so indeed it was, since souls live on in perpetual

> echoes, and to all fine expression there goes somewhere an originating activity, if it be only that of an interpreter. Lydgate was taken possession of, and began to believe in her as something exceptional. (150–51)[153]

This idea of Rosamond as a consummate performer of feeling who lacks the authentic "originating activity" of being able to feel deeply herself is associated throughout the novel with her similarly accomplished impersonation of "a perfect lady" (156).

Rosamond's infamous unpopularity and artificial extraordinariness extends from her aged counterpart. Mrs Transome, a "faded woman" (*Felix* 33) who "had been in her bloom before this century began" (27), also seems to lack an original inner life.[154] A description of Mrs Transome's physical appearance as she looks in the mirror references "a consciousness within her" that is never more clearly defined:

> she looked like an image faded, dried, and bleached by uncounted suns, rather than a breathing woman who had numbered the years as they passed, and had a consciousness within her which was the slow deposit of those ceaseless rolling years. (311)

The image of an inviolable surface recurs in a much later description of Mrs Transome as a woman who "had never seen behind the canvas with which her life was hung" (318). Mrs Transome lacks the moral self-acquaintance to communicate "the full truth about her[self] …

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[153] *Felix Holt* uses a musical metaphor to describe the exceptional depths of character in Esther that Lydgate mistakenly attributes to Rosamond: "This bright, delicate, beautiful-shaped thing that seemed most like a toy or ornament — some hand had touched the cords, and there came forth music that brought tears. Half a year before, Esther's dread of being ridiculous spread over the surface of her life; but the depth below was sleeping" (375).

[154] Mrs Transome's first name, Arabella, is used only twice in *Felix Holt*, on both occasions by her brother Reverend Lingon. The narratorial erasure of her first name, in favour of her married title, though not unusual in Victorian fiction, emphasises the extent to which her individual character is eclipsed by her social position and her age.

what was hidden under that outward life" (28) and thus remains an "image" rather than a "breathing woman."

The narrator frequently insinuates that Mrs Transome's "hidden depths" are, in fact, simply the pains of vanity and largely made up of expostulations like "'I am a hag!,'" an example of the "very sharp outline" that Mrs Transome is "accustomed to give her thoughts" (21). Rosamond's "less exquisite" thoughts, by contrast, remain decorously hidden beneath a paradoxically "deep" surface:

> eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite. (*MM* 104)

Whereas other characters in *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* think and behave most conventionally when they claim to be motivated by profound individual feelings,[155] mirrors signal Mrs Transome's and Rosamond's expert shallow social performances and the unsatisfactory interpretative processes they generate.[156]

The association of all three characters in this section with mirrors attests to their embodiment of Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's necessarily vague definition of "surface" as "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; …. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through" (9). By collapsing the distinction between introspection (looking

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[155] *Felix Holt*'s narrator comically references this in a description of Esther: "[i]f Esther had been less absorbed by supreme feelings, she would have been aware that she was an object of special notice" (365).

[156] Interestingly, Kathryn Bond Stockton describes Lucy Snowe's relationship to *Villette*'s more conventional characters as "mirror-attractions" that "also function vocationally for Lucy, letting her touch upon a series of vocations that may or may not be available to her — roles as bourgeois housewife, wealthy widow, kept coquette, actress, capitalist career woman, nun, and master-teacher" (122).

inside yourself), vanity (looking at yourself), and performance or display (being looked at), however, Eliot's conventional characters also embody the near impossibility of distinguishing between the hidden and the apprehensible in literary representation. Mrs Transome and Rosamond not only draw attention to the rigid social system of which they are such exemplary products: their psychological monotony and artificial social relationships also reveal, in novel ways, the conventional — and indeed shallow — social structures underpinning other characters' pursuits of intimacy.

Arabella Transome's Helpless Discontent

Felix Holt hinges on a joke that being "a radical" is much easier to claim as an identity than to enact as a political principle. Hilda Hollis summarises recent critical responses to the novel that describe Felix as "a conservative in disguise" (157) and locate an alternative avenue of "subversiveness" in Mrs Transome (155), suggesting that Mrs Transome is a locus of the novel's social and political critique: her failings are society's failings. I argue, however, that Mrs Transome's self-discontent does not straightforwardly critique or satirise the conventionality that causes it. Esther, in choosing to give up her claim to the Transome estates, is the only character in the novel whose actions might qualify as anything close to radical, in the sense of prioritising consistent principles over material advantages. Yet Esther's renunciation of wealth and position — like Felix's actions during the riot — is also fundamentally conservative in that it supports the rich and upholds the existing social order.[157] In fact, a major theme of the novel is that conventional reading practices rely on the premise of characters acting against convention. Mrs Transome exposes

[157] Harold Transome's character acts as an analogue for the indeterminate individual impulses that shape the novel's non-progressive politics: "he was addicted at once to rebellion and to conformity, and only an intimate personal knowledge could enable any one to predict where his conformity would begin" (93). Harold also exhibits several features of conventional characterisation, and his ultimate allegiance to conformity over rebellion is, like Daniel's, associated with colonial violence (see chapter 5).

the way in which conventionality forecloses the possibility of intimate personal knowledge. Her "helpless repressed bitterness of discontent" (335) and "piteous sensibilities" (33) act as a vexed cautionary tale, not about adultery, but about the kind of social conformity that makes a prison of one's own selfhood.[158]

Felix Holt begins with temporal precision on "the first of September, in the memorable year 1832" (13), a specificity that corresponds with, and draws attention to, the national significance of the 1832 Reform Act. Mrs Transome's life maps onto this broader narrative of national change. Her own history is introduced at the same moment yet with a contrasting vagueness about her age (the "uncounted suns," 16), which gestures to her comparative lack of historical specificity and a therefore inconsistent metaphorical relationship between her individual life and its sponsoring culture.[159] Her suns are counted via a rapid vacillation from the indeterminate point "between fifty and sixty" (14) to the more charged "far beyond fifty" (16) before eventually crystallising into "this fifty-sixth year of her life" (16). The novel is punctuated with several long asides about Mrs Transome's narrowness, misery, and its scandalous origin story, but like *Middlemarch*'s references to Rosamond's quietly domineering mild manners, these tautological remarks neither psychologically individuate Mrs Transome nor offer a consistent critique of society. Catherine Gallagher identifies *Felix Holt* as an industrial novel, which she defines partly as

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[158] Mrs Transome is an apposite fictional representation of the oppressive generality that José Esteban Muñoz describes as a "totalizing rendering of reality" that makes a "prison house" of "the here and now" (1).

[159] Although *Felix Holt* is set in 1832, it was written in the mid-century, when the mid-Victorian liberalism was, in Elaine Hadley's account:

> stoked by particular — and clearly still influential — practices of moralized cognition. … For the mid-Victorians, these cognitive practices still carried with them the Enlightenment promise of a better world but also the promise of a "good life," a phrase that ought to suggest in this period a yoking of disinterested virtue to worldly pleasure in the actions of the singular person. (10)

In this respect, Mrs Transome is a failure of the ideal liberal subject.

those with earnest insistence that fictional representation can accurately correspond to "social reality":

> the industrial novelists take no sly satisfaction in formal self-reflexiveness because their polemical purposes, the same purposes that lead them to question the novel's form, also lead them to make excessively naïve mimetic claims for it. Even as they probe the contested assumptions of their medium, they try to insist that their fictions are unmediated presentations of social reality. (xii)

Mrs Transome's function as a portrait of "small rigid habits of thinking and acting" (*Felix* 23) is inherently self-reflexive and undermines *Felix Holt*'s mimetic claims by drawing attention to the way the novel's political commentary is mediated through literary conventions.

The narrator's early portrait of Mrs Transome syntactically buries the hypothetical and never-realised "full truth" of her character under the "withered rubbish" of attractive accomplishments:

> When she was young she had been thought wonderfully clever and accomplished, and had been rather ambitious of intellectual superiority — had secretly picked out for private reading the higher parts of dangerous French authors. … Miss Lingon had had a superior governess, who held that a woman should be able to write a good letter, and to express herself with propriety on general subjects. And it is astonishing how effective this education appeared in a handsome girl, who sat supremely well on horseback, sang and played a little, painted small figures in water-colors, had a naughty sparkle in her eyes when she made a daring quotation, and an air of serious dignity when she recited something from her store of correct opinions. But however such a stock of ideas may be made to tell in elegant society, and during a few seasons in town, no amount of bloom and beauty can make them a perennial source of interest. … If she had only been more haggard and less majestic, those who had

> glimpses of her outward life might have said she was a tyrannical, griping harridan, with a tongue like a razor. No one said exactly that; but they never said anything like the full truth about her, or divined what was hidden under that outward life — a woman's keen sensibility and dread, which lay screened behind all her petty habits and narrow notions, as some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart may lie crouching behind withered rubbish. (26–28)

This ostensible character portrait begins by associating Mrs Transome with the "correct opinions" of "elegant society" before concluding with a disembodied and imprecise image of "some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart" that *may* exist behind them. Even the link between Mrs Transome's "private reading" of "dangerous French authors" and her actual extramarital affair is exaggeratedly generic (27). Her "sensibility and dread" is definitionally "hidden" and "screened," rather than indicating any full character development that may be in progress.[160]

Mrs Transome is the first character the novel introduces, and yet the great crisis of her life begins with a dispiriting and imprecise portrait of commonplace misery. In the novel's final and most climactic social encounter, Mrs Transome illustrates a distinct function of conventional characters within Eliot's realist character systems: they cannot be subject to profound moral scrutiny. Mrs Transome's explosive confrontation with her son, leading to a desperate vigil outside Esther's door, begins with the characteristic line: "[s]he was neither more nor less empty of joy than usual" (382–83). Despite proceeding from an obvious cause straight out of sensation fiction (infidelity and an illegitimate son), the effect of these events

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[160] In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's resentment of feminine "education" echoes the trash heap of Mrs Transome's interiority: "the fad of drawing plans! What was life worth — what great faith was possible when the whole effect of one's actions could be withered up into such parched rubbish as that?" (34). Mrs Transome's characterisation embodies Dorothea's dread of the ways society and its conventions might pollute her individual sense of purpose.

on Mrs Transome is only ever articulated in the vague terms of "dread," "misery," and "suffering." Esther is initially fascinated by Mrs Transome's regal performance of psychological shallowness, "the threadbare tissue of this majestic lady's life" (384).[161]

Mrs Transome's longing for intimacy, first for Harold to comfort her, then to be comforted by Esther, is narrated as a temporary descent into gothic madness, during which she is haunted by the ghosts of human affection while attempting to cling to the "truer consciousness" of solitary self-control:

> For two hours Mrs Transome's mind hung on what was hardly a hope — hardly more than the listening for a bare possibility. She began to create the sounds that her anguish craved to hear — began to imagine a footfall, and a hand upon the door. Then, checked by continual disappointment, she tried to rouse a truer consciousness by rising from her seat and walking to her window, where she saw streaks of light moving and disappearing on the grass, and heard the sound of bolts and closing doors. (391)[162]

The narrator's free indirect discourse as Mrs Transome contemplates Harold's hardness clearly indicates that this is not a transformation scene: "[s]he was not penitent. She had borne too hard a punishment" (391). Her experience of consolation with Esther is an instance of meaningful, longed-for socialising that does not result in any particular narrative outcome. The encounter is represented as a leap of faith whose purpose for either character is never explained:

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[161] It is also characteristic of a novel so invested in the power that social convention exerts on character and behaviour that Harold's version of the same crisis leads to the following reflection: "well, he had acted so that he could defy any one to say he was not a gentleman" (388).

[162] Rosamond's experience with Will is narrated similarly, incorporating a gothic excess unusual within the novel and unprecedented in its narration of Rosamond: "poisoned weapons"; "terrible existence"; "terrified recoil"; "lash"; "burnt and bitten" (*MM* 732–33).

> The proud woman yearned for the caressing pity that must dwell in that young bosom. She opened her door gently, but when she had reached Esther's she hesitated. She had never yet in her life asked for compassion — had never thrown herself in faith on an unproffered love. And she might have gone on pacing the corridor like an uneasy spirit without a goal, if Esther's thought, leaping toward her, had not saved her from the need to ask admission. (391)

The serendipitous "thought, leaping towards her" parodies the transcendentalist understanding of sympathy discussed in chapter one.

Mrs Transome receives, almost miraculously, something "yearned for" in the precise moment of longing. The scene thereby draws attention to both Mrs Transome's unresolvable character and Esther's mistaken impression of her exceptionalism: "through all Mrs Transome's perfect manners, there pierced some undefinable indications of a hidden anxiety much deeper … young speculation is always stirred by discontent for which there is no obvious cause" (319). This "young speculation" is articulated as an unfinished sentence: "Mr Transome had always had his beetles, but Mrs Transome—?" (317). Esther's dash stands in for the question mark that perpetually hovers over Mrs Transome's interiority.[163] This once-in-a-lifetime intimate moment reveals how little Esther and Mrs Transome will ever know of each other, and how little it matters.

Esther's desire to support and comfort Mrs Transome is pitched against the harrowing warning of Mrs Transome's shallow life (and selfhood), which "seemed to have come as a last vision to urge her toward the life where the draughts of joy sprang from the unchanging

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[163] As Anne Toner notes, unfinished sentences like this are rare in Eliot's late fiction: "[t]he novelistic trend towards the suppression of variant marks of ellipsis can be seen in microcosm in the writing of George Eliot. Ellipsis points are a common feature of her early writing, but they attenuate as her career progresses" (126).

fountains of reverence and devout love" (392). The narrator claims that "all the more [Esther] longed to still the pain of this heart that beat against hers" (392), a line that ultimately proves to describe a temporary social obligation (what Talia Schaffer might describe as an act of caregiving) rather than a genuine affectionate impulse. Esther does not want to comfort Mrs Transome more than she wants to escape Transome Court and marry Felix. Mrs Transome, in her turn, does not want affection and comfort more than she wishes to remain in her old home and keep her pride and position intact.

Felix Holt establishes an ethical binary (made literal in the image of the riot) between conformist (bad) and non-conformist (good) social behaviour that Mrs Transome's isolated conventionality destabilises. Mrs Transome ostensibly offers a straightforward morality tale about what she calls "the misery of being a woman" (336), the emotional dead-end of social conformity and egoistic motivations. Both her controlled behaviour ("perfect manners" [319]) and unguarded outbursts ("she was inclined to lash him with indignation, to scorch him with the words that were just the fit names for his doings" [98]) are performances whose value lies in the extent of their effect on others. However, her wish that Harold had "never been born" (98) is not an ethical response to her affair and its consequences, nor to the society that enforced them, but the wish that the social advantages of her past had lived up to their promise. Mrs Transome's discontent is made up of rebellious impulses that are produced by her socially conventional characterisation, leaving no scope for an alternative to the novel's existing social order.

Rosamond Vincy's Self-Contented Grace

Rosamond Vincy's characterisation as "a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability" is qualified by *Middlemarch*'s narrator's ironic reference to "general consent" (252). Rosamond's commitment to social conformity produces a compound of qualities that makes her "the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date" (252) and thereby an

analogy for the irresistibility of normative social values. Lydgate's introduction anticipates the way his passion for Rosamond will reveal his own conventional passions — rather than, as some critics still claim of the novel's ending, anticipating an error of judgement that imposes conventional social life upon him: "Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world" (141). Much later, the narrator references their own classification of Lydgate's commonness:

> In the rest of practical life he walked by hereditary habit; half from that personal pride and unreflecting egoism which I have already called commonness, and half from that naivete which belonged to preoccupation with favourite ideas. (327)

The shallow and reflective surface of Rosamond's character acts as a mirror for the force of conventionality as it operates in others, the "ordinary men of the world." The novel's repeated references to Rosamond as "infantine" are a clue to her strategically unformed character, rather than a reference to individual naivety, ignorance, or lack of morality. Rosamond is a literary device who draws attention to the "commonness" of others, the operations of which are the major theme of *Middlemarch*.

Like Ginevra's, Rosamond's artifice (the "expensive substitute for simplicity" [407]), cultivated "pretty good-tempered air of unconsciousness" (604), and theatrical performance of ladylike grace introduce a campish excess into *Middlemarch*'s social landscape. The sardonic line in the narrator's farewell to Rosamond — "as the years went on [Lydgate] opposed her less and less, whence Rosamond concluded that he had learned the value of her opinion" (782) — indicates both Rosamond's limited self-awareness and the chimerical status of socially conventional opinions. Indeed, the inherent performance and publicness of Rosamond's character is linked to her place in the *Middlemarch* social pecking order from the moment of her narrative entry:

> The Miss Vincy who had the honor of being Mr Chichely's ideal was of course not present; for Mr Brooke, always objecting to go too far, would not have chosen that his nieces should meet the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer, unless it were on a public occasion. (83)

Rosamond is thus linked economically, socially, and characteristically to public occasions. By the novel's end, she has achieved sufficient social mobility to relocate to London, away from those who gossip about her, while Mrs Transome is doomed to spend her life at Transome Hall, among decorously disapproving neighbours.

Self-discipline is the private counterpart to public social behaviour in all three of Eliot's final novels. Rosamond's interiority is described as a rehearsal space for conventional socialising, where she cultivates "from morning till night her own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness, with sometimes the not unwelcome addition of a more variable external audience in the numerous visitors of the house" (157). Rosamond's engagement is sealed by an apparent departure from this internal and external "management":

> When [Lydgate] rose he was very near to a lovely little face set on a fair long neck which he had been used to see turning about under the most perfect management of self-contented grace. But as he raised his eyes now he saw a certain helpless quivering which touched him quite newly, and made him look at Rosamond with a questioning flash. At this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old: she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would. That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feather-touch: it shook flirtation into love. Remember that the ambitious man who was looking at those forget-me-nots under the water was very warm-hearted and rash … Rosamond had

never been spoken to in such tones before. I am not sure that she knew what the words were: but she looked at Lydgate and the tears fell over her cheeks. (282–83)

Lydgate's impression of Rosamond's moment of naturalness, however, is conveyed through free indirect discourse that recalls the way Lydgate was "taken possession of" by Rosamond's music.[164] When the narrator interjects with the reminder that "the ambitious man who was looking at those forget-me-nots under the water was very warm-hearted and rash" (282), Lydgate's belief in the naturalness of Rosamond's performance of her engagement is as much the product of credulous rashness as his hasty decision to propose to her.

Two aspects of the scene stand out. First, the contradiction between "at this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old" and the description that follows it: "she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would." The self-consciously florid narration of Rosamond's beautiful eyes suffuses the image with artificiality, both in the clumsy simile (suggesting that the image of water on a blue flower might come from Rosamond's own "correct little speech" [604]) and its similarity to many, more scathing, descriptions of Rosamond that have gone before.[165] Second, the strange comment that "Rosamond had never been spoken to in such tones before. I am not sure that she knew what the words were." We have already been told that Rosamond

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[164] Manfred Pfister, describing character types in Restoration drama, notes that "the contrast between nature and affectation is reflected in that between natural and playful elegance and the affected artificiality of narcissistic dandies and vain fops" (169). Rosamond seems to encapsulate a successful performance of the former artfully concealing the latter, and Pfister's observation reinforces the theatricality of Rosamond's character that recalls Ginevra's school play performance and resurfaces in Gwendolen's character acting and actual interest in going on the stage.

[165] A description of Rosamond's training for social performances also ironises her artificiality by comparing her to a flower: "[s]he was admitted to be the flower of Mrs Lemon's school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female — even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage" (89).

"did not distinguish flirtation from love, either in herself or in another" (251), and so the line gestures to her incomprehension of Lydgate's emotional transformation from flirtation into love, the newness of her contact with passionate feelings, and therefore her loss of control over a social encounter. Nevertheless, the narrator's hesitant "I am not sure she knew what the words were" allows Lydgate's unnarrated declaration of love to roll off Rosamond's character-constituting surface as demurely as her tears. "Rosamond had never been spoken to in such tones before" characterises the scene as exceptional and anticipates Rosamond's encounter with Dorothea at the end of *Middlemarch* by signalling her passive approach to social relationships and tendency to alienate others.[166] Rosamond's emotional role in this more conventionally life-altering social encounter, and familiar novelistic plot point, is narrated from a distance — the narrator looks at Rosamond looking at Lydgate. The narrator's position as a casual onlooker metatextually replicates Rosamond's narrative role: to look at herself with "self-contented grace" and to be looked at by others who do not know her well.[167]

Middlemarch concludes with an intense, uncharacteristic, once-in-a-lifetime and never-to-be-repeated social encounter. The scene between Rosamond and Dorothea has remarkable structural similarities to the scene between Mrs Transome and Esther.

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[166] The scene also restages a very similar encounter between Esther Lyon and Felix Holt: "[h]er eyes filled instantly, and a great tear rolled down … Was there ever more awkward speaking? — or any behavior less like that of the graceful, self-possessed Miss Lyon, whose phrases were usually so well turned, and whose repartees were so ready?" (190).

[167] McWeeny gestures to the extreme social conventionality of Rosamond's and Lydgate's engagement in a reading that is both astute and somewhat disingenuous:

> The most attractive man and woman in town by the Middlemarcher's lights anyway, the inevitability of their coupling is phrased by the novel as having all the surprise and depth of the high school prom king and queen dating one another. Which is to say, no surprise at all, given that their prom-like coronation depends upon their acceptance of the structures with which the social system has already made a match between them inevitable. (88)

The fact that Rosamond's and Lydgate's marriage does meet with disapproval and obstacles, however trivial, is one of the novel's ways of indicating that rebellion and resistance are themselves aspects of conventionality.

Rosamond's moment of meaningful socialising occurs after an alienating and crushing argument with someone she knows better than Dorothea: Will Ladislaw.[168] Rosamond reflects on her encounter with Dorothea using the same evasive formulation with which Mrs Transome's troubles are introduced: the latter's "sharp inward struggle" (*Felix* 18) is reincarnated as "the sharpest crisis of [Rosamond's] life" (*MM* 782). Following Dorothea's visit to Rosamond, *Middlemarch*'s narrator makes an unambiguous moral assessment about the scene's two cast members:

> With her usual tendency to over-estimate the good in others, [Dorothea] felt a great outgoing of her heart towards Rosamond for the generous effort which had redeemed her from suffering, not counting that the effort was a reflex of her own energy. (750)[169]

Once again, Rosamond is characterised as a reflective surface. Rosamond herself articulates the same realistically social (and formally realist) understanding that Dorothea is *Middlemarch*'s (and Middlemarch's) "preferred woman":

> Rosamond, wrapping her soft shawl around her as she walked towards Dorothea, was inwardly wrapping her soul in cold reserve. … Dorothea was not only the "preferred" woman, but had also a formidable advantage in being Lydgate's benefactor; and to poor Rosamond's pained confused vision it seemed that this Mrs Casaubon — this woman who predominated in all things concerning her — must have come now with the sense of having the advantage, and with animosity prompting her to use it. Indeed, not Rosamond only, but any one else, knowing the outer facts of the case, and not the

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[168] Of course, Rosamond does not really know Will Ladislaw (or anyone) very well, just as Mrs Transome does not know anybody well, including her son.

[169] Deborah Epstein Nord recapitulates the narrator's assessment when she describes Dorothea's and Rosamond's respective relationships to Will as "the difference between Dorothea's authentic, apparently selfless attachment and Rosamond's duplicitous and superficial interest" (40).

> simple inspiration on which Dorothea acted, might well have wondered why she came. (744–45)

The narrator characterises Dorothea's laudably unconventional motives by aligning Rosamond's suspicions with those of "any one else." "Soft" is a term used repeatedly in *Felix Holt* to describe the allure of luxurious and well-bred ease, and here, in Rosamond, the association between soft outer furnishings and inner coldness and impenetrability corresponds with her association with "outer facts" rather than inward "inspiration." Though an encounter in which "pride was broken down between these two" (748) does ensue, the binary categories the narrator assigns each character remain intact.

Rosamond's pursuit of social intimacy and the "crisis" that produces it are described as an uncharacteristic one-off:

> It was a newer crisis in Rosamond's experience than even Dorothea could imagine: she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and in this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with shrinking aversion and dread, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her. (747–48)

Rosamond reacts to Dorothea's support as such "a strange unexpected manifestation of feeling" that it "made her soul totter." Rosamond does, however, know that Dorothea's love for Will has prompted the visit:

> It is really the most charming romance: Mr Casaubon jealous, and foreseeing that there was no one else whom Mrs Casaubon would so much like to marry, and no one who would so much like to marry her as a certain gentleman; and then laying a plan to spoil all by making her forfeit her property if she did marry that gentleman — and

> then — and then — and then — oh, I have no doubt the end will be thoroughly romantic (563).

Rosamond's insight into Dorothea's secret has nothing to do with interpersonal intimacy or social perceptiveness. Rosamond is a poor reader of complex individual feeling but an excellent reader of conventional novel plots. Her most "human" encounter thus becomes a means of affirming her character's self-reflexive fictionality.

Dorothea's and Rosamond's encounter prioritises touch over language: "poor Dorothea, in her palpitating anxiety, could only seize her language brokenly" (749). Eventually, Dorothea's "sorrow" manifests in physical intensity and violence that also obstructs Rosamond's powers of speech:

> [Dorothea] stopped in speechless agitation, not crying, but feeling as if she were being inwardly grappled. … Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own — hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined, aspect — could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck. (749)

This is the only scene in the novel in which Rosamond breaks from her characteristic "cold reserve" to spontaneously initiate physical touch. Her kiss on Dorothea's forehead is a marked contrast to her role in Lydgate's dread of "a future without affection" and passive submission to his embraces: "Rosamond obeyed him, and he took her on his knee, but in her secret soul she was utterly aloof from him" (610). This scene reveals a version of Rosamond that is intensely present and "involuntarily" affectionate. Yet without offering any further

evidence of her "secret soul," it severs the relationship between human intimacy and psychological revelation that *Middlemarch* otherwise seems to endorse and rely upon.[170]

Rachel Ablow makes a detailed analysis of the same scene that also notes its one-sidedness:

> This scene constitutes a key turning point in the novel, both in terms of the plot and in terms of its ethical agenda. Dorothea's successful act of sympathy requires that she set aside her own interests in order to help remedy the suffering of another. That generosity is fully rewarded by the information she receives as a result, information that paves the way for her to be reunited with Will. From the perspective of Dorothea, therefore, this scene represents a perfectly sympathetic moment, one in which selflessness is met with selflessness, and a concern for another is rewarded in ways that could never have been predicted. From Rosamond's perspective, by contrast, the scene looks quite different: she is not altered by the encounter with Dorothea. (1161)

Ablow, like *Middlemarch*'s narrator, valorises Dorothea's character and sympathetic impulses over Rosamond's, but her reading of the scene also makes clear that for Dorothea, the scene is productively transactional: effort is met with reward. Ablow inadvertently draws attention to the fact that Rosamond in turn gets very little. She may not be altered by the encounter with Dorothea, but her act of impulsive generosity (arguably both more impulsive and more generous that Dorothea's pilgrimage to the Lydgates') does not meet with a similarly concrete reward, nor does Rosamond appear to expect one.

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[170]Consider, for instance, the description of Farebrother's confession of his love for Mary, and its effect on Fred Vincy: "Fred was moved quite newly. Some one highly susceptible to the contemplation of a fine act has said, that it produces a sort of regenerating shudder through the frame, and makes one feel ready to begin a new life. A good degree of that effect was just then present in Fred Vincy" (636).

Ablow is unsparing in her description of Rosamond. She is, according to Ablow, "a perfect egotist whose sole interest in others involves what they can do for her. Her flirtation with Will is only one of a long list of her crimes, final proof of her inability or unwillingness to imagine the feelings of others" (1160). Ablow's account of Rosamond's selfishness echoes a similar statement made by the narrator in the preceding scene with Will:

> Shallow natures dream of an easy sway over the emotions of others, trusting implicitly in their own petty magic to turn the deepest streams … [Rosamond] knew that Will had received a severe blow, but she had been little used to imagining other people's states of mind except as material cut into shape by her own wishes; and she believed in her own power to soothe or subdue. (731)

Critics take pleasure in cataloguing the narration of Rosamond's "crimes" without considering the narratological function of her shallow nature and petty magic.[171]

Like those about Ginevra, critical responses to Rosamond tend to be characterised by hostile language.[172] Stefanie Markovits encapsulates the way that hating and fearing

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[171] Puckett also closely analyses this scene and the difficulties it raises: "Rosamond's development, which seems initially to lead toward the development of the sort of disinterested moral consciousness that *Middlemarch* privileges, falls back into a strategic egoism" (103). Like myself, Puckett recognises that there must be some broader implication to the scene's "exceptional" act of representation:

> That Rosamond maintains the hard shell of her narcissism and lives to tell the tale threatens the usual developmental sequence of Eliot's plots. … *Middlemarch* at once counts on and denies the conventions of the classic realist novel but also to Rosamond's special exemption from the trajectory of style and shame that we have seen as so usual within Eliot's novels. Such an exemption leads us to believe that, as she escapes from a developmental logic that is otherwise inexorable, she also plays a more than usual structural part within the system that is *Middlemarch*. What is that function? How, now, to account for it? (104)

[172] McWeeny, describing Rosamond's "supercilious indifference," notes that "Rosamond has tended to be neglected (or treated) by critics as one of the novel's least likeable characters" (87). His account of her "socially vitiated qualities" (and Lydgate's) comes closest to mine in arguing that "while the narrator's irony highlights Rosamond's mere type-ishness, those within Middlemarch find her all the more attractive for her performance and incarnation of a type. Like the felt force of 'all ordinary life,' the apprehension of Rosamond as a kind of sociological entity carries its own charge, one that makes the sociological affectively real within the novel" (99). McWeeny also claims, however, that "the demise of Lydgate and Rosamond's shared sense of being exempt from the social forms of Middlemarch render *Middlemarch*'s narrator all the more secure in its own claims to

Rosamond is routinely attributed to George Eliot the writer as much as to *Middlemarch*'s narrator:

> Arguably, Rosamond is the most effective agent — almost demonically so — in all of George Eliot's writing. Her passive aggressive purposiveness represents a nightmarish realization of the kind of novelistic activity George Eliot seems to be advocating: it is habitual and petit-bourgeois in the extreme. Perhaps this helps to explain the intensity of George Eliot's hatred of her. (790)

Markovits recognises that there is a relationship between Rosamond's characterisation and Eliot's formal and thematic preoccupation with the "habitual and petit-bourgeois," and she suggests that Rosamond is an articulation of the fear that focused attention on conventional social life might cause realism itself to be nightmarishly transformed into a silly novel by a lady novelist. I contend, however, that Rosamond's characterisation represents a mode of "novelistic activity" that aims to realise normative subjects by subjecting them to less moral judgement (or intense hatred). It is Rosamond's commitment to a character act, rather than her "passive aggressive purposiveness," that distinguishes her function in *Middlemarch*.

The most decisive assessment the narrator makes about Rosamond's social situation occurs towards the end of the novel, when the narrator offers a rare commentary on Rosamond's "thoughts":

> He would have made, she thought, a much more suitable husband for her than she had found in Lydgate. No notion could have been falser than this, for Rosamond's

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represent, and manage, the complex social environments that spell the frustration of these two characters" (102), and he insists that Rosamond functions as the novel's "primary exhibit" in an ethical "case against an oversensitivity to social form" (95). I am arguing instead that Rosamond, particularly given her relationship to other conventional characters in Eliot's novels, actually poses a sincere challenge to conventional realist narration and its management of a novel's social environment.

> discontent in her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance, and not to the nature of her husband. (709)[173]

Rosamond is presented here as a discontented aspirant to masculine mastery in a contradiction of Lydgate's (and Rosamond's own) insistence on her hyper-femininity. In this respect, her aggressive imitation of feminine contentment resembles what I described as Ginevra's drag performance in the previous chapter. The association between conventional characterisation and artificial femininity is also narratively enacted in a suggestive distinction between Rosamond and "those helpless girls" (almost as if to say, actual girls):

> But Rosamond was not one of those helpless girls who betray themselves unawares, and whose behavior is awkwardly driven by their impulses, instead of being steered by wary grace and propriety. Do you imagine that her rapid forecast and rumination concerning house-furniture and society were ever discernible in her conversation, even with her mamma? On the contrary, she would have expressed the prettiest surprise and disapprobation if she had heard that another young lady had been detected in that immodest prematureness — indeed, would probably have disbelieved in its possibility. For Rosamond never showed any unbecoming knowledge… Think

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[173] Rosamond's conversation with Mary is also a rare instance of her "less exquisite" inner thoughts being narrated alongside an exterior conversation: "Rosamond thought, 'Poor Mary, she takes the kindest things ill.' Aloud she said, 'What have you been doing lately?'" (106). This dialogue anticipates the more extensive use of the same device in Gwendolen's conversation with Grandcourt: "[i]n a letter to Eliot written while he was reading the proofs of *Deronda*, William Blackwood noted that Gwendolen's 'running mental reflections after each few words she has said to Grandcourt' were 'as far as I know a new device in reporting a conversation.'" (Shaw 248n26). That the "new" literary device to report Gwendolen's artificial social performance has its origins in Rosamond's elusive character representation is further evidence that the challenges of conventional characterisation influenced the form, as well as the themes, of Eliot's late realism. The scene with Mary is the first of only three times in the novel that a sentence begins with "Rosamond thought" and the only time the "thought" indicates Rosamond's actual thoughts, rather than the narrator's commentary on her misreadings: "Rosamond thought that no one could be more in love than she was" (*MM* 331); "Rosamond thought she knew perfectly well why Mr. Ladislaw disliked the Captain: he was jealous, and she liked his being jealous" (547).

> no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary. (251–52)

This is an illustration of what Lydgate later describes as Rosamond's "negative character" (613). Lydgate is aligned with the narrator in thinking of Rosamond as "negative," less in the sense of having a "bad" character than in the sense of having no character. The relationship between Rosamond's generic uninterestingness and bad (because absent) character is encapsulated by Farebrother's opinion of her as "rather uninteresting — a little too much the pattern-card of the finishing-school" (602). Rosamond's lack of both "impulses" and "wicked plots" encapsulates her conventionality and the way "grace and propriety" evade moral scrutiny in realist narration.

Eliot's portrayal of Rosamond and Mrs Transome as too conventional to be worth interpreting exposes a related interpretative assumption that social conventionality doesn't need to be read, that it goes without saying. In this respect, *Felix Holt*'s and *Middlemarch*'s experiments with the construction of uninteresting normativity are comparable to Toni Morrison's formal experiment with the social construction of race in "Recitatif" (1983). Despite being thematically preoccupied with the racial difference between its two protagonists, Morrison's text removes all racial markers from its narration. Amy Shuman and Robyn Warhol have argued that Morrison's text repudiates epiphany and "substitutes shame for the sympathy readers are ordinarily supposed to experience in reading progressive narratives about otherness" (1011). Like Eliot's final novels, "Recitatif" concludes with an emotional social encounter between two characters that is nevertheless not a "'relatable' epiphany" and does not produce sincere or lasting intimacy, or any other narrative development (1011). Readers, Shuman and Warhol claim, are affectively shamed into a recognition of their own "assumption that race shouldn't need to be read, because — as the narrator's silences imply — it supposedly goes without saying" (1011). In a similar way,

Eliot's two conventional characters reveal readerly assumptions taken for granted in non-progressive narratives about likeness.[174] Eliot's novels, which are about ordinary social life, also use their third-person narrator's silences about the inner lives of Mrs Transome and Rosamond to undermine the sympathy readers "ordinarily" expect from engaging with realist characters. In both of Eliot's novels, social norms are as hard to interpret in practice as they are easy to act on or reject in principle. Chapter five turns to Gwendolen Harleth, whose conventional characterisation more directly reflects "the logic of sameness that structures both conventional femininity and whiteness" (Chatterjee 4). Gwendolen's relationship with Daniel creates a connection between failures of intimacy and epiphany, social conformity, and nationalist ideology, transforming a double plot ostensibly about difference into one that exposes a violent form of likeness.

[174] My reference to Morrison's short story is also a gesture to Ronjaunee Chatterjee's proposal that reading nineteenth-century literary texts in dialogue with contemporary ones can recalibrate critical reading habits in Victorian studies. This "critical disruption," she proposes, "can help us challenge received ideas of literary history as well as neoliberal accounts of the subject in the present" (3).

5. What Happens to Gwendolen Harleth

This chapter's title is a reference to Margaret Loewen Reimer's persuasive theory about "what happened to Gwendolen Harleth": that her stepfather, Captain Davilow, sexually abused her as a child.[175] Reimer's argument relies on a logic about realist representation, however, that Gwendolen's character functions to destabilise: that intimate personal knowledge can illuminate individual actions, beliefs, and motivations.[176] While Gwendolen tends to invite psychological readings that treat her consciousness more like that of a real person than of a literary character, I propose that Gwendolen's characterisation is defined by its obvious fictionality and limited correspondence to realistic individual psychology. What happens to Gwendolen Harleth is that she tries, and fails, to make friends with Daniel Deronda. Anna Henchman describes the "multiplot novel's focus on the persistent misperception of one's own centrality" as one of the "recognized norms of the novel" (2). *Daniel Deronda*'s narrator savagely ascribes this misperception to Gwendolen: "could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant?" (100). Gwendolen's small consciousness is ostensibly displaced by Daniel's commitment to Zionism. I argue that Gwendolen, rather than a traumatised psychological construction, is a conventional character whose conventionality negates the possibility of deep intimacy yet ironically reveals that she and Daniel are both social conformists, and just like each other.

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[175] Judith Wilt's earlier and slightly more oblique article reads the origin story of Gwendolen's status as "the spoiled child" in the same way, describing Gwendolen's relationship with her stepfather exhibiting "the cankered sorrows of the real world" (316).

[176] Doreen Thiereuf's argument that Rosamond's miscarriage is an abortion plot is similarly persuasive, but also similarly responds to Rosamond's conventional characterisation as an invitation to excavate psychological depth.

Gwendolen's relationship with Daniel exemplifies an overlap between the ambivalence of conventional realist characters and what Homi Bhabha calls "the ambivalent margin of the nation-space" (4). Conventional characters, as chapters two, three, and four have demonstrated, are constructed from the same combination of cultural significance, claims to social representation, and "conceptual indeterminacy" Bhabha associates with the idea of nation itself (2).[177] Ginevra's cosmopolitanism and Mrs Transome's Toryism gesture to a connection between conventional character and the combination of conformity and domination inherent in nationalist (and imperialist) ideology.[178] Conformity and domination are, in Eliot's final novel, desires that operate independently of individual feeling, history, or experience and which therefore cannot be interrogated through psychologically individuated characterisation.[179] Daniel's preparations to undertake a violent colonial project are narrated with the same emphasis on external self-presentation that informs the novel's representations of Gwendolen's social life. Gwendolen's conventional character thus becomes a mirror of, rather than a foil to, Daniel's Zionist conversion.

Stefanie Markovits is one of many critics who sees the novel's representation of Zionism as a departure from realism. The "heroine and hero of the story," Markovits writes,

> actually represent not only two kinds of plot — those of realism and romance — but also, and more importantly, two kinds of activity. … George Eliot sacrifices any potential for realistic progress when she scapegoats Gwendolen, leaving her behind to suffer in an outdated England while Daniel departs for Palestine and the future

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[177] And also, therefore, as having a more complicated relationship with their respective novels' representation of "provincial life," which John Plotz has described as a *Villette*-esque Choseville, "desirable for its capacity to locate its inhabitants at once in a trivial (but chartable) Nowheresville and in a universal (but strangely ephemeral) everywhere" (102).

[178] See, for instance, Buzard's analysis of *Villette*'s "Outlandish Nationalism" (245–278).

[179] Grandcourt's characterisation is another example of this.

> …[and] the possibilities of romantic political idealism, of make-believe as a leaven for doing. Ultimately, one's feelings about the success of the novel's action will depend in part on one's willingness to see beyond realism. (793)

I propose instead that Daniel's Zionism is as realist as Gwendolen's conventionality, and that the novel contains only one kind of plot and one kind of protagonist. *Deronda's* representation of Palestine, referred to simply as "the East," relies on the "make-believe beginning" (to quote the novel's opening epigraph) that Palestinian society does not exist. Daniel's nationalist scheme is anticipated not only by his own childhood preference for leadership over scholarship — "'I don't want to be a Porson or a Leibnitz,' said Daniel. 'I would rather be a great leader, like Pericles or Washington'" (143) — but also by Gwendolen's ability to rule over her "domestic empire" like a "common sort" of man (32).[180]

My reading of Daniel's similarity to Gwendolen picks up from the novel's notorious repetitiveness, which Nicholas Dames describes as "a luxury of reiteration" (151). A remark about Daniel's youth, during which "reserve" about his social position acts as "a check on his naturally strong bent toward the formation of intimate friendship" (143), emphasises the novel's cyclical plot with a reminder that the social caution characterising Gwendolen's attempt at intimate friendship with Daniel in adulthood resembles Daniel's own childhood. Daniel exits the novel in pursuit of an imperialist childhood fantasy, while Gwendolen's childhood imperialism functions as the novel's initial "make-believe beginning":

> I remember having seen the same assiduous, apologetic attention awarded to persons who were not at all beautiful or unusual. … Some of them were a very common sort of men. … Hence I am forced to doubt whether even without her potent charm and

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[180] Daniel's Zionism is a response to the same egoistic question Gwendolen repeatedly asks him — "what can *I* do?" (374, my emphasis) rather than, as Amanda Anderson claims, "a desire for community at a higher level" (*Bleak Liberalism* 76).

> peculiar filial position Gwendolen might not still have played the queen in exile, if only she had kept her inborn energy of egoistic desire, and her power of inspiring fear as to what she might say or do. However, she had the charm, and those who feared her were also fond of her; the fear and the fondness being perhaps both heightened by what may be called the iridescence of her character — the play of various, nay, contrary tendencies. … [A] moment is a room wide enough for the loyal and mean desire, for the outlast of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance. (32–33)

The "possibility of winning empire" (51) best consolidates Gwendolen's otherwise "hazy" (31) ambitions, which she later describes as the desire to escape "the distasteful petty empire of her girlhood" (366).[181] Conventionality, formations of intimacy, and nation building are, in *Deronda*, all make-believe beginnings.[182]

The passage prophecies the masculine violence Gwendolen will be subjected to in her marriage, as well as her experience of Grandcourt's drowning, which does lead to "a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance." This narrative foresight, however, belies the fact that Daniel's character progressively exhibits a very similar "iridescence." In his case, "various, nay, contrary tendencies" play out in his antisemitic

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[181] One of the ironies of the reality check *Deronda* seems to issue to Gwendolen's naive ambitions of luxurious ease achieved through social domination of a community, and, more specifically, of a husband, is that Rosamond has already established that particular empire in *Middlemarch*.

[182] *Deronda*'s representation of Zionism is a very literal example of what Elaine Freedgood calls the "colonial effect": "the way in which [the] novel helps us to imagine and colonize actual space, in part through the navigation of represented space, and it also refers to the idea of the colony as a place over which a fantasied domination can always preside." (393–94). Freedgood argues that "the connection of fiction to the real is complemented by the connection of that real *back to fiction*" (407) because, as in *Deronda*'s romanticisation of the violent displacement inherent to forming a Jewish state in Palestine, "there were always aspects of the imperial endeavor about which various Victorians might well have wished to believe that much of what they had heard, read, or imagined might not be true; might not be real" (408).

allegiance to the social world (and socio-economic position) he shares with Gwendolen — his prejudicial discrimination against the Cohen family, for instance, is relentless[183] — and his embrace of Mordecai's Zionism. As Max Chapnick notes, the idealistic romanticism of Eliot's portrayal of Zionism was concretely influential: "Zionism is not only a trauma-reactive ideology that blots out Palestinians … but an ideology of feelings and futures that Eliot does not merely assent to but intervenes in creating (299).[184] Gwendolen's conventionality provides a more realist point of access to the novel's Zionist conversion narrative. Daniel's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, associates Daniel's and Mirah's fantasy of feelings and futures with the same ignorant conventionality that informs Gwendolen's superficial fantasy of becoming an artist. The princess compares Zionism to bad (non-realistic) art: "'ah, like you. She is attached to the Judaism she knows nothing of … That is poetry — fit to last through an opera night'" (552).[185] Daniel, by marrying Mirah and

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[183] "I confess, he particularly desired that Ezra Cohen should not keep a shop" (315); "for his own part those amenities had been carried on under the heaviest spirits. If these were really Mirah's relatives, he could not imagine that even her fervid filial piety could give the reunion with them any sweetness beyond such as could be found in the strict fulfillment of a painful duty" (325); "[h]is own sense of deliverance from the dreaded relationship of the other Cohens" (450); "people who had caused him so much prospective annoyance on [Mirah's] account" (512). See Meyer for a foundational account of Daniel's antisemitism.

[184] This enacts the imperial process of realist representation that Freedgood describes, in which "the metalepses of fiction make possible an ontological flexibility in cultural memory, an open circuit between fact and fiction that contributes to the imagining and undertaking of the work of empire, again and again" (408). *Deronda*'s Palestine is both a decidedly fictional fantasy and a real space that readers, like Daniel, are encouraged to imagine as the site of a future fictional reading and actual colonisation: "[t]he work of reading fiction set in factual space involves, like the work of colonization and the productions of space that attend it, finding, seeing, imagining, refinding, and reimagining, and finally inhabiting, in endless sequences of cognitive and physical adjustment" (Freedgood, 406–407).

[185] As Nicholas Dames notes, Eliot frequently associates the "prolonged form" of opera with the "ability to live in and with other lasting structures, be they national, religious, political," and that "haunting this thinking was the persistent suspicion that the actual experience of elongated time may result in disappointment, rejection, or even panic, as much as rootedness and belonging" (165).

planning to establish a Jewish nation, casts himself as the "ballad hero" derided in *Felix Holt*.[186]

The "strictly feminine furniture" (30) of Gwendolen's youthful imperialism challenges Daniel's embrace of Zionism as an alternative to the subduing pressures of the conventional, white, upper-class, British social life represented by his adopted family and his own youthful wish to "be a Gentleman" (143). Daniel imagines his role in establishing a Jewish nation in much the same way that Gwendolen sets out to colonise Wessex:

> Other people allowed themselves to be made slaves of, and to have their lives blown hither and thither like empty ships in which no will was present. It was not to be so with her; she would no longer be sacrificed to creatures worth less than herself, but would make the very best of the chances that life offered her, and conquer circumstances by her exceptional cleverness. (31)

Daniel plots his novelistic exit with an intention to conquer circumstances (and "creatures worth less than [himself]") that closely resembles Gwendolen's imperialist girlhood.[187]

Gwendolen's metaphorical vocabulary (enslavement and ships) also undermines the narrator's repeated insistence that her social surroundings, her relationship with Daniel, and her consciousness itself are insulated from race and nation. An explicit dinner conversation about the British use of enslaved labour in the Caribbean misleadingly positions Daniel's sympathetic tendencies as a counterpoint to Grandcourt's anti-Black racism. Gwendolen's

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[186] Harold describes Esther's choice between "sympathy" and "legal claim" (and between himself and Felix Holt) as an implausible literary parody: "Esther was too clever and tasteful a woman to make a ballad heroine of herself, by bestowing her beauty and her lands on this lowly lover" (*Felix* 349), and Mrs Transome laments that Harold "'will not listen to me any more than if I were an old ballad-singer'" (333).

[187] A description of Deronda's feminised education links him to the conventional women I have been discussing in this section and emphasises this connection: "[h]e had not lived with other boys, and his mind showed the same blending of child's ignorance with surprising knowledge which is oftener seen in bright girls" (*Deronda* 137).

mother then mentions that "her father had an estate in Barbados," and the scene concludes with a description of Gwendolen's egoistic indifference: "while this polite pea-shooting was going on, Gwendolen trifled with her jelly, and looked at every speaker in turn that she might feel at ease in looking at Deronda" (272). Though Gwendolen is apparently unconcerned by anything but "looking at Deronda" (and wondering how he is looking at her), she also "look[s] at every speaker in turn." This indicates that the catalogue of contributions to this discussion of "the rinderpest and Jamaica," and the description of the racist remarks as "polite pea-shooting," can be attributed to Gwendolen, rather than the narrator.[188] Much later, on the fateful sailing trip with Grandcourt, Gwendolen looks at a plantation from the deck, "remembering that she must try and interest herself in sugar-canes as something outside her personal affairs" (557), forgetting that her lack of interest is bred by familiarity not alienation. Gwendolen's personal affairs are highly bound up with sugar canes, both economically and socially, and her family, friends, and acquaintances regularly discuss them. The scene's representation of colonial trade, investment, and use of enslaved labour as "polite" dinner conversation collapses the novel's already fragile distinction between the narrow "personal affairs" (and prejudices) of conventional women like Gwendolen, the moral imperative to look "outside" them, and the questions of national identity that inform Daniel's prejudices and ambitions.

Deronda's representation of Daniel's Zionism relies on the diligently maintained (and expensively attained) shallowness essential to Gwendolen's conventional characterisation. My reading is thus distinguished from more metaphorical interpretations of Gwendolen's "psychological imperialism" (David 176). Indeed, critics of the novel have focused

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[188] Though race is a major theme of *Deronda*, this particular scene is also an instance of what Carolyn Betensky calls "the banality of Victorian racism" (724).

disproportionately on Gwendolen's psychology and have usually acceded to Gwendolen's and Daniel's diegetic claims that *Deronda*'s major theme is the possibility of Gwendolen's ethical development — critics such as Deborah Nord, who persist in describing Gwendolen's "moral education" and "the gradual, if limited, widening of her world" (34). Helena Michie refers to Gwendolen's need "to make ethical decisions" (162), Doreen Thierauf to her "imperfect reconstitution as a moral subject" ("*Daniel Deronda*" 248) and "moral accountability" (255). Markovits describes Gwendolen having "learned sympathy" by "the end of the novel" (797), and Reimer asks if she can "be transformed," noting that some critics have seen her "interaction with Deronda as a forerunner of the therapeutic relationship" (48). Rachel Hollander refers to "Gwendolen's ethical awakening" (77), "solitary emergence into ethical awareness" (78), and even "newfound goodness" (94). Alternatives to this promising ethical arc could be mistaken for responses to Rosamond, such as Adela Pinch's description of "the sticky narcissism of Gwendolen's thinking" (148).

Ironically, Grandcourt, who views Gwendolen's and Daniel's relationship strictly in terms of its potential to depart from social propriety, summarises the impression they have tended to make on readers:

> there was some "confounded nonsense" between them: he did not imagine it exactly as flirtation, and his imagination in other branches was rather restricted; but it was nonsense that evidently kept up a kind of simmering in her mind — an inward action which might become disagreeable outward. (492–93)

Deronda's critics have, to some extent, exhibited a similarly limited imagination. Nord notes that "though the tendency to see Gwendolen's and Daniel's stories as dissonant persists, careful readers of the novel have understood that the relationship between Gwendolen and Daniel provides many of the themes and variation that bind the novel together" (33). I argue that social conventionality is the theme Daniel's and Gwendolen's relationship provides, and

that their striking consistency of characterisation binds the novel together. *Deronda*'s early reference to "common sort of men," like Lydgate's "spots of commonness" in *Middlemarch*, reveals that Gwendolen's lack of individuating inward actions in fact defines her narrative function.

Daniel Deronda's Mentorship

Deronda uses Daniel's and Gwendolen's attempt to form an intimate relationship outside the normative boundaries of heterosexual socialising as an extended metaphor for their shared inability to imagine fulfilment outside of conventional social life. Their non-amorous relationship as co-protagonists is a significant departure from the generic conventions of nineteenth-century realist fiction, though the furthest either character ever challenges social propriety is a single, constrained meeting in Gwendolen's marital home.[189] As Pinch puts it, "the anomaly" of *Deronda* is that "it is a novel which, in a totally unprecedented fashion, places at its center a heterosexual relation between a man and a woman that cannot possibly be subsumed under any of the varieties of amatory plotting — courtship, seduction — known to English fiction" (145). While Deronda admits his attraction to Gwendolen and ultimately falls in love with (and marries) Mirah, Gwendolen is practically unprecedented among nineteenth-century female protagonists in that erotic desire and romantic love form no part of her characterisation at all.

Deronda's narrator defines Daniel's own struggle with the pressures of characterisation as "irritation" with his role as "the man whom others are inclined to trust as a mentor" (385). Gwendolen's first glimpse of Daniel prompts the novel's only other use of the term *mentor*: she anticipates many future critics by furiously venting her impression that

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[189] Nord has recently described Daniel's and Gwendolen's relationship as the "most complicated" of a series of male/female friendships in Eliot's novels that "is inseparable from [Eliot's] desire to experiment with the structure and purpose of novel form" (30), whereas I focus on its relationship to Eliot's other representations of conventional socialising between women.

Daniel (who she has not yet met) is "taking the air of a supercilious mentor" (15). The novel ends with the death of Daniel's own mentor, Mordecai, and thereby reinstates Daniel as the novel's primary mentor figure just as he sets out to colonise Palestine. The "second-sight" that anticipates Mordecai's introduction outlines Daniel's ideal of sympathetic friendship,

> the sort of friend to whom he might possibly unfold his experience: a young man like himself who sustained a private grief and was not too confident about his own career; speculative enough to understand every moral difficulty, yet socially susceptible, as he himself was. (390)

Yet Daniel's description of private grief, public aimlessness, and moral speculation limited by social susceptibility best describes Gwendolen. Rather than resulting from the novel experience of being mentored — being "invited to lean" instead of being "leaned on" (390) — Daniel's desire for both mastery and mentorship is modelled after Gwendolen, the sort of friend whom he never considers a mentor and the character most "like himself" (and like the novel's descriptions of young men). Indeed, Daniel's narrative culminates at the outskirts of an imperial capital and with the determination to make a "career" out of dispossessing Palestinians of their land, itself an echo of Gwendolen's marital "career" and its (ultimately unsuccessful) dispossession of Mrs Glasher and her children.[190]

Daniel's response to Gwendolen mixes animosity, fascination, pity, and erotic desire until the repulsiveness of her character becomes a test of his own:

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[190] The narrator's association of Gwendolen's ethical process with "the verdict of 'anybody'" is another example of how the novel anticipates Gwendolen's moral development while actually narrating its impossibility:

> to consider what "anybody" would say, was to be released from the difficulty of judging where everything was obscure to her, when feeling had ceased to be decisive. She had only to collect her memories, which proved to her that "anybody" regarded the illegitimate children as more rightfully to be looked shy on and deprived of social advantages than illegitimate fathers. The verdict of "anybody" seemed to be that she had no reason to concern herself greatly on behalf of Mrs. Glasher and her children. (246)

> Pray excuse Deronda that in this moment he felt a transient renewal of his first repulsion from Gwendolen, as if she and her beauty and her failings were to blame for the undervaluing of Mirah as a woman — a feeling something like class animosity, which affection for what is not fully recognized by others, whether in persons or in poetry, rarely allows us to escape. (463)

Daniel outlines the generalised unlikability that tends to accompany a character's social aplomb. Gwendolen projects an undefined desire for transformative social experience onto Daniel, and he projects a more defined imperialist investment in moral improvement onto her "beauty and her failings." The reference to "class animosity" illustrates how the unlikability of conventional characters creates the conditions for other characters (and readers) to self-identify with a hostility towards society and its conventions.

One unlikeable trait common to conventional characters is a lack of capacity for "that exclusive passionate love of which some men and women (by no means all) are capable" (*Deronda* 514), hence Lucy's frustration with Ginevra's flippant approach to courtship. Gwendolen, like Mrs Transome and Rosamond, does not experience, or seem capable of, the "romantic love" that Vivian Gornick characterises as "a yearning to dive down into feeling and come up magically changed" (162).[191] Gornick's description of love as a literary plot relies upon the same investment in development and change that tends to characterise accounts of Eliot's realist ethics. The fantasy of being transformed by a deep dive into intimacy also articulates what is lacking in the (anti)-climactic scenes that conclude Eliot's

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[191] An exchange between Daniel and Gwendolen directly references the extent to which Gwendolen's moral potential (and Daniel's investment in her character) hinges on a latent, unevidenced capacity for affection:

> "I wonder whether I understand that," said Gwendolen, putting up her chin in her old saucy manner. "I believe I am not very affectionate; perhaps you mean to tell me, that is the reason why I don't see much good in life."
> "No, I did not mean to tell you that; but I admit that I should think it true if I believed what you say of yourself," said Deronda, gravely. (345–346)

final three novels. Gwendolen's vague yearning to be magically changed, and for close friendship with Daniel, never develops into a viable alternative plot and instead functions as a protracted and just-as-unrealised version of Mrs Transome's and Rosamond's momentary yearning for comfort and intimacy.

Allan Hepburn has recently defined "the friendship plot" as "a narrative structure … in which characters help each other and promote intellectual and emotional growth" (5). Daniel and Gwendolen repeatedly articulate the desire for precisely this plot structure but cannot realise it. Their relationship is comprised of brief meetings as intense and undefined as the one-off encounters in chapter four. Between these meetings, Daniel and Gwendolen think about, and try to analyse, each other. On one occasion that Daniel tries to interpret Gwendolen, the narrator bizarrely observes that his "growing solicitude … depended chiefly on her peculiar manner toward him; and I suppose neither man nor woman would be the better for an utter insensibility to such appeals" (360).[192] "I suppose" signals the strategic distance *Deronda*'s narrator maintains from the motivations informing both Daniel's and Gwendolen's "manner." The scene moves swiftly and revealingly from Deronda's efforts to probe Gwendolen's deeper character to his more practical efforts to physically encounter her "at tea with the other ladies in the drawing-room":

> Since the early days when he tried to construct the hidden story of his own birth, his mind had perhaps never been so active in weaving probabilities about any private affair as it had now begun to be about Gwendolen's marriage. … He could recall almost every word she had said to him. … He thought he had found a key now by which to interpret her more clearly. … One sign that his interest in her had changed

[192] Dorothea makes almost precisely the same observation about her "peculiar" relationship to Rosamond: "[s]he felt the relation between them to be peculiar enough to give her a peculiar influence" (*MM* 747).

> its footing was that he dismissed any caution against her being a coquette setting snares to involve him in a vulgar flirtation … he remembered that she was likely to be at tea with the other ladies in the drawing-room. The conjecture was true ... [Gwendolen] adjusted herself, put on her little air of self-possession, and going down, made herself resolutely agreeable. (359–60)

The acerbic description of Gwendolen's "little air of self-possession" (an echo of Rosamond's playful "little air of meekness" [429] and possession of "the gravest little airs possible about other people's duties" [710]) essentially defines Gwendolen's "peculiar manner" as a series of minor departures from her central marital task of making herself "resolutely agreeable." Daniel distinguishes his relationship to Gwendolen from the kind of "vulgar flirtation" that characterised Rosamond's relationship with Will Ladislaw, but he is unable to define the actual nature of "his interest in her."

The companion piece to this passage from Gwendolen's perspective points primarily to her naivety in thinking so little of Daniel's life beyond her, and in believing that intimacy with and guidance from him might remove her from a sexual economy and into a moral one:

> And Gwendolen? — She was thinking of Deronda much more than he was thinking of her — often wondering what were his ideas "about things," and how his life was occupied. But a lapdog would be necessarily at a loss in framing to itself the motives and adventures of doghood at large.[193] … Gwendolen, with her youth and inward solitude, may be excused for dwelling on signs of special interest in her shown by the

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[193] Lapdogs, like horses, provide another textual link to Dorothea, who uses dogs and lapdogs as a metaphor for blind social conformity in exactly the same way as *Deronda*'s narrator:

> It is painful to me to see these creatures that are bred merely as pets … I believe all the petting that is given them does not make them happy. They are too helpless: their lives are too frail. A weasel or a mouse that gets its own living is more interesting. I like to think that the animals about us have souls something like our own, and either carry on their own little affairs or can be companions to us, like Monk here. Those creatures are parasitic. (*MM* 28)

> one person who had impressed her with the feeling of submission, and for mistaking the colour and proportion of those signs in the mind of Deronda. … But it was astonishing how little time she found for these vast mental excursions. Constantly she had to be on the scene as Mrs Grandcourt. … She had never felt so kindly toward her uncle. … And here perhaps she was unconsciously finding some of that mental enlargement which it was hard to get from her occasional dashes into difficult authors, who instead of blending themselves with her daily agitations required her to dismiss them. (453–55)

The passage surveys how other people are misinterpreting Gwendolen, and it mocks her inability to imagine a moral education in any other form but the conventional feminine pursuit of ornamental accomplishments. The hesitant "perhaps unconsciously" that introduces the prospect of Gwendolen's "mental enlargement" then acts as another reminder that Gwendolen's conscious thinking and experience remain equally aloof from the novel's dispassionate realist narration and extended free indirect discourse. Here, the shape the narrator imagines for Gwendolen's "mental enlargement" is the ability to form strong social bonds as an antidote to her "inward solitude." Gwendolen's "occasional dashes into difficult authors" and "daily agitations" form the conventionality that the narrator observes from a distance. The two passages affirm Daniel's and Gwendolen's preoccupation with each other but also their identical, and identically naïve, error of judgement: an over-investment in Gwendolen's moral capacity as the "key" to her character, the potential disillusionment of which causes Daniel's repeated bouts of "anxiety" (505; 514; 666). The critical tendency to interpret Gwendolen's characterisation as psychologically complex has been used to explain the incoherence of her moral trajectory and to associate her plot with social critique. I contend that it is Gwendolen's lack of psychological complexity that produces both her ethical indeterminacy and the limits of her intimacy with Daniel.

Daniel identifies his own narrative as distant from Gwendolen's because he rejects his ties to the proverbial English ancestral home to set his sights on a homeland outside Europe. In their final encounter, Daniel explains to Gwendolen his discovery of his mother, his Jewish heritage, and the Zionist ideology that informs his plan to establish a Jewish nation in Palestine. His dialogue is interspersed with Gwendolen's difficulty in interpreting a plot she has been excluded from and which frustrates her conventional reading practices (which favour Sir Hugo as Deronda's father):

> Gwendolen was not astonished: she felt the more assured that her expectations of what was coming were right. Deronda went on without check … "A Jew!" Gwendolen exclaimed, in a low tone of amazement, with an utterly frustrated look, as if some confusing potion were creeping through her system. … [B]ut he could not go on easily — the distance between her ideas and his acted like a difference of native language, making him uncertain what force his words would carry. (667–68)

Daniel's exaggerated sense that he and Gwendolen have "a difference of native language" belies their many similarities, much like Lucy's feigned inability to translate Ginevra's French. Gwendolen's response and its reference to her "childishness" also recalls the link between childish characterisation and the strategic avoidance of psychological individuation in Rosamond's character:

> She looked at Deronda with lips childishly parted. It was not that she had yet connected his words with Mirah and her brother, but that they had inspired her with a dreadful presentiment of mountainous travel for her mind before it could reach Deronda's. Great ideas in general which she had attributed to him seemed to make no great practical difference, and were not formidable in the same way as these mysteriously-shadowed particular ideas. He could not quite divine what was going on within her; he could only seek the least abrupt path of disclosure. (668)

As usual, Daniel and Gwendolen cannot quite divine what is going on within each other. The "mountainous" mental "travel" that Gwendolen imagines as a "dreadful presentiment" then anticipates the actual, "more immediately agitating" travel that will take Deronda away. The passage clearly indicates what has only been intimated before: that Gwendolen's encounters with Daniel are a retreat from introspection more than a pathway towards it. In this moment of agitation, she addresses Deronda with mildness, the favoured term regarding Rosamond and rarely applied to Gwendolen, and which indicates ladylike self-control and distance rather than maturity and gravity: "'What are you going to do?' she asked, at last, very mildly. 'Can I understand the ideas, or am I too ignorant?'" (669).[194]

The centre of the encounter elaborates on the crisis that grips Gwendolen and recalls Rosamond's crisis, in which "what another nature felt in opposition to her own was being burnt and bitten into her consciousness" (*MM* 733):

> The world seemed getting larger round poor Gwendolen, and she more solitary and helpless in the midst. … That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolen's small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious movement. … All the troubles of her wifehood and widowhood had still left her with the implicit impression which had accompanied her from childhood, that whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her, and it was because of this that no personal jealousy had been roused in her relation to Deronda: she could not spontaneously think of him as rightfully belonging to others more than to her. But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy — something

[194] *Middlemarch* is bookended by "mildness." The novel opens by telling us that "Celia mildly acquiesced in all her sister's sentiments, only infusing them with that common-sense which is able to accept momentous doctrines without any eccentric agitation" (7–8) and concludes with the reminder that Rosamond "simply continued to be mild in her temper" (781).

> spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all her anger into self-humiliation. (*Deronda* 669–70)

The difference between Gwendolen's and Rosamond's crises, as this passage makes clear, is the difference between "personal jealousy" and "something spiritual and vaguely tremendous." Yet the outcome, anger dissolving into self-humiliation, is the same. Gwendolen's imperialist impression that "whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her" reveals, however, the similarity of her "small life" to the "larger world" of Daniel's intention to establish a Jewish nation "such as the English have" (669), and therefore the shallowness of this "shock…deeper than personal jealousy."

Gwendolen registers that Daniel's narrative exit necessitates her own:

> The look of sorrow brought back what seemed a very far-off moment — the first time she had ever seen it, in the library at the Abbey. Sobs rose, and great tears fell fast. Deronda would not let her hands go — held them still with one of his, and himself pressed her handkerchief against her eyes. She submitted like a half-soothed child, making an effort to speak, which was hindered by struggling sobs. …
>
> "I shall be more with you than I used to be," Deronda said with gentle urgency, releasing her hands and rising from his kneeling posture. "If we had been much together before, we should have felt our differences more, and seemed to get farther apart. Now we can perhaps never see each other again. But our minds may get nearer."
>
> Gwendolen said nothing, but rose too, automatically. Her withered look of grief, such as the sun often shines on when the blinds are drawn up after the burial of life's joy, made him hate his own words: they seemed to have the hardness of easy consolation in them. (671)

The scene is suffused with grief, nostalgia, a hyperbolic image of living death, and an undeniable recourse to "easy consolation." Their exchange, buckling under "the pressure of a vast mysterious movement," resorts to the structure we have already seen in Mrs Transome's and Rosamond's encounters, in which physical touch breaks down language. Gwendolen and Daniel's double plot appropriates a one-off scene from *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* to represent a relationship hemmed in by similarities and propriety rather than differences: the internal and external forces of conventionality that mean Daniel and Gwendolen rarely physically see each other, and their minds cannot get nearer.

There is a double meaning to the "frustration" Gwendolen expresses in this passage. The "burden" of Gwendolen's "difficult rectitude" to Daniel is burdensome because she cannot understand or articulate an alternative to her current position. Gwendolen's masculine quest for glory at the outset of *Deronda* complicates what Hollander cursorily describes as Daniel's "abandonment of her in favour of his masculine quest for leadership and glory on the world stage" (80).[195] The narrator compares Daniel, like Gwendolen, to "common young men" and unsparingly links Daniel's moral contemplativeness to his economic and social privileges that produce:

> another sort of contemplative mood perhaps more common in the young men of our day — that of questioning whether it were worth while to take part in the battle of the world: I mean, of course, the young men in whom the unproductive labor of questioning is sustained by three or five per cent, on capital which somebody else has battled for. (153)

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[195] This interpretation of *Deronda*'s plot structure, in which Gwendolen's future life is sacrificed for Daniel's, is common. Markovits describes the way Daniel "deserts her" (797), and Priyanka Jacob argues that "Daniel's momentous future offstage is not possible without burying Gwendolen at Offendene. The novel closes as a tale of reinvention, with haunting" (868). I argue instead that the novel makes very clear that it is the difference between Daniel's momentousness and Gwendolen's diminutive burying that is superficial.

At the novel's end, Daniel is about to "take part in the battle of the world" and Gwendolen is left at home with sufficient capital to commence "the unproductive labour of questioning." Crucially, we never see Daniel battle or Gwendolen question. The novel's structure creates two inverse and complementary plots that ultimately conspire to negate both narrative closure and character development.[196]

Indeed, *Deronda* almost systematically dismantles McWeeny's account of the conventional "novelistic plot," which transforms the "weak ties" among characters at a novel's start "into the densely interwoven set of relations that typify novel endings: friends united, weddings celebrated, relatives long-lost brought home at last" (81). Daniel gets no closer to his long-lost mother, he and Gwendolen are parted, Gwendolen does not attend Daniel's wedding (because for her to do so would defy social convention). The novel's weak ties, in other words, are in just as indeterminate a state of disarray at the ending as at the beginning, despite *Deronda*'s particularly strong reliance on the coincidence of interwoven relationships to structure its plot. Daniel and Gwendolen are so conventional that their character traits are insufficient to successfully advance the conventions of the novel.

The great irony of *Deronda* is that Gwendolen's repeated insistence that her relationship with Daniel will achieve something and her comment that "it shall be better with me because I have known you" (675) are disavowed by the novel's characterisation and narrative structure.[197] The social relationship that defines *Deronda*'s double plot feels

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[196] Gallagher describes *Deronda* as a novel that "stresses the overcoming of aimlessness" (*Body Economic* 122), but I contend that Daniel's ending is just as aimless as Gwendolen's, rather than offering an alternative.

[197] Gwendolen's final narrative appearance is a letter she writes to Daniel, in which the same language draws attention to the limits of her actual characterisation within the novel in comparison with the theoretical potential Daniel imposes upon her: "I have remembered your words — that I may live to be one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born. I do not yet see how that can be, but you know better than I" (675). Pinch notes that letter writing itself is an unnatural departure from Gwendolen's established character (154).

meaningful to both characters but does not last or generate change. By the text's conclusion, things are better with Gwendolen thanks to a conveniently dead husband and enough income that the fear of poverty is unlikely to recur. Gwendolen's "rewards" are, like Rosamond's, financial security and the timely death of a spouse: social, not spiritual, practical not ethical. Readers of the novel cannot know Gwendolen any better than Daniel does, which is not very well at all.

The aftermath of Daniel's and Gwendolen's final encounter shares significant structural and linguistic features with Rosamond's and Mrs Transome's respective scenes. All three link physical illness to their concluding psychological crises. Gwendolen ends as she began, in uneasy suspended animation, and in an identical position to her predecessors, repeating Mrs Transome's refrain, "I shall live — I shall live!" (*Felix* 390): "'I am going to live,' said Gwendolen, bursting out hysterically. … 'Don't be afraid. I shall live. I mean to live'" (672). Gwendolen's character is in this sense purgatorial: she does not die, but we do not see her live. Eliot's three conventional women persist in the face of at least one major upheaval, analogous to the persistence of social conventions despite disruptions. By departing England (and the novel) to colonise Palestine, Daniel becomes Gwendolen's protegee as much as he abandons his role as her mentor. Gwendolen's conventionality, and the way it enables Daniel's sense of exceptionality, exposes the inseparability of two equally conventional desires: for an unrealised transformation into something different, and for domination over something familiar.

A Striking Girl Unlike Others

Mrs Transome's "imperious will" (*Felix* 28) and Rosamond's effectiveness as the leader of a domestic empire are important precedents to the relationship between imperialism and conventionality in Gwendolen's character. Gwendolen is ultimately "brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena" in her abusive marriage with Grandcourt

(*Deronda* 262), but the loss of control does not change her conformist instinct for compliance nor her desire for dominance over others. Gwendolen should, therefore, not be too readily associated with the superficial impression of *Deronda*'s society that there is "a certain unusualness about her" (32). My classification of her as conventional aims to dispute Hollander's claim, for instance, that Gwendolen's "profound" inaccessibility is due to her "psychological complex[ity]" and "full character" (82).[198] Reimer similarly signals her solidarity with Gwendolen by describing her as an "extraordinary creature" (33), almost exactly echoing Hugo Mallinger's observation that Gwendolen "ought to be something extraordinary, for there must be an entanglement between your horoscope and hers — eh?" (*Deronda* 595). Markovits, like Hollander, also attributes the vagueness of Gwendolen's character to its "roundness," making a distinction between her and Rosamond that has limited textual basis:

> Of course, Rosamond's selfishness is the antithesis of Dorothea's benevolence, but it also anticipates Gwendolen Harleth's selfish willfulness at the start of *Daniel Deronda*. Yet, Gwendolen's position is far more complex. Of all of George Eliot's characters, she finds it hardest to accept restrictions on her activity, and her struggle must, in part, be seen to represent George Eliot's struggle with the conclusions of her own beliefs. This is one of the forces behind Gwendolen's striking roundness of character. (790)

Quite the contrary, Gwendolen is definitively unexceptional. The narrator makes her unexceptionalness explicit and simultaneously avoids individuating her inward commonness: "it would have been rash to say then that she was at all exceptional inwardly, or that the

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[198] Hollander claims that these traits of Gwendolen's character reinforce "the novel's status as neither realist nor yet fully modernist" (82).

unusual in her was more than her rare grace of movement and bearing, and a certain daring which gave piquancy to a very common egoistic ambition" (41–42).

Robyn R. Warhol's analysis of the "paranarratable" end of *Villette* makes a point about the comparative expansiveness of social life over novel form: "[l]aws of literary generic convention are more inflexible, I believe, than laws of social convention, and have led throughout literary history to more instances of unnarratability than even taboo has led" (226). Gwendolen is a rare example in nineteenth-century fiction of a female protagonist who occupies the paranarratable position Warhol describes. Gwendolen exits the narrative without dying or getting married, but her character lacks sufficient individuality to transform that position into an alternative narratable plot. The "laws of social convention" make it easy to imagine the social type to whom Gwendolen corresponds but her character nevertheless proves difficult to narrate using the "laws of literary generic convention." The novel shows that Gwendolen's "selfish wilfulness" is not only the "very common egoistic ambition" that restricts her activity, but also the conventional form of "daring" that shapes Daniel's concurrent nationalist plot.

Gwendolen's relationship with Daniel ostensibly represents a sincere attempt to transcend the conventions of her social world but ultimately functions to reveal that she is constituted by those conventions. Indeed, the "dark shadow" that haunts Gwendolen's consciousness really boils down to the prospect of becoming "a woman destitute of acknowledged social dignity" (*Deronda* 502), a fear that for Gwendolen is far more accessible than the fear of moral corruption and even inspires murderous thoughts: "what possible release could there be for her from this hated vantage-ground, which yet she dared not quit, any more than if fire had been raining outside it? What release, but death?" (502). Gwendolen's inability to imagine purpose and motivation for herself beyond conventional social success torments her as much as what the novel obliquely refers to as "a large

discourse of imaginary fears" (351). Although the novel begins with the disconnected observation of various "acquaintances" and "seated groups" that Gwendolen is "a striking girl … unlike others" (7), *Deronda* reveals that Gwendolen is very much like others.

Like Mrs Transome's and Rosamond's, Gwendolen's shallowness is frequently indicated by the literal image of looking at herself in the mirror:

> She stood motionless for a few minutes, then tossed off her hat and automatically looked in the glass … and as on other nights, Gwendolen might have looked lingeringly at herself for pleasure (surely an allowable indulgence); but now she took no conscious note of her reflected beauty, and simply stared right before her. (11)

Shortly after this scene, Gwendolen succumbs to the temptation to partake in the "allowable indulgence" of enjoying the pleasure of her reflected beauty:

> It is possible to have a strong self-love without any self-satisfaction, rather with a self-discontent which is the more intense because one's own little core of egoistic sensibility is a supreme care; but Gwendolen knew nothing of such inward strife. She had a naïve delight in her fortunate self, which any but the harshest saintliness will have some indulgence for in a girl who had every day seen a pleasant reflection of that self in her friends' flattery as well as in the looking-glass. And even in this beginning of troubles, while for lack of anything else to do she sat gazing at her image in the growing light, her face gathered a complacency gradual as the cheerfulness of the morning. Her beautiful lips curled into a more and more decided smile, till at last she took off her hat, leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which had looked so warm. (13)

Gwendolen's tendency to repeatedly look in the mirror demonstrates that she lacks "anything else to do," which is also an obvious marker of her lack of narrative progress. Helena Michie reads these "rehearsals of self and costume before the endless flattering mirrors of the text" as

a source of "Gwendolen's power" (168) and the motivation behind her self-control, but Gwendolen's tendency to contemplate her reflection also functions throughout *Deronda* as a reminder that the depths of selfhood that Gwendolen, Daniel, and others imagine her initiation into "self-discontent" will reveal are, in fact, non-existent.

Gwendolen's interiority is, like Mrs Transome's and Rosamond's, founded on her sense that life is primarily about being looked at.[199] When the narrator describes one of Gwendolen's "best moments," they recall Gwendolen kissing her own image, associating her temporary removal from "the glass" with a moment of disinterested naturalness she otherwise never achieves. The brief removal of the mirror provides the moment of illumination during which Gwendolen formulates a plan for being "something":

> The self-delight with which she had kissed her image in the glass had faded before the sense of futility in being anything whatever — charming, clever, resolute — what was the good of it all? … Mrs Davilow and Gwendolen hastened up-stairs and shut themselves in the black and yellow bedroom.
>
> "Never mind, mamma dear," said Gwendolen, tenderly pressing her handkerchief against the tears that were rolling down Mrs Davilow's cheeks. "Never mind. I don't mind. I will do something. I will be something. Things will come right." … Gwendolen felt every word of that speech. A rush of compassionate tenderness stirred all her capability of generous resolution … It was one of her best moments, and the fond mother, forgetting everything below that tide mark, looked at her with a sort of adoration. (189–90)

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[199] Gwendolen likes to be looked at in the same way Rosamond likes an "external audience" (*MM* 157) and Mrs Transome likes "Esther to look at her" (*Felix* 306).

The scene acts as the ironic antithesis of an earlier scene in the same black-and-yellow bedroom, during which Gwendolen looks in the mirror and imagines herself as an actress:

> "That is a becoming glass, Gwendolen; or is it the black and gold color that sets you off?" said Mrs Davilow, as Gwendolen stood obliquely with her three-quarter face turned toward the mirror, and her left hand brushing back the stream of hair.
>
> "I should make a tolerable St. Cecilia with some white roses on my head," said Gwendolen. (21)

Harry E. Shaw, referring to Daniel's position in the novel's opening scene, describes him as a character "who feels drawn to read the riddle Gwendolen's beautiful surface presents" (246), but Daniel ultimately reflects Gwendolen's own impulse to look at herself externally. That Gwendolen comes to the same conclusion about herself as a probable actress when she looks into the mirror, in selfishness, and away from it, with "all her capability of generous resolution," encapsulates the novel's consistent representation of her character as an act of social performance.

Gwendolen's analysis of her own beauty and its suitability for social performances is played out over three scenes of crisis for which Gwendolen dresses in black, without "a single ornament" (208), and then looks at herself in the mirror, as if repeatedly mourning an alternative version of her own life and character. The first is the result of Gwendolen's "best moment," which leads to a consultation with Klesmer about the prospect of going on the stage:

> catching the reflection of her movements in the glass panel, she was diverted to the contemplation of the image there and walked toward it. Dressed in black, without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between her light-brown coronet of hair and her square-cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white, and tawny marble. Seeing her

> image slowly advancing, she thought "I am beautiful" — not exultingly, but with grave decision. (208)

In the crisis of confidence that follows, Gwendolen's "very reflection" registers an alienation from the image she imagines herself to project and on which she has based her identity and prospects. She has a haunting "vision of herself on the common level" that recalls Rosamond's vision of a "new terrible existence" (*MM* 733).

Gwendolen is doomed to go on mourning her commonness. She makes strikingly similar preparations, "seated before the mirror," to meet Grandcourt when he comes to the house to propose: "I shall not wear any ornaments, and I shall put on my black silk. Black is the only wear when one is going to refuse an offer" (244). The "glass panels" in Gwendolen's marital home later index her newfound knowledge that external perception can be an agent of surveillance and alienation as well as a site of triumph: "she … walked about the large drawing-room like an imprisoned dumb creature, not recognizing herself in the glass panels, not noting any object around her in the painted gilded prison" (488).[200] The image of Gwendolen as "an imprisoned dumb creature" in a "painted gilded prison" while she prepares to question Mirah about Daniel (an attempt to restore her faith in "fine ideas") is a nightmarish extension of what Esther described in *Felix Holt* as an existence "overhung with the languorous haziness of motiveless ease, where poetry was only literature, and the fine ideas had to be taken down from the shelves of the library when her husband's back was turned" (356). When Gwendolen's husband's back is turned, she plays the scene for a final

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[200] The novel later deploys an imaginary "magic" mirror as an image of Gwendolen's disillusionment:

> The bride opening the ball with Sir Hugo was necessarily the cynosure of all eyes; and less than a year before, if some magic mirror could have shown Gwendolen her actual position, she would have imagined herself moving in it with a glow of triumphant pleasure, conscious that she held in her hands a life full of favorable chances which her cleverness and spirit would enable her to make the best of. And now she was wondering that she could get so little joy out of the exaltation to which she had been suddenly lifted. (366).

time, surreptitiously snatching a meeting with Daniel, as "a long mirror reflected her in her black dress" (504). Gwendolen's near-identical costume and performance preparation for her fateful encounters with Klesmer, Grandcourt, and, finally, Daniel characterise Gwendolen's performance of her own character as lacking imagination and destined to go on repeating itself.

All three of Eliot's novels understand conventional thinking and behaviour as the product of "education." *Deronda* lays out explicitly what was only implied by *Felix Holt*'s references to Mrs Transome's "superior governess" (27) and the "many arts" that went into "finishing Mrs Lemon's favorite pupil" (*MM* 252):

> "Gwendolen will not rest without having the world at her feet," said Miss Merry, the meek governess: hyperbolical words which have long come to carry the most moderate meanings; for who has not heard of private persons having the world at their feet in the shape of some half-dozen items of flattering regard generally known in a genteel suburb? And words could hardly be too wide or vague to indicate the prospect that made a hazy largeness about poor Gwendolen on the heights of her young self-exultation. (30–31)

The narrator's acerbic reference to "private persons having the world at their feet in the shape of some half-dozen items of flattering regard" articulates the convergence of being private persons in unremarkable social circumstances and the way such conventional experiences render "words," narration itself, "too wide or vague." Almost immediately afterwards, Gwendolen reflects that her education "had left her under no disadvantages":

> In the schoolroom her quick mind had taken readily to that strong starch of unexplained rules and disconnected facts which saves ignorance from any painful sense of limpness; and what remained of all things knowable, she was conscious of being sufficiently acquainted with through novels, plays, and poems. (31)

Here, the narrator is merciless about "that strong starch of unexplained rules and disconnected facts which saves ignorance from any painful sense of limpness" yet dispassionate in their narration of the conventional and yet highly consequential nature of Gwendolen's education.[201]

Catherine Arrowpoint is, from the perspective of characterisation, a more obvious realist protagonist. Her combination of easy wealth and position, with the ability to defy society for love, causes her subplot to resemble a parody of the European realist novel. The contrast between Catherine's and Gwendolen's "manners" and Gwendolen's apparently sincere desire to be "like her" is a very direct example of the relationship between Gwendolen's discontent and her socially conventional characterisation:

> "I think Miss Arrowpoint has the best manners I ever saw," said Mrs Davilow, when she and Gwendolen were in a dressing-room with Mrs Gascoigne and Anna, but at a distance where they could have their talk apart.
>
> "I wish I were like her," said Gwendolen.
>
> "Why? Are you getting discontented with yourself, Gwen?"
>
> "No; but I am discontented with things. She seems contented." (94)

Catherine is torn between her own independent spirit and what the Arrowpoints consider her "social duty which required her to marry a needy nobleman or a commoner on the ladder towards nobility" (197). Gwendolen, by contrast, is stifled by her more conformist inclinations, leading to "the raising of a self-discontent which could be satisfied only by genuine change" (559), and Gwendolen never genuinely changes. Her character repetitively fluctuates between Mrs Transome's discontent and Rosamond's self-content. Gwendolen has

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[201] Michie gestures to this performance when she describes Gwendolen as "a hyperbolic epistemological case" of "the eligible upper-class young lady" (162).

the right conventional "manners" for survival in the social world and a very different set of manners from a conventional realist protagonist.

Instead of "genuine change," Gwendolen's increasing self-discontent manifests in increasing concern that others can perceive and judge her artificiality. The narrator indicates that Gwendolen's very tendency to rebel is a sign of her commonness:

> Can we wonder at the practical submission which hid her constructive rebellion? The combination is common enough, as we know from the number of persons who make us aware of it in their own case by a clamorous unwearied statement of the reasons against their submitting to a situation which, on inquiry, we discover to be the least disagreeable within their reach. Poor Gwendolen had both too much and too little mental power and dignity to make herself exceptional. (501)

When Gwendolen, in her new role as Mrs Grandcourt, watches Mirah's musical performance, she registers the tired conventionality of her own submission to a marriage which seemed "the least disagreeable" prospect within her reach:

> [Her] smile seemed to each a lightning-flash back on that morning when it had been her ambition to stand as the "little Jewess" was standing, and survey a grand audience from the higher rank of her talent — instead of which she was one of the ordinary crowd in silk and gems, whose utmost performance it must be to admire or find fault. "He thinks I am in the right road now," said the lurking resentment within her. (461–62)

Crucially, Gwendolen does not sincerely aspire to Mirah's musical talent, nor to artistic superiority in general. She simply squirms at the thought she is not able to give an impression of substance and that others recognise that she has taken the conventional "road."[202]

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[202] Earlier, the narrator makes an explicit link between Gwendolen's character acting and her brief ambition to go on the stage: "[p]erhaps if Klesmer had seen more of her in this unconscious kind

Gwendolen's ability to identify and despise her own conventionality is not, however, associated with moral change or any other concrete narrative outcome.

Eliot's socially conventional women are an extended act of resistance to the expectation that unconventional behaviour is a determining feature of realist literary characterisation. Dorothea is distinguished from the masses at the start of *Middlemarch* because she is "enamoured of intensity and greatness." The narrator's sardonic remark that "such elements in the character of a marriageable girl tended to interfere with her lot, and hinder it from being decided according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection" (8) anticipates Rosamond's introduction and reminds us that if "good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection" are good qualifications for a marriageable girl, they have always been poor qualifications for a literary character. Gwendolen's reputation as a psychologically complex antiheroine says more about contemporary reading practices than her actual characterisation in *Deronda*. Gwendolen's lot is decided according to custom: the chief points of her character are good looks, vanity, and a small share of canine affection primarily bestowed on her mother and then reconstituted in her increasingly desperate bids for Deronda's attention.[203] Yet she also ultimately usurps the Dorotheas, Romolas, and Dinahs that came before her in Eliot's realist universe. Eliot, our exemplar of the realist commitment to the representation of ordinary life, thus ends her career with the creation of a protagonist whose ordinariness disqualifies her from individuated representation.

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of acting, instead of when she was trying to be theatrical, he might have rated her chance higher" (259).

[203] Early on, Gwendolen's mother refers to "the mystery of her child's feeling" (76). Gwendolen's love for her mother acts as the novel's only real evidence of her "capacity for ruth, compunction, or any unselfish regret" (617), but Mrs Davilow repeatedly characterises her child's inner life and motivations as internally enigmatic as well as externally capricious.

Gwendolen's representation deconstructs the relationship between realist character and realist plot, and failed attempts at intimacy illustrate the stasis of all three of Eliot's most conventional characters. *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch,* and *Deronda* each build towards an emotionally intense but morally meaningless social encounter, a structure that becomes a repeated cycle in *Deronda*. Gwendolen's would-be friendship with Daniel parodies the sympathetic ideal: fully knowing another and being fully known in return. Gwendolen wants someone "to know everything about [her]" (357) and fixes on Daniel as her target, but neither he, the narrator, nor Gwendolen herself can tell us very much about Gwendolen's character. Despite this, her stymying conventionality punctures the artificial difference between herself and Daniel and becomes analogous to the nationalist ideology that Daniel describes as "the impersonal part of their separateness from each other" (669).

I have argued that the ethically detached narration of Gwendolen's conventional character is reflected in the novel's representation of the colonial project plotted alongside it. In this sense, Gwendolen's Western conventionality and insistence on Daniel's virtues unnervingly enacts the relationship Saree Makdisi describes between "most liberal sectors of European and especially American society" and "a specific form of denial in which the Palestinian presence in and claim to Palestine (as well as Zionism's role in violently attempting to negate that claim) are not simply refused, covered up, or negated outright. Rather, they are occluded … through the positive affirmation of various wonderful virtues" (*Tolerance* 2). My reading of *Deronda* does not make a new political argument about the violent colonisation and ethnic cleansing of Palestine, but it does reflect Makdisi's dismayed recognition, following Said's (*The Question of Palestine*), that mainstream Western support for Israel's occupation and now, at the time of writing, genocide, of Palestinians is both an exceptional "act of political alchemy" (2) and evidence that "support for violence, mass murder, and ethnic cleansing" (5) remain conventional features of Western governance and

social consciousness. Daniel's desire to morally improve others and Gwendolen's desire to master society without being morally compromised negate the closure and development of both characters, positioning each as realist conformists that *Deronda* does not ethically condemn or imagine an alternative to.

Gwendolen seeks a sustainable relationship with society comparable to the Dickinson speakers in chapter one. In both cases, the texts' apparent emphasis on psychic disturbance is misleading. The desire for change in *Deronda* turns out to be artificial; really, it is the desire to triumph over the familiar in disguise. Gwendolen's characterisation is one illustration of the relationship between conventionality and nationalism in characters who define and conform to the norms of their fictional societies; Gwendolen's relationship with Daniel demonstrates how attending to conventional characters can add nuance to the analysis of social and political ideologies in realist texts. *Deronda* and its reception history provide a warning against the assumption that conventional characters are either socially satirical or conservatively didactic, and a final reminder that the most socially conventional aspects of a text are not always immediately obvious.

Conclusion: All the Other Girls

Conventional characters abundantly populate literary texts. Yet the case studies throughout this thesis model an interpretative practice at odds with most mainstream literary criticism. I have positioned fictional representations of social conventionality as both formally interesting and ethically indeterminate. Conventional characters like Nelly Dean, Gilbert Markham, Ginevra Fanshawe, Arabella Transome, Rosamond Vincy, and Gwendolen Harleth prove that external social performances are just as significant to realist fiction as psychological introspection and individuation. Dickinson's poems, meanwhile, are also far less psychological than most extant criticism has presumed and reveal conventional characterisation at work in experimental poetry.

Conventionality is a challenging imaginative space because it seems to require and engage so little imagination. *Just Like Other Girls* proposes that conventional social behaviour is a textual feature that scholars recognise and respond to but which lacks a critical framework to thoroughly examine as a formal construct. As I have demonstrated, if we are to understand normality as an affect, an unnarrated space, or a starting point from which literary texts automatically depart, the distinction between storyworlds and actual worlds begins to blur. Far from being a stable reference point traversing reality and representation, social normativity in fiction does not necessarily correspond to its real-world reference. Lucy's narration of Ginevra in chapter three, the centre of this dissertation, is analogous to the relationship I have been describing between literary critics and conventional characterisation: we scholars are Lucys who have thus far only briefly (and often contemptuously) accounted for our Ginevras.

Both long, multi-plotted realistic novels and short, single-speaker poems are understood to succeed by representing individual feelings and experiences. This deifying of individuality and strong feelings, what Audrey Jaffe calls a realist character's "specialness"

(8), is also one of the few literary features that is still openly used as an evaluative tool in contemporary criticism. As Sianne Ngai notes, "something about the cultural canon itself seems to prefer higher passions and emotions" (11). Emily Dickinson, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, and George Eliot all owe their canonicity to our celebration of their higher passions and emotions: "higher" because of these writers' distinct and special rendering of interiority and meaningful social relationships. Ngai's description of Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener as a character who embodies an "unnervingly passive form of dissent" (1) also distinguishes my conventional characters from flat characters who correspond to a single idea, or dull characters who lack personality. Bartleby exemplifies formally flat and socially dull characterisation at once. In contrast, the characters I discuss all exhibit unnervingly active forms of conformity.

Nelly, Gilbert, Ginevra, Mrs Transome, Rosamond, and Gwendolen do, however, have many nineteenth-century counterparts. Since sheltered debutants such as Frances Burney's Evelina inaugurated the novelistic distinction between social codes of conduct and individually ethical (and authentic) behaviour, fictional societies have been densely populated with subjects who fail the latter test of character. Further study of conventional characterisation in Victorian fiction could reorient discussions of many prominent realist novels. Lady Dedlock (*Bleak House*) shares many features with Mrs Transome. Mary Smith, *Cranford*'s conventional narrator-character — not even named until the final chapters and whose late interjection to "say a word or two here about myself" (117) is startling — operates similarly to Nelly Dean. Hardy's Arabella Donn (*Jude the Obscure*) and Anne Brontë's Rosalie Murray (*Agnes Grey*) are not unlike Ginevra Fanshawe. Austen's novels include many conventional characters, from Lady Susan (certainly a relation of Rosamond Vincy) to the secondary Bennet sisters (Jane, Mary, Kitty, Lydia) and even Emma Woodhouse. Both Rebecca Sharp and Amelia Sedley, in that most famous comedy of manners, *Vanity Fair*, are

conventional characters. Trollope's Alice Vavasor (*Can You Forgive Her?*) and Oliphant's Lucilla Marjoribanks (*Miss Marjoribanks*) recall Gwendolen Harleth. In many Victorian novels, shallow characters take up considerable narrative space and function independently of psychological depth as a generic (and moral) expectation.

Victorian realism's mode of conventional characterisation also emerges in later novels. At the turn of the century, Henry James, an Eliot critic, is perhaps the best-known novelistic inheritor of Victorian realism's preoccupation with social conventions. Gwendolen's counterpart, the impressively conventional Isabel Archer, is "stoutly determined not to be hollow" (*Portrait of a Lady* 55) and strikes Ralph Touchett as "different from most girls" (50). Gwendolen's greatest transatlantic legatee, however, is Edith Wharton's Lily Bart (*House of Mirth*). Lily, like Gwendolen, is punished for being too conventional for a realist plot, too selfish and shallow for a realist protagonist, and yet not quite ruthless enough for a corrupt social world. Seldon, like Daniel, maintains to the novel's end the illusion that he and Lily are distinct character types, divided along the ever-present line of insufficiently critical social conformity: "[Seldon] saw that all the conditions of life had conspired to keep them apart; since his very detachment from the external influences which swayed her had increased his spiritual fastidiousness, and made it more difficult for him to live and love uncritically" (*House of Mirth* 329). Protagonists like Gwendolen, Isabel, and Lily tend to be read as victims of both a social order and their own "spiritual" failings, without sufficient attention to how social conventionality operates as the foundation of their characterisation.

Though my study of Dickinson is attuned to her distinctive editorial and reception history, the thought experiment in chapter one could be productively applied to the plethora of poetry (particularly by female poets such as Sylvia Plath and Audre Lorde) associated in various ways with radical self-expression, intense psychological experience, and an author's socially unconventional personhood. My methods for reading social conventionality in

Dickinson's poetry might also contribute to recent scholarly revisions of Romantic genius, originality, and solitude.[204] Conventional characterisation could, for example, be a novel framework for Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* or generate new approaches to *Frankenstein*'s character network. Recovering the concept of conventionality as both literary theme and critical strategy also speaks to Manu Samriti Chander's work on the relationship between an "aesthetic ideology" of "normative taste" (43) and British Romanticism as an imperial export and colonising tool.[205]

Dickinson's speakers "talk to each other about each other" the way most people talk to each other about each other. Gwendolen's actions are limited to the ways most young women like Gwendolen would behave. Nelly, Gilbert, Ginevra, Mrs Transome, and Rosamond could, likewise, really be anyone. In every case study this thesis takes up, canonical nineteenth-century literary texts demonstrably exhibit narrative, structural, and affective reliance on social conventionality, as well as or instead of individual personality. Since at least the nineteenth century, and largely thanks to the tenets of Romanticism, poetry has been associated with originality and therefore exemplary literariness. The same period inaugurated an enduring distinction between literary fiction and genre fiction (such as fantasy, mass market romance, detective novels) based on the inherent literariness of unique characters whose relationships, experiences, and motivations cannot easily be classified into a genre's set of functional tropes. As Gage McWeeny shrewdly remarks,

> in the Lydgate–Rosamond plot, we find ourselves reading what feels like a miniaturized pulp version of *Middlemarch* that has snuck inside *Middlemarch*, in

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[204] See Langan; Mathes; Nersessian; Singer; and Rigby.

[205] See Chander's analysis of nineteenth-century poets from India (Henry Derozio), British Guiana (Egbert Martin), and Australia (Henry Lawson) as "nationalist poets" who "paid heed to the Romantic concept of the poet as the voice of the people he wishes to represent" (6).

> which the pleasures of the reliable structural predictability of genre fiction, such as those we might find in the detective novel, temporarily supplant the more diffusive pleasures of deferral we have come to associate with *Middlemarch* itself in all its social and narrative complexity. (93–94)

Reliable structural predictability is often associated with plots that operate at the expense of character. McWeeny's "miniaturized pulp version of *Middlemarch*" identifies characters who *could be anyone* as out of place amidst the "diffusive pleasures" and "social and narrative complexity" of realist fiction. As I have demonstrated, however, socially normative predictability is itself a mode of fictional characterisation and a key feature of realist complexity.

Dickinson's poetry has something else in common with many readings of realist characters: its speakers tend to be read as universal or relatable (they could be the reader) or sympathetic (they are someone particular, possibly the poet herself). All the characters and speakers I have surveyed, however, are more like the cast of an Agatha Christie mystery. They behave how "everyone" behaves and could feasibly prove to be good, bad, or neutral. In fact, the characters I discuss have many correspondents in the nineteenth-century's sensation and detective genre fictions — take the conventional characterisation of, for example, Gabriel Betteredge and Drusilla Clack (*The Moonstone*) or, more specifically, Collins's version of Gilbert Markham, Eustace Woodville (*Law and the Lady*). Braddon's Lucy Audley is the most obvious sensational precursor to Rosamond Vincy.[206] Lady Audley is also childishly beautiful, a consummate social performer, and sinisterly indifferent:

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[206] Tara Macdonald has recently described sensation fiction itself as "a genre long-dismissed as plot-driven, silly, and feminine" (2).

> She may have thought of long-ago years of childish innocence, childish follies and selfishness, of frivolous, feminine sins that had weighed very lightly upon her conscience. Perhaps in that retrospective revery she recalled that early time in which she had first looked in the glass and discovered that she was beautiful; that fatal early time in which she had first begun to look upon her loveliness as a right divine, a boundless possession which was to be a set-off against all girlish shortcomings, a counterbalance of every youthful sin. Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotism? (*Lady Audley's Secret* 93)

Despite purported divisions, genre fictions often share with literary realism the feature of being, as Mary Poovey puts it, "realistic, in the nontechnical sense of containing lifelike characters and situations" (22).[207] Conventional character is a lens that could bring together texts that share many common formal features but are still rarely compared without recourse to an aesthetic hierarchy of relative literariness.

Furthermore, conventional characters are very common in a variety of aesthetic mediums, including film and television.[208] Scholarly focus on such characters would significantly expand and offer much-needed new directions for the interpretation of

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[207] Macdonald uses the term "hyperrealism" to associate sensation fiction with realism, rather than opposing the two genres.

[208] Conventional characterisation is, for example, essential to the structure of reality television. This is especially observable in formats such as the *Real Housewives* franchise that, like Victorian realist novels, claim to offer exclusive access to a specific social world. Revealingly, the director of a new play about the Brontës has recently compared the sisters to the Kardashians (Armitstead and Ibu).

contemporary realisms.[209] Normativity has long been understood as a political peril inherent to realist forms, but this thesis has promoted the critical possibilities of social conventionality when it appears in literary texts. Recent popularly and critically acclaimed novels *Normal People* and *Detransition, Baby* both rely on the dense social networks, progressively individuated and socially rebellious protagonists, coincidental plot structures, and thematic focus on social disillusionment and meaningful social relationships established in nineteenth-century realist fiction.[210] Each novel includes conventional characters that resonate with the case studies in chapters two through five.[211] Moreover, in each text, the fictional impossibility and oppressive structural confines of "normal" personhood also become the best imaginable forms of salvation. Despite being psychically punished and socially alienated by the vague conventional dictates of "normality," Peters's and Rooney's protagonists fail to separate meaningful social life from conventional social life. This problematic inseparability, I have argued, informs most literary representation.

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[209] James Wood's pejorative coinage "hysterical realism" describes the contemporary novel's alleged "awkwardness about character and the representation of character," the importance to novel form of "access to strong feeling," and the aesthetic crime of lacking "moral seriousness." Wood's proprietorial account of realism is one example of the ongoing association between realist forms, sympathetic individual characterisation, art as an influence on social life, and the politics of storytelling and its special cultural status.

[210] Grace E. Lavery muses that "perhaps *Detransition, Baby* is the first great trans realist novel," noting that author Torrey Peters's "comedy of manners" both "plays with the structural conventions of literary realism" and relies thematically on an "uncanny seduction: the calming whispers of bourgeois realism" ("*Detransition, Baby* Review"). Elsewhere, Lavery has repeatedly observed that "nobody really bothers to explain the difference" between Mary Ann Evans's masculine pseudonym George Eliot, which has "stuck around," and Charlotte Brontë's (Currer Bell), which has been left in the nineteenth century ("Trans Realism" 741; *Pleasure and Efficacy* 31). It is ironic, therefore, that a violently transphobic (and interpretively bizarre) open letter protesting the nomination of *Detransition, Baby* for the 2021 Women's Prize for Fiction includes "Mary Ann Evans" and "Currer Bell" as signatories (along with Emily Dickinson), as though the letter's authors are advertising cis Brontë's professional disenfranchisement by putting trans Eliot back in the closet.

[211] Erin, Karen, Rachel, Helen, and Peggy in Sally Rooney's *Normal People*; Iris, Kathy, and Diana in Peters's *Detransition, Baby*.

In studies of literature, social conventionality exists in a paradoxical space between passive irrelevance and active taboo. Many textual elements that are likely to bore leisure readers turn out to be treasure troves for literary critics (Lucy's descriptions of realist paintings in *Villette,* Felix's address to working men in *Felix*, Mordecai's passionate speech to his philosophers' club in *Deronda*, small variations between Dickinson manuscripts). My readings, however, emphasise characters and moments that both general and professional readers are liable to find either too boring, too obvious, or even too ethically compromising to be an interpretative focus. As I have shown, psychologically uninviting representations of conventionality do not promote readerly identification. Indeed, conventional characters allow readers to reaffirm their own contrasting individuality. The normal girls of fiction are the "others" we measure ourselves and our preferred characters against. My exploration of social conventionality as a literary feature demonstrates instead that those who behave just like others can generate critical interpretations that are, in fact, very much unlike others.

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