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More or less than kind: Brothers and sisters in nineteenth-century American literature

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MORE OR LESS THAN KIND:
BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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This dissertation investigates the under-examined relationships between sibling characters in nineteenth-century American literature (1852–1900). Focusing on the depictions of siblinghood in such works as Herman Melville’s *Pierre*, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*, and Edith Wharton’s *Bunner Sisters*, I explore how nineteenth-century American authors construct, comment on, and use the sibling bond as an attempt to reconcile tensions of personal and collective identity and the competing drives for family ties and individual experience. In these fictions and others, I argue, siblinghood is a space where the rules of relation are negotiable and unfixed—where brothers and sisters use each other variously as partners in sympathetic union, extensions of their selves, and objects of identification, and do so in ways both supportive of and detrimental to one another. I read these texts with an eye on siblinghood to suggest new perspectives on major nineteenth-century fictions, as well as new ways of thinking about the nineteenth-century family.

In the first chapter, I argue that Melville’s *Pierre* is a seduction novel, in which the site of seduction is the double promise of siblinghood to offer a close and sympathetic relation and the opportunity for virtuous or heroic performance. My second chapter looks at how Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* exposes a significant (yet largely unacknowledged) cruelty at the heart of the nineteenth-century American family: that siblings are taught to invest their energies and their affections in one another in youth, but they are also taught that marriage is their goal—which takes them out of their home, and away from their brothers and sisters. Chapter Three explores the significance of the many adult and elderly sister pairs in local color literature of the late nineteenth century, arguing that the depiction of siblings living in close, marriage-like relationships—far beyond the period of time that most siblings share an intimate bond under the same roof—is part of these fictions’ larger project of describing and preserving a United States in the midst of massive and rapid change. And Chapter Four investigates the many nineteenth-century authors who set their novels and stories in motion by separating two siblings on opposite sides of the color line, then exploring their relationships and identities as a result of this split.
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Dedicated

(obviously but affectionately)

to

Sarah, Emily, and Tyler Blanchard

and

to our parents,

David and Susan Blanchard
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III
In 1851, aspiring writer Sara Willis Eldredge Farrington approached her brother, the established writer and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis, seeking some employment that might help her support her family. Nathaniel rebuffed Sara's request, called her writing samples "dreadful," and complained that he should be "sorry that any editor knows that a sister of mine wrote some of these which you sent me." Though Sara soon thereafter found another publisher and became widely popular as the writer known as Fanny Fern, she never forgot—nor forgave—her brother's cruel appraisal of her talents and refusal to help her in a time of need. In 1854, she satirized him as the foppish Hyacinth Ellet in her first long-form fiction, the bestselling *Ruth Hall*. While the novel won Fanny Fern an even greater popularity, Nathaniel Parker Willis had his own large audience of fans, who were outraged by Hyacinth Ellet on Willis's behalf. One devotee wrote:

How I do pity Mr Willis, & I am sure, I *love* him more than ever—oh how I wish I were his *sister*, and I would love him, so dearly that he would forget, all the unkindness of her, who does not deserve the name.... Would it were in my power to do something to atone for that *woman's* (for I will not call her by the sacred name of sister) unkindness not to say cruelty—I cannot bear, that he who has ever

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touched the most sacred & the deepest recesses of my heart, should have his torn & lacerated, & I not allowed to do something for him ...¹

To this faithful fan, who may well have known no more about the Willis family’s relationships than the mocking portrayal of Nathaniel she found in the pages of Sara’s book, Sara had failed in her sisterly role, so much so that she did not “deserve” the name of “sister.” The letter’s author is so devoted to Nathaniel Parker Willis that she wishes she were his sister instead, believing she would be able to “do something”—though the exact nature of that something remains unclear—to redress his hurt. Her imagined sympathy with Willis, based on her passion for and identification with his words, becomes the basis of her wish to perform the role of a “good” sister: Willis has “touched” her heart, and she wants to reciprocate. In this brief but ardent bit of correspondence, Willis’s reader lays out the terms of siblinghood as she sees them: Siblings should love each other; they should be kind, not cruel; when one suffers, the other should soothe him or her. Though one wonders what this reader would have thought had she known the whole Willis story, her stance on the obligations of brothers and sisters is very clear.

The Willis sibling drama demonstrates what any person with brothers and sisters knows very well: that these closest of kin have the capacity to be, to borrow from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “less than kind.” The double meaning in the Prince of

Denmark's famous words resonates with particular piquancy when applied to the bonds of brothers and sisters, suggesting both the unique similarity of siblings—sharing a generation and a blood, they are of the same "kind"—and the singular tension that so often characterizes their relationships. Because they are the people with whom individuals share the closest physical and social intimacy in youth; because they are, in many cases, the people with whom one has relationships of the longest duration; and, finally, because these relations are of blood and not of choice, siblinghood represents one of the most complex—yet least examined—biological and social ties.

This is a study of the peculiar mechanics of siblinghood as they were inscribed in the American fictions of the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries. From Herman Melville's *Pierre* in 1852 through Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* in 1901, sisters and brothers have some of the most interesting and complicated relationships in American literature. Their bonds take endlessly diverse shapes and embody a broad range of affective functions, all warranting greater attention than they have thus far been granted. The novels and stories considered here reveal siblinghood as a space where issues of gender, class, race, and power are negotiated and contested, challenged and defended; where brothers and sisters variously love, influence, control, depend upon, hurt, and recoil from one another—and, sometimes, seem to do all these things simultaneously. Within the flexible
sibling relationship, fictional characters find the possibility for creating (or re-
creating) family on their own terms—aligning themselves horizontally rather than
vertically, or exerting the power of choice in electing to prioritize one identity, bond,
or set of affinities over another—but this possibility is not without its problems. By
focusing on sibling characters and the dynamics of their relationships, many
nineteenth-century texts posed provocative questions about how one assumes,
defines, or performs one's sibling identity; how power is asserted, awarded, and
resisted in supposedly equal relationships; where the lines of siblinghood lie—what
its possibilities and limits are, and how people figure this out; how the relationships
between siblings change (or not) over the lifespan; and what it means, in the end, to
be or to have a sibling. The novels and stories at hand reveal that the answers to these
questions are never simple, and often contradictory.

In taking as their focus the relationship(s) between siblings, I argue, Melville,
Chesnutt, Louisa May Alcott, Mark Twain, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and other
nineteenth-century authors sought to explore essential questions of how people
identify themselves, and how and why they form or perform bonds with others.
Siblinghood, in these fictions, is presented as the beau ideal of relational identity—
brothers and sisters are as biologically and socially “like” as two people can be, yet
they are distinct human beings; they can see themselves in one another—physically
and spiritually—but they can also, if they choose, separate themselves entirely from
one another, refusing or denying what unites them. They are, as a Vietnamese proverb puts it, “as close as hands and feet”—related, yet different. An emphasis on sibling relationships therefore allowed the authors at hand to explore, and even resolve, the two signal and potentially competing nineteenth-century imperatives, drives, or desires: the creation or preservation of family and the dream of self-reliance and individualism. Because of its uniquely flexible structure, which allows brothers and sisters to affiliate as closely or as loosely as their needs and circumstances dictate, siblinghood, as these fictions reveal, allows one to assert or deny family ties as one wishes. It is, therefore, an ideal framework for imagining and investigating tensions of individual and collective identity.

Siblinghood is, of course, one of the oldest models for figuring human relationships beyond the intimate family. The Bible features many stories of siblings, which become the basis for the traditional Judeo-Christian invocation of the “brotherhood of man.” And as Bruno Bettelheim has explained, fairy tales frequently use siblings to tell parables of identity:

Such fairy tales begin with an original lack of differentiation between the two siblings: they live together and feel alike; in short, they are inseparable. But then, at a certain moment in growing up, one of them begins an animal existence, and the other does not. At the end of the tale the animal is changed back into his human form; the two are

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2 See Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (1994): “Almost every major character in the Bible has at least one brother or sister who contributes to the story’s development in a material way” (3).
reunited, never to be separated again. This is the fairy tale's symbolic way of rendering the essentials of human personality development: the child's personality is at first undifferentiated, then id, ego, and superego develop out of the undifferentiated stage. In a process of maturation these must be integrated, despite opposite pulls. (79)

If siblinghood may be used as a metaphor for non-biologically-related members of the human family, Bettelheim suggests, it has also been used to explain the way an individual identifies and distinguishes, or differentiates, him- or herself. We understand siblings to be "as close as hands and feet," similar and yet different, yet we have paid little attention to siblinghood as a site of identity formation or performance in American life and literature, both as it relates to the intimate family and the broader human family.

In 2002, historian Wayne Bodle called the "persistent inattention to siblings in the otherwise-booming field" of American family history "truly perplexing." The relationships between brothers and sisters, he argued, offer an "alluring new paradigm" for understanding the lives of American families, and the greater history of the United States, and merit deeper investigation (22, 29). Bodle made his call for an expanded body of sibling studies in a review of two very different books about brothers and sisters, Lorri Glover's *All Our Relations: Blood Ties and Emotional Bonds among the Early South Carolina Gentry* (2000) and Annette Atkins's *We Grew Up Together: Brothers and Sisters in Nineteenth-Century America* (2001). These are, indeed, two of the most comprehensive recent studies of siblings by scholars in the
humanities, with Glover's investigation of sibling and extended kin networks in colonial South Carolina by far the more compelling work.³ Glover argues that siblings and other "intragenerational kin" represent a sort of "hidden family" that is "occasionally invoked but rarely analyzed" (xii), but that begs exploration for the way in which it "construct[s] ... relationships based on cooperation and mutuality" and is thus among the most "powerful and unique sources of socialization." Siblings, Glover continues, "also usually represent the longest lasting of all familial relationships. They consequently exert a tremendous influence over an individual's self-definition from early childhood throughout the life course" (31). The issues Glover raises in these short passages alone suggest the breadth of possibility in sibling studies, not only as they might expand definitions of the family but for what they suggest about identity formation and social relations beyond the domestic sphere. They also raise one of the most commonly cited characteristics of sibling relations: that our brothers and sisters are the people who are closest to us for the longest part of our lives.⁴

The existing literature on the sibling bond, most of which has been conducted by social scientists, sounds this refrain time and again, but largely fails to satisfactorily plumb its implications. Sibling studies exists as a field primarily in the realm of

³ Though Atkins's book focuses on the same time period as my study, it is more a biography and collection of the correspondence of specific families of siblings than an analytical discussion of the nature and quality of their relationships.
⁴ I greatly admire Glover's articulation of the importance of sibling relationships; hers is, of course, an archival study of kin networks in a specific place and time, and as such covers ground quite different from the literary analysis I essay here.

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parenting and self-help-style literature, most of which focuses either on sibling rivalry or on the importance of birth order. But sociologists and psychologists have produced several thoughtful and provocative investigations of siblinghood, among the best of which is Juliet Mitchell’s *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (2003). Mitchell argues that understanding the sibling bond is key to understanding families—and that “looking laterally changes the analysis.” She continues:

The proposition is this: that an observation of the importance of siblings, and all the lateral relations that take their cue from them, must lead to a paradigm shift that challenges the unique importance of understanding through vertical paradigms. Mothers and fathers are, of course, immensely important, but social life does not only follow from a relationship with them as it is made to do in our Western theories. The baby is born into a world of peers as well as of parents. (3)

Mitchell posits that an over-reliance on “vertical paradigms” in the study of the family may be the result of “human social and individual psychology” being traditionally studied and understood from a male perspective (3). Shifting the focus, and adopting a new framework of analysis centered on the (supposedly) lateral relationships of siblings, permits a more expansive view of power, influence, and

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affinity within the family, and gives us new ways of identifying what motivates and monitors all members of a family unit.

Using language that typifies the short shrift given to sibling relationships, psychologist Theodore Lidz, in The Relevance of the Family to Psychoanalytic Theory (1992), concedes the significance of the bonds between brothers and sisters, and admits that scholars have paid them too little attention. “Although I have not managed to find a suitable place to discuss the matter adequately,” he writes, “many if not most children are affected profoundly by sibling relationships.” Lidz argues that siblings, “commonly the persons who share the most intimate experiences and feelings for they have grown up in the same family and have often been subjected to similar parental attitudes,” can be “important love objects and sources of protection and comfort,” and provide “a major source of self-evaluation” (173). Though this represents virtually the full extent of Lidz’s examination of siblinghood, this passage supplies some of the most commonly used language and assumptions about siblinghood, and offers some useful avenues for inquiry. Because they are relatively close in age, and are likely to experience a similar life span, siblings, more than any other pair or group of relations, share a common family history and narrative—a fact that can be a source of both possibility and oppression, since siblings can either find
comfort or suffocation in sharing so much with others. And like Mitchell, Lidz discusses siblings in terms of identification, suggesting not only that sisters and brothers are, like parents, persons with whom individuals affiliate themselves, but against and alongside whom they form their definitions of self and individuality. As a source of "self-evaluation," a sibling influences one's perception of one's self, and is a measure against which one may either succeed or fail.

The relationships of brothers and sisters as represented in literature have likewise earned little critical attention, though rather more criticism has been directed at sibling bonds in British literature than American, apparently because of the surfeit of siblings who wrote novels, or had famous literary relationships, in nineteenth-century England (the Austens, the Brontes, the Wordsworths, etc). When literary critics do attend to siblinghood, they almost always use it as a lens through which to examine something else—such as gender or authorship—rather than considering the characteristics, possibilities, and conflicts of the bond itself. In one of

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6 See also Mink and Ward: sibling bond is "unique, irreplaceable"; with siblings "we share the greatest possible degree of similarity (based on the randomness of the gene pool, on shared family history, and so on), plus since in the natural order of things our parents die before we do, it is a relationship that cannot be replicated." (1)

7 In For Moral Ambiguity: National Culture and the Politics of the Family (2001), Michael J. Shapiro makes a similar gesture toward siblings—then doesn't fully address them. He explains his object as "treat[ing] the ways in which family space, historically protean though it is, serves as a critical locus of enunciation, as a space from which diverse family personae challenge the relationships and historical narratives that support dominant structures of power and authority and offer ways to renegotiate the problem of the political." Siblinghood would seem to be a signal part of this conversation, yet Shapiro doesn't explore that relationship. For an example of a more direct (though rather less compelling from a humanities perspective) approach to siblinghood, see Salman Akhtar and Selma Kramer, eds., Brothers and Sisters: Developmental, Dynamic, and Technical Aspects of the Sibling Relationship (1999).
the most extended studies of siblings in fiction, Valerie Sanders' *The Brother-Sister Culture in Nineteenth-Century Literature: From Austen to Woolf* (2002), the author argues that most investigations of the family neglect sibling relationships, and finds this a particular deficiency in studies of the nineteenth century. She points to the emergence of the middle-class family and industrialization as significant sources for an increased emphasis on siblinghood in the nineteenth century, and argues that “through the sibling bond, girls and boys, men and women, rehearse the complexities of the connections they will have with other men, other women, as adults” (183).

And yet, Sanders herself is more interested in gender as a category of analysis, rather than family relations, and views the brother-sister bond primarily as practice or substitute for courtship, romantic love, and marriage, rather than digging deeply into the mechanics of the specific siblinghoods she considers. In *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (1992), Helena Michie examines many of the same texts as Sanders, finding that “within the protective idiom of sisterhood, women could express anger and sexuality in a way unavailable to them in the context of other relations” (21). Though Michie's primary interest is gender and sexuality and not the broader inquiry into family relationships and identities I'll pursue here, she does point, in this passage, to one of the many ways in which siblinghood may contain an innate flexibility for the practicing of social relations and the assertion of power absent in other bonds.
Sibling relationships in American literature have received more focused and exhaustive treatment in doctoral dissertations than in published books or journal articles, and two in particular suggest useful frameworks for examining those bonds. In her 2000 thesis, Teresa Durbin names “identity, differentiation, separation, connection, comparison, and competition” as the key issues upon which sibling ties are predicated, looking specifically at twentieth-century plays featuring trios of sisters (iii). Liane Ritchey Sillett looks at depictions of sisters in British and American “women’s fiction” together, focusing especially on the modes of familial sisters, female friendships, and communities of women. These frameworks make sense, and may be more broadly applied, but along with Michie, both Durbin and Sillett study sisterhood as a discrete category; I call attention to these studies only to show where “sibling studies” exists in literary scholarship, and to demonstrate that in this dissertation, while issues of gender are absolutely critical, I will prioritize the family bond and begin to offer ways of looking at it in a variety of forms that deal with gender, race, and more. My aim is to suggest some of the ways that considering siblinghood as a site of identity and relationship can add a rich additional layer to the analytical frameworks we already employ, particularly, I argue, in a historical period where the bond acquired such practical and symbolic importance.

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8 I’m speaking here of studies that take the sibling relationship as their main focus—as I’ll discuss in the chapters that follow, critical attention to siblings is not wholly lacking, but explorations of their bonds are, for the most part, subsumed under broader concerns with sympathy, the family, and publicity and intimacy.
While the word "sibling" was not in common usage in the nineteenth century, the relationship that existed between sisters and brothers grew more important in that time both as a biological fact and as a social ideal. The American family changed in certain fundamental ways over the nineteenth century—as did the pressures on the family and, therefore, its responses to outside influences and social structures. As Alan Trachtenberg, Steven Mintz, and others have explained, the economy of the United States shifted dramatically over the course of the century, moving from an agrarian to a market to an incorporated economy—a world that was, as Eric Sundquist explains, "increasingly defined by calculated zones of time and labor, and technologies of measurement and regulation" (Columbia 508). As a result, young people found that they could not depend on working the same land as their parents, or inheriting a portion of that land, in order to make a living. More young men—and, increasingly, young women—had to leave the natal home and go to the town or city, or go west, in order to support themselves (and, often, their parents and siblings). Lateral sibling bonds began to assume a greater significance, as young people sought out the assistance of established older siblings, or provided it to younger brothers and sisters. As Karen Halttunen writes, "the ties between family generations weakened" and "traditional controls" declined, and as a result, "older patterns of social deference

9 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term was once used to refer to any member of a kin group, and gained currency among natural and social scientists in the early twentieth century. A search in the Making of America digital archives yields fewer than a dozen uses of "sibling" in nineteenth-century publications.
[gave] way to the new significance of relationships between peers" (13). In A Prison of Expectations. The Family in Victorian Culture (1983), Mintz argues that the late-nineteenth-century incorporation of the United States heightened the importance of lateral familial bonds for Americans, finding that "an emphasis on sibling loyalty was a way to counteract the problems of generational discontinuity and the anarchy of individualism" (148). Social and economic changes, according to these and other historians, precipitated a shift in intimate relations. Brothers and sisters became more important.10

The American nineteenth century is virtually defined by siblings, with brothers and sisters making their marks in literature, art, politics, and social movements. One need think only of the Beechers, from Catherine’s transformation of female education to Henry’s sermons and scandals to Harriet’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a novel that continues to influence the way we think of the United States in the nineteenth century. Or take the Willises, again, among whom writers Sara and Nathaniel are only the most famous; brother Richard composed the music for “It Came upon a Midnight Clear,” and sister Julia wrote countless book reviews. The list goes on and on: the Grimkes, the Peabodys, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, Chang and Eng Bunker, Frank and Jesse James, William and Henry and Alice James.

10 See also Tamara Hareven: “Rather than disrupting kinship ties, migration often strengthened them and led to the development of new functions for kin in response to changing economic and employment conditions” (110).
Nothing about this list, however, describes the other side of nineteenth-century siblinghood: the many brothers and sisters who never knew each other, much less achieved notoriety, because they and their parents were slaves, and were either sold apart from one another or prevented by their owners from living as the kind of family their owners and the rest of white society deemed the heart of American life. It also fails to account for those who shared one parent but not two, whose father had children by both his white wife and his black mistress, who lived alternately in their father's house and in his slave quarters—never acknowledging, or even knowing of, their sibling bond. When one sibling is white and the other black, when interracial sex is undeniable and yet denied, are two people then truly brother and sister? This is a question authors such as Chesnutt, Mark Twain, and Pauline Hopkins would raise in their nineteenth-century fictions, and that authors like William Faulkner would take up in later decades, as the intersections of race and family continued to be a source of tension in American life.

Somewhere on the spectrum of nineteenth-century siblinghood, between the famous brothers and sisters who wrote that century's history and those who never acknowledged—or were able to acknowledge—their sibling tie, are the many men and women, unrelated by blood, who claimed bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood to assert a collective power or advance a social agenda. The nineteenth century saw a rising interest in fraternal and sororal organizations, as labor unions became major
forces in the industrializing nation and reform movements attempted to create social
change; as Halttunen writes, “the traditional vertical institutions could not contain
the new complexity of national social life,” so new organizations were formed in
which membership was “not hereditary or compulsory, but voluntary; the pattern of
authority was not one of mastery and deference, but of equality” (21). This era also
saw the birth of Greek organizations at the nation’s colleges and universities, with
young men and women forming early social networks with their “brothers” and
“sisters” in social houses, fraternities, and sororities. “Brotherhood” and “sisterhood”
became institutionalized in new ways, vaunted as relationships of equality and unity,
desirable connections for those seeking to achieve some common end. In reality, of
course, equality was often a pretense and hierarchical rule prevailed—trade unionists
and reformers may have talked about themselves as equal brothers and sisters, but in
any given group, there were leaders and followers and structures of power.

Of course, many nineteenth-century religious groups ordered themselves according to a lateral, sibling-like structure, or at least employed the brother-sister vocabulary to refer to fellow members of their congregations. Following such Biblical strictures as Matthew 12:50—"Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister"—Christians of various sects united rhetorically along lines of siblinghood. Evangelical Christians enacted and experienced their faith communally, as a siblinghood of believers, and Catholic nuns and monks pledged their lives to God and to the good of their sister- and brotherhoods. Groups like the Northeast-based Shakers, who practiced celibacy and gained new members only from outside their communities, also referred to one another as "brother" and "sister," while the westward-trending Mormons used the same terminology to speak of fellow members of their faith. African Americans, both enslaved and free, found in their church families the connections that they were so often denied in a segregated, slavery-condoning society.\textsuperscript{14}

At the very center of the nineteenth century, of course, the United States found itself in the middle of a violent conflict of "brother fighting brother," as the nation (and the imagined national family) was torn in two in the years around and during the Civil War. Popular ballads and stories described the painful separation of

North and South using "brother versus brother" language, while works like Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Gates Ajar* (1868) depicted a sister's devotion to and abiding love for a brother killed in the fighting as the most intense and virtuous feeling a woman could have.15 Later, in the years after the war's end, the North was frequently imagined as a strong, supportive brother coming to the rescue of its delicate Southern sister.16 The language of siblinghood could therefore be employed to describe both the division and the cohesion of the nation, for it suggests both similarity and union and distinct, relative identities. Americans could view themselves as siblings in conflict or as undivided members of the national family, depending on what best suited their needs at a given point in time.

Siblinghood, then, offered a resolution to the contending nineteenth-century impulses toward (re)creation of family and individual success and self-reliance. Along lines of blood, affiliation and identification with brothers and sisters provided a means of asserting the value, even dominance, of a current over a past generation, proclaiming one's interest in and embrace of progress rather than clinging to the outdated modes and mores of the past. When men and women unrelated by blood

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aligned themselves in fraternal or sororal organizations, they were likewise asserting a collective power that could present a challenge to the standing order, and offer them an identity outside of the one that tradition and the biological family imposed upon them. Identifying horizontally represented the possibility for change and progress—and the acceptance of the change and progress that was happening whether people liked it or not.

Through close readings of several well known and widely discussed texts—as well as a few texts that have earned rather less attention—this paper will examine siblinghood as a site of individual and collective identity, and as a uniquely flexible relationship that has no fixed set of governing principles and is, therefore, always in negotiation among its members. This makes siblinghood a tremendously attractive relationship for many of the characters in the novels and stories under consideration, as they seek love, support, sympathetic understanding, and identification in their sibling bonds. Of course, the flexibility of siblinghood also leaves room for conflict and strife, and the brothers and sisters in the texts at hand almost always reach a moment of crisis that challenges their sibling tie. The fictions at hand show brothers and sisters pushing one another away nearly as often as they pull one another near.
Time and again, they seem to find in their brothers and sisters relations that they can manipulate to suit their needs, and ignore when their needs are met.¹⁷

Though the bulk of my study is situated in texts written after the Civil War, I begin with an examination of Herman Melville’s 1852 novel *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities*, which inherits its tone and substance from both the early national and antebellum incest stories of Brown, Poe, and Hawthorne and the sentimental novels about “girls alone” who marry brother-like figures, as in the works of writers such as E.D.E.N. Southworth, Maria Cummins, and Susan Warner. Melville’s text, which has received critical attention primarily for its convoluted language and expressed obsession with authorship and publishing, focuses even more intriguingly on a brother-sister pair—that is, on a man and woman who may or may not be brother and sister, and whose mania for siblinghood results in their ultimate ruin. Melville invests his protagonist with a deep-seated, yet deeply problematic, desire for a sister, holding siblinghood up to the light and forcing readers to consider exactly what constitutes a sibling relationship, and why it is alternately valuable, fulfilling, difficult, and terrible. Pierre Glendinning, the novel’s tortured hero, is seduced by

¹⁷ The careful reader will notice that I do not discuss in depth any work dealing with brother-brother relationships. This is due, primarily, to the fact that there do not seem to be any, at least of comparable popularity and notoriety with the other texts under discussion, a somewhat puzzling situation that begs further investigation. Overall, though, as Sarah Annes Brown points out in *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (2003), “significant paired brothers seem comparatively few and far between in nineteenth-century fiction ... the brother-sister relationship is much more important, and provides the focus of numerous works” (vii).
siblinghood because he thinks having a sister will give him a way of escaping what is oppressive in his life (bearing, as an only child, all the expectations of his distinguished lineage and all the attentions of his dominating mother) and a venue for heroism he feels it is his duty, as a Glendinning, to perform.

In the second chapter, I turn to Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), perhaps the most familiar (and beloved) nineteenth-century sibling story. Alcott places the four March girls in a crucible of siblinghood, where issues of identity, power, and intimacy are always in flux and under negotiation, simmering restlessly and sometimes boiling over. The sisterhood shared by Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy can be a source of both love and mutual support and conflict and strife, but for Jo, Alcott’s heroine, it is the relationship valued above all others, and she is motivated throughout the novel by nothing so much as her desire to preserve the sisterhood. Marriage, which takes the girls out of the natal home and disrupts their sisterly unit, is the greatest threat to its preservation, and Jo protests mightily against the expectation that she and her sisters must marry. However, because her form (the sentimental novel) and her audience demand it, Alcott marries off each of the surviving March girls by the end of the novel, and must therefore resolve the two competing mandates she has constructed in *Little Women*: the imperative that sisters love and be everything to one another, and the demand that well-raised young ladies leave the natal home and start new families of their own. My contention is that the truest, though perhaps most
unrealistic, "happy ending" that Alcott grants her heroine, Jo, is to give her both a 
husband and a sustained, close attachment to her sisters, making the real romance of 
*Little Women* the one shared among Jo and her sisters.

The local color literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries 
frequently discusses what happens when siblings do maintain close bonds well into 
adulthood, and in the third chapter I explore the ways in which these sibling 
"marriages," usually between two sisters, embody and expand our understanding of 
the core concerns of the local color genre: the tensions between past and present, 
tradition and progress, insider and outsider. Focusing on stories and novellas by Mary 
E. Wilkins Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Edith Wharton, I argue that these 
authors, like those before them, used sustained sibling bonds to explore issues of 
individual and collective identity, investing in their sister pairs a commitment to 
family and an understanding of self that is inextricably linked to their sisters and their 
own sisterly roles. As in other local color stories, however, these sibling tales also 
present a way of life that is at risk of being lost forever, and in the stories of "sister-
love," this way of life is all the sisters have ever known—so the threats to their unity 
present very high stakes indeed. Nothing less than the sisters' sense of family and self 
is put at risk.

My final chapter explores the many nineteenth-century fictions that place 
siblings on opposite sides of the color line, serving both as a metaphor for the
fractured American family of the era and as an illustration of the taboo of interracial sex and the multitude of mixed-race Americans. Focusing primarily on works by Charles Chesnutt, as well as novels by Pauline Hopkins and Mark Twain, I trace out the ways siblinghood is complicated by issues of race and sex, arguing that the splintered sibling relationships in these texts frame the problems of racial discord, segregation, and national reunion faced by the United States in the post-Civil War era. Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Twain call the ideal of universal brother- or sisterhood into question in these texts, amplifying the frequent abolitionist invocation of the slave's plea—"am I not a man, and a brother?"—through their use of literal, and often splintered or compromised, siblinghoods.

Melville, Alcott, Freeman, Chesnutt, and other nineteenth-century authors understood and depicted the unique flexibility of the sibling relationship, and used the bonds of brothers and sisters as a space in which both the intimate family and issues of identity, individuality, sympathy, and power could be shaded in new and complex ways. The texts at hand reveal siblinghood as an electric, ever-changing relationship, in which networks of power are constantly realigning and reversing themselves; in which a brother or sister may prove equally loathsome as loving and lovable; and where the possibilities and limits of the bond are always important—and always in negotiation. Unlike the parent-child bond, where an innate hierarchy is generally understood, and power resides firmly with the parent, the sibling
relationships in these fictions demonstrate that no such order exists among brothers and sisters—age, which might be presumed to supply a kind of hierarchy of power, is seldom the guarantor of influence or control.

Yet despite the potential for conflict, in almost all of the sibling fictions examined in this study, siblinghood represents possibility—the possibility of sympathetic union with a like other; the possibility of knowing one's self by seeing it reflected in another person with the same blood, family narrative, and experience; the possibility of deflecting overly intense attention from parents or others onto a brother or sister. Perhaps the greatest possibility to be found in siblinghood is the opportunity the relationship provides characters in many of these novels and stories to create, or recreate, family on their own terms. From Melville's Pierre Glendinning, who escapes the oppressiveness of his natal home by pretending to marry his supposed half-sister; to Alcott's Jo March, who would rather "marry" her sisters than find an appropriate husband; to the sisters that populate Freeman's local color stories, who have lived together their entire lives, siblinghood becomes an alternative to the expectation of traditional marriage, and a way of realigning one's primary identity from "daughter" or "son" or "wife" or "husband" to "sister" or "brother," labels that presumably impose less stringent, submissive, or oppressive identities. When characters choose siblinghood, they are choosing their own identity—who they are, and how, and to whom, they relate. Electing or emphasizing siblinghood, these fictions show, is an
assertion of individualism and selfhood—but one that, because it depends upon other people, is also an assertion of family.
CHAPTER ONE

Fraternal Succor, or, Keep It in the Family: The Seductive Promise of Siblinghood in Herman Melville's *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities* (1852)

Herman Melville's *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities* (1852) revolves around the question of siblinghood. Early in the novel, the protagonist, Pierre Glendinning, learns that his late father may have had an illegitimate daughter—Pierre’s half-sister—before marrying Pierre’s mother. This supposed sister, Isabel, announces her identity to Pierre in a letter; having read its astonishing contents, Pierre then goes to dine with his mother and their minister. The dinner discussion centers on the pregnancy of an unmarried local girl, with Mrs. Glendinning passing harsh judgment on the situation, and Pierre finally asks, “Should the legitimate child shun the illegitimate, when one father is father to both?” His question here exposes the novel’s linked concerns with kinship and virtue: Pierre is asking how, exactly, legitimate and illegitimate children do, and should, “relate.” He ultimately decides that, to protect his father’s good name and do the right thing where his father failed, he must acknowledge to Isabel that they are brother and sister—and tell the world that they are husband and wife. For this decision, Pierre is disinherited by his mother, dismissed by his friends, and forced to find a way of supporting himself and Isabel—his sister-wife—in the cold and unwelcoming city. He is unable to do so, his

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1 This and all subsequent citations are drawn from the 1996 Penguin edition of *Pierre*, and will be cited parenthetically (101).
relationship with Isabel goes haywire, and the tale ends with multiple deaths on a jailhouse floor.

Since its publication in 1852, reviewers and critics have found the task of summarizing and classifying *Pierre* a not inconsiderable challenge. Early reviewers wondered if the author of *Moby-Dick* and *Typee* could really be talking about incest, as he appeared to be, and mourned the disappearance of his earlier genius. Later critics would debate the extent to which the novel was a parody and/or a failure, and, most recently, read *Pierre* alongside the sentimental fictions that were popular in his time, and whose style Melville claimed to be adopting in *Pierre*. To the wife of his new and adored friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville wrote that his current project would be “not a bowl of salt water” but “a rural bowl of milk,” while he told his English publisher, Richard Bentley, that it was “much more calculated for popularity”

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2 The Boston *Daily Times* sniffed that there was “nothing rational or probable, hardly anything possible,” about the narrative. The *Albion* fretted that it “hints at that fearfullest of all human crimes, which one shrinks from naming.” And Melville’s friend Evert A. Duyckinck wrote in the *Literary World* that there was a troubling “supersensuousness” in the book, and that “the horrors of an incestuous relation between Pierre and Isabel seem to be vaguely hinted at.” Nathaniel Parker Willis commented a bit more generously that *Pierre* was “subtle, metaphysical, often profound, and has passages of bewildering intensity,” though one might be inclined to stop at “subtle” and wonder whether or not Willis actually read the book. (These reviews and others are included in Higgins and Parker, *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews* [1995].)

than anything else he had yet written. Melville professed repeatedly that *Pierre* was designed to win readers by operating in the same sentimental mode as the most popular and best selling novels of his age.

Many of the themes and much of the language of *Pierre* are clearly borrowed from contemporary sentimental fiction. However, I want to propose that an earlier genre, the seduction novel, provides an equally apt model for the central drama of *Pierre* and, perhaps, a better framework for understanding the product Melville created. Abandoning the maritime setting of his earlier novels for a land-bound domestic tale, Melville constructs *Pierre*, superficially at least, according to the narrative trajectory of seduction fictions such as Susannah Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791) or Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797): cloistered naïf succumbs to the charms of a mysterious stranger, leaves home, meets tragic end. But the particulars render *Pierre* something altogether more complex, and less readily classifiable along generic lines. The hero of Melville's tale, the character who gets seduced, is not a sweet young maiden, but a nearly grown young man. The dark seducer is not a man, but a woman, Isabel Banford. And the terms of the seduction are not promises of romance or marriage (at least not overtly, and not at first). Isabel appears as if out of thin air to announce herself as the illegitimate daughter of Pierre's father, answering his single "yearning" in life: for a "sweet sister" whom he might

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4 Letter to Sophia Hawthorne, 8 January 1852; letter to Richard Bentley, 16 April 1852.
“love, and protect, and fight for” (7). In Pierre, the site of seduction is the promise of siblinghood.

What exactly is this sister wish of Pierre’s, and where does it come from? Why is siblinghood the missing relationship he so desires, and “brother” the role he so wants to perform? In part, the answer lies in the simultaneous excesses and deficiencies of the family Pierre does have. He is the sole surviving male Glendinning in his family line, his father having died years before, and lives alone in an overwrought, suffocating intimacy with his mother, Mary, who calls him “Brother Pierre” and whom he labels “Sister Mary.” Pierre seems overwhelmed by the intense closeness of his relationship with his mother, and by the obligation to live as heroic a life as his forefathers did—and wishes desperately for what he lacks, for a sister who might (he imagines) both lighten the load he carries as an only child and offer him an outlet for the heroism he feels required to perform. When the dark and mysterious Isabel appears and offers herself as a sister, the irksome issue of her illegitimacy and the speciousness of her claim do occur to Pierre, but rather than providing cause for doubt, they only make Isabel more attractive to him. In her simultaneous similarity (the blood they presumably share) and difference (her darkness, her utter lack of kinship ties), and in her need for acknowledgement (and, by extension, salvation), Isabel is the perfect sister for Pierre.
What Pierre sees—or believes he sees, or chooses to see—in Isabel, I argue, is the resolution of the nineteenth-century American's anxieties of likeness and difference and doing and feeling “right,” and the competing drives for individual experience and sympathetic connection. As critics such as Priscilla Wald and Walter Benn Michaels have argued, the rapidly changing face of the nineteenth-century United States—racially, geographically, and economically speaking—compelled many Americans to assert and distinguish their separate, and supposedly superior, identities. Knowing one's own identity as well as the identities of others became a central concern. Melville also wrote Pierre in an age when ideals of fraternity and sorority were powerful metaphors for organizations of affinity, where laborers, reformers, and religious groups assembled as brothers and sisters to declare their identity and assert their collective power. For Pierre, a sister represents this same sort of extension of identity, of broadening one's space in the world through a sympathetic other who is the same, yet a separate being, who affirms Pierre's identity and shares a common purpose.

With his repeated descriptions of Isabel's darkness and Pierre's lightness, Melville identifies them as both utterly different or foreign from one another and,

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5 Walter Benn Michaels, in Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism (1995), argues that the social transformation of the United States in the nineteenth century prompted Americans to take up the central question, “So what is an American?” (15). In Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form (1995), Priscilla Wald looks at how nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors used, or responded to, the “official stories” of what constituted a true “American” identity, as the “changing demographics of the United States “besieged” U.S. nationalists (299).
through their supposed siblinghood, members of the same family. Melville seems to want readers to imagine Pierre as white and Isabel as, at least in part, black, but by giving them a shared father, he unites them across racial lines; Pierre's twin yearnings for a sister and heroic performance may therefore be read as the problem of the virtuous (and Christian) nineteenth-century white American in regard to the experience of black Americans within the system of slavery—he feels compelled to answer the question Harriet Beecher Stowe poses at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—"What can any individual do?"—with Stowe's own confident response, "they can feel right." The central attraction of siblinghood to Pierre lies in its promise of an other who is both like and unlike himself, who, at least ostensibly, shares his identity and place in the family—and the weight of his family legacy—yet is a distinct human being, an object or vessel for his own imagined heroism. Pierre is seduced by Isabel because she is at once strange and related; he can imagine her as a sympathetic soul sister or as an object of exotic, unfamiliar attraction. What Isabel finally offers Pierre, in her all her mystery and siblingly familiarity, is the possibility of creating a family on his own terms. She seduces him by offering him both siblinghood and the capacity for virtuous performance. When Pierre decides that he has been betrayed by that seduction, he rejects any pretense of familiarity and fixates on what he now perceives as Isabel's utter foreignness to himself.
By crafting a seduction tale centered around the relationship of a brother and sister, Melville suggests the particular flexibility and value in siblinghood, and also—by describing all the ways in which Isabel seduces Pierre by more traditional sexual and romantic means—exposes the "hidden" story within the sentimental fiction whose structures he borrows for *Pierre*. The question of incest—brother and sister pretend to be husband and wife; do they or don't they consummate their relationship?—is impossible to ignore in *Pierre*, as Isabel's allure is located simultaneously in her ostensible sisterly relation to Pierre and in her undeniable sex appeal, in her similarity and in her foreignness. The same may be said for domestic fictions such as Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), in which young women who are alone in the world, bereft of close family ties, form sibling-like attachments with sympathetic men and ultimately marry them—fulfilling the same narrative of incest, in a less overt way, as Melville narrates in *Pierre*. Melville therefore seems, in *Pierre*, to be as much commenting on—or parodying—domestic novels, or "rural bowls of milk," as constructing one of his own.\(^6\)

The point to which we must always return is that Pierre's central motivation is his wish for a sister, and in this chapter I will attempt to account for the manifold impulses behind and characteristics of that wish. It is a relative identity that Pierre

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\(^6\) He is also, of course, picking up the threads of William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), a text whose influence I discuss in further detail elsewhere in this chapter.
seeks, believing that his own is incomplete without a like other, so he is at once outwardly focused and utterly narcissistic. Further, by suggesting that we read Pierre as working within the established and popular mode of seduction fiction, I am proposing one way we might better understand both how the book “fits”—as a Melville novel, as an American novel—and what force drives the actions of its protagonist: how the narrative operates. By proposing siblinghood, rather than romantic love or sexual attraction, as the basis of Pierre’s seduction, I hope to train our focus on the relationship that most interests Melville in the novel, and begin to suggest why it matters so much—to Pierre, to Melville, to nineteenth-century Americans both fictional and actual. The problem with Pierre—and Pierre—is the problem of siblinghood; the novel demands consideration of what makes people siblings, and where the boundaries and obligations of that bond lie.

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Melville began work on Pierre, or, The Ambiguities in the fall of 1851, mere months after completing Moby-Dick. Published the following year, Pierre, unlike Melville’s earlier tales of maritime adventure, follows a hero whose territory is land, not sea, but who shares with Moby-Dick’s Captain Ahab an all-consuming
monomania. The white whale for Pierre Glendinning, as Melville explains in the first pages of the novel, is a sister:

So perfect to Pierre had long seemed the illuminated scroll of his life thus far, that only one hiatus was discoverable by him in that sweetly-writ manuscript. A sister had been omitted from the text. He mourned that so delicious a feeling as fraternal love had been denied him. Nor could the fictitious title, which he so often lavished upon his mother, at all supply the absent reality. This emotion was most natural; and the full cause and reason of it even Pierre did not at that time entirely appreciate. For surely a gentle sister is the second best gift to a man; and it is first in point of occurrence; for the wife comes after. He who is sisterless, is as a bachelor before his time. For much that goes to make up the deliciousness of a wife, already lies in the sister.

"Oh, had my father but had a daughter!" cried Pierre; "some one whom I might love, and protect, and fight for if need be. It must be a glorious thing to engage in a mortal quarrel on a sweet sister's behalf! Now, of all things, would to heaven, I had a sister!" (7)

These two short paragraphs establish the character of Pierre's "sister-wish," and are worth exploring at some length, as they also foreshadow and encapsulate the entire sprawling, bizarre plot of the narrative that follows. In this early passage, Melville informs his readers not only that his protagonist is driven by a yearning for "fraternal love," but that this desire is wholly entwined with his relationships with his dead father, his living mother, and—in the comparison of sisters and wives—with his fiancée, Lucy Tartan. The author sheds further light on Pierre's character by describing the way in which Pierre sees his life as a "text," and his performance in that text as, necessarily, "heroic." By casting exertions on behalf of a sister as Pierre's
preferred fulfillment of his heroic destiny, Melville here sets Pierre up for the arrival of Isabel, and his subsequent “heroism” on her behalf—and, concomitantly, situates him as a sitting duck, the seducee primed to fall to the seducer who promises to grant his fondest wish.

In language that belies his protagonist’s sense of himself as a hero of unrealized potential, Melville depicts Pierre as a sort of spoiled child, obsessed with the one thing he does not have. With the repeated use of passive-voice constructions such as “had been omitted” and “had been denied him,” the author conveys Pierre’s petulant sense of injustice at not having a sister: He sees himself as a character in a “scroll” or “manuscript” or “text” whose author has failed him in not drawing a sister character by his side. The author of the text of Pierre’s life may be read as God, or some universal, transcendental “Author,” but Melville also makes it clear that Pierre harbors resentment toward his father—another potential “author” of Pierre’s life—for not siring a daughter.

Here we begin to understand that though Pierre reveres his father’s memory, and wishes to perform heroically in order to claim the name of Glendinning, he also feels as if Pierre Senior has failed him—left him sisterless and incapable of heroic performance. Pierre first appears “issuing from the high-gabled old home of his fathers” (3), in the country where his great-grandfather had fought in “an Indian battle” and his grandfather had defended a fort in the Revolutionary War (5). Pierre,
Melville tells readers, had inherited the “noble qualities of his ancestors,” but has yet to perform any heroic acts of his own—and his destiny as a Glendinning and as an American demands that he do so. While his ancestors fought battles of epic, historical scope, Pierre wishes to perform a more intimate, personal act. His rueful “Oh, had my father but had a daughter” indicates that he is denied this opportunity by what he conceives of as a failure of his revered father; therefore, Pierre’s wish to live up to the unimpeachable nobility of his forefathers is, ironically, thwarted by a perceived deficiency on their part.

This is, in fact, the foundational irony—or ambiguity—of the novel. Pierre idolizes his dead father, whom memory, and his mother, always describe to him as perfect. “There had long stood a shrine in the fresh-foliaged heart of Pierre,” Melville writes, in which stood “the perfect marble form of his departed father; without blemish, unclouded, snow-white, and serene” (68). Mary Glendinning advises Pierre to “never rave ... and never rant,” for his father “never did either”: as a guide for his own behavior, Mary tells Pierre to “always think of your dear perfect father” (19). Pierre Senior is a marble god, unblemished and beyond reproach, an ideal to which Pierre Junior must aspire; he is the sacred symbolic ancestor who must be preserved and saved by successive generations.7 Since Pierre the father is consistently portrayed as perfect, it is little wonder that Pierre the son, who sees his life as perfect except for

7 Freud explores the symbolic uses of the totem in his discussion of incest—see “Totem and Taboo” and “The Savage’s Dread of Incest” in Basic Writings.
the absence of a sister, should wish so fervently for one: Her presence would make his life perfect, and save him from having to doubt the perfection of his father. Pierre Junior feels that his father has left him with a family that is incomplete—not only through his own absence, as a patriarch, but in his “failure” to father a daughter.8

Instead, Pierre lives alone in the Glendinning home with his mother, with whom he shares a sort of exaggerated intimacy. Pierre and Mary Glendinning apply the “fictitious titles” of “brother” and “sister” to one another in a conflation of family roles that Melville extends in his description of Pierre’s sister-wish. With the assertion that “He who is sisterless, is as a bachelor before his time,” since “much that goes to make up the deliciousness of a wife, already lies in the sister,” Melville presents the complications of familial and personal identity that course throughout Pierre—but he does not elaborate on the provocative claim that the “deliciousness” of a wife may be found, in large part, in a sister. Is his premise that a man requires a close female relation, in one form or another, throughout his life? That he is incomplete without one? Certainly, as we have seen, the vocabulary of wistful yearning throughout this early passage communicates Pierre’s sense that he has been denied something essential, something that would complete him. Finding himself without a “real” sister, therefore, Pierre gives that title to his mother; the ease with which he interchanges women’s roles and his relationships to them foreshadows the

8 As Carol Colatrella writes, “Pierre’s mission to right his father’s wrongs is a radical project founded on accepting family responsibility and changing the definition of family” (193).
troubles and transgressions of relationship boundaries (namely, through incest) that arise later in the novel.

Melville describes Pierre and Mary’s relationship as officially mother-and-son, nominally brother-and-sister, and effectively lover-and-lover. Mary Glendinning is a beautiful woman who “still eclipsed far younger charms, and had she chosen to encourage them, would have been followed by a train of infatuated suitors,” but “a reverential and devoted son seemed lover enough” (5). Pierre fulfills Mary’s needs in some special way, even waiting on her as she dresses, and offering to secure the ribbon around her neck with a kiss (14). For Mary, still a fairly young and attractive widow, Pierre’s adoration supplies all the masculine attention she needs, and employing a vocabulary of siblinghood with her son is a way of asserting her youth and exerting her control over Pierre. When he displeases her, she tells him, “Sister me not, now, Pierre;—I am thy mother” (95). While this sibling play might go some distance toward fulfilling Pierre’s sister-wish, he lacks control over the configuration of family in the Glendinning home—the controller of the terms of relationships is most definitely Mary.

Pierre’s sister-wish may therefore signal a desire for family on his own terms, or at least for an other who might share the dual burdens of the Glendinning legacy.
and Mary's excessive intimacies. In his description of the "sisterless" young man as being a "bachelor before his time," Melville also positions Pierre as somehow incomplete and isolated in his life, a lone figure who wants a sibling to share his space in the world, to reflect himself back upon himself, to prove and legitimate his own identity. Just following his description of the sister-wish, Melville explains that Pierre sometimes experienced a "feeling of loneliness" at finding himself "surrounded by numerous kinsmen and kinswomen, yet companioned by no surnamed male Glendinning, but the duplicate one reflected to him in the mirror" (7). This seems to signal Pierre's understanding that siblings can be ways in which the individual extends beyond him- or herself to claim a greater identity than the one he or she possesses as his or her own. Siblings share parents, blood, and a common family narrative; they are (ostensibly) as similar as distinct human beings can be.

Melville casts Pierre's sense of incompleteness as a "most natural" feeling, as if all people feel, as Pierre does, that a sibling is a significant and necessary relation. His belief in the universality of his yearning for a sister may come from his novel reading, as this description of Pierre's sister-wish also supplies an early hint at the novel's preoccupation with literature and authorship. In one of the first of many images and

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9 Clark Davis writes that "the presence of an equally developing yet sexually opposite sibling might have allowed him to depend less upon his mother" (27).

10 In The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (1976), Bruno Bettelheim includes a section titled "'Brother and Sister': Unifying Our Dual Nature," in which he explains that fairy tales often use siblings to "represent the disparate natures of id, ego, and superego; and the main message is that these must be integrated for human happiness" (78).
metaphors of texts and scripts in *Pierre*, the hero conceives of his life as a "sweetly-writ manuscript," from which only a sister character is missing; later on, Melville informs readers that "like all youths, Pierre had conned his novel-lessons; had read more novels than most persons of his years" (141). Pierre's sister-wish seems to be informed by the lessons of both the seduction novels of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, in which brother-sister incest was presented as sympathetic union taken too far, as well as by the sentimental fiction of Melville's own era, which often featured the marriages of young men and women who were either raised as, or felt themselves to be, as close as brother and sister, but who did not share the blood that would make them "true" siblings.

The sympathetic union of brothers and sisters—and the potentially incestuous implications of their bonds—had a well-established and familiar precedent in American literature by the time *Pierre* appeared in 1852. As critics such as Glenn Hendler and Elizabeth Barnes have argued, in early national life and literature, Americans prized the experience of feeling like and with a sympathetic other, and ordered social and civic ties according to a vocabulary of kinship. Melville's novel strongly echoes a work such as William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), in which characters Harriot and Harrington—their names sufficient warning of their relatedness—exchange passionate letters of romantic devotion and sympathetic attachment even after they are revealed to be brother and sister. Harriot declares to
Harrington, “I start with horrour at the idea of incest—of ruin—of perdition,” and yet asks, “Shall we strive to oppose the link of nature that draws us to each other?” (86, 87) The knowledge of their sibling relation ultimately kills Harriot, but not before she has asked Harrington if the "natural" sympathy between them can possibly be ignored. In Harriot's mind, it cannot.\(^{11}\)

Incest, while an acknowledged possibility in works such as *The Power of Sympathy* and Edgar Allan Poe's “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), is avoided in the later sentimental novels by the union of women with men who are only *like* brothers. The heroines in novels like Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) and Maria Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854) begin their fictional journeys alone in the world, forced to re-create new families for themselves—families that include brother figures whom the heroines end up marrying. These couples are as closely united in sympathy and affection as a brother and sister, but because they share no blood, their marriages are acceptable. Though their initial lack of family ties is generally depicted as a forced, undesirable, and tragic state, in their solitude and independence, as Cindy Weinstein has suggested, these heroines are in some ways the quintessential Americans, free to make their own connections and find their own

\(^{11}\) As Elizabeth Barnes writes, "the revelation of their sibling relationship dampens the lovers' spirits but does nothing to dry up their desire" (*States*, 146).
ways in the world. This is what Pierre wants for himself—he wants to be the sentimental heroine, at liberty to construct a family, a life, on his own terms. But in choosing to play that part, rather than having the sentimental heroine’s solitary and family-free existence forced upon him, Pierre demonstrates a fatal narcissism—a self-centeredness that manifests itself in his relationships with others in such a way that he ends up controlling them, not relating to them; the sympathy he seeks to acquire is not shared with Isabel or anyone else but felt, or imagined, by Pierre alone.

Melville’s concern with sympathy does not begin with Pierre; in *Moby-Dick*, for example, Ishmael is delighted to find himself “mysteriously drawn” toward Queequeg, and the tenth chapter of that novel is titled “Bosom Friend” (49). In her

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12 Wai-chee Dimock points to “the destruction of the local farm economy, the collapse of the artisan and apprenticeship system, and rapid industrial growth” as some of the nineteenth-century phenomena that “hastened the breakdown of kinship ties and promoted the notion of individual autonomy” (142). Weinstein argues that the sentimental novels advance the “radical” proposition that “without the biological family in shards, [the sentimental novel] can’t work, and as much as protagonists mourn the wreckage of family relations, their very lives depend on it” (161).

13 Melville is plainly subverting the conventions of the sentimental novel by investing his male protagonist with many of the attributes traditionally applied to female characters. Louisa May Alcott does a similar thing in *Little Women*, where Laurie, the male neighbor and friend of the four March girls, is drawn with more of the characteristics and plot points of the traditional sentimental heroine than are any of the March sisters (see Chapter Two).

14 In suggesting that Pierre is motivated primarily by the twin desires for sympathetic siblinghood and the power to (re)create family on his own terms, I am both following and diverging from previous approaches to *Pierre* that frame his core motivation as a yearning to cast of the constrictions of genealogy altogether and achieve an orphan-like status. Wai-chee Dimock’s provocative analysis of the novel in *Empire for Liberty* is the model of this approach. Arguing that Melville himself sought, in writing *Pierre*, to produce a truly original literary product, owing no debts to the “genealogy” of writers who came before him, Dimock describes how Pierre is captivated by Isabel’s “apparently unbegotten selfhood” and what he views as “the privilege term of individualism in its naturalized form” (164). Jennifer DiLalla Toner agrees with Dimock that Pierre is intent on “embracing a version of Isabel’s orphanhood for himself” (246). My contention is that while Pierre effectively isolates, or orphans himself, in the novel, he does so either accidentally or helplessly. That is, he genuinely wants connection, preferably with a sibling or a sibling-like person, but his desire or need to control the terms of their relationship results in his ultimate isolation. Pierre is incapable of “relating.”
insightful analysis of *Pierre*, Wyn Kelley suggests that Melville would have been familiar with the popular sentimental mode of his day, either reading them himself, or sharing in the habit of his female-dominated household of reading novels aloud together. Kelley, along with Monika Mueller, also points to Melville’s burgeoning friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne as a significant influence on his writing of *Pierre*. In Hawthorne, Melville seems to have been experiencing the indescribable pleasure of discovering a sympathetic soul; in one oft-cited passage, he wrote his new friend, “A sense of unspeakable security is in me this moment, on account of your having understood the book [*Moby-Dick*].... Whence come you, Hawthorne? By what right do you drink from my flagon of life?....Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling.”

Melville is delighted by likeness here, by the sympathy he senses in Hawthorne. There is clearly something deeply attractive to Melville about the discovery of a communion of spirit, and this is the passion he invests in Pierre’s sister-wish. It may in fact be that Pierre has “conned his novel lessons” so well that he believes he *must* be a brother in order to be a hero; it is therefore useful to consider the novel as a story about the creation of siblinghood. Throughout the book, Melville presents readers with instances of created, rather than “natural,” siblings: Pierre and

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15 Letter from Melville to Hawthorne, November 1851, quoted in Leyda (435).
16 Kelley and Mueller both point out as well that one of the things Melville and Hawthorne shared was an interest in the utopian communities that were so prevalent in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, with *Pierre* and Hawthorne’s satire of such communities, *The Blithedale Romance*, both appearing in 1852.
Mary Glendinning, Pierre and Isabel Banford, Pierre and Lucy Tartan, Pierre and Glen Stanly. Pierre even conducts a sort of sibling play with his fiancée, Lucy Tartan, and her two brothers. In one of the novel’s most amusing scenes, the Tartan brothers return home after three years in the navy. Lucy embraces them and exclaims, “My darling brothers!” Pierre then embraces the three Tartan siblings, and cries, “My darling brothers and sister!” The Tartan brothers do not recognize the friend of their youth, and deem his behavior “decidedly improper.” Pierre’s answer to this is that he “can’t explain for joy” (29). Pierre is so caught up in the Tartans’ display of sibling love that he cannot stop himself from joining them. And while he might reasonably call the brothers of his fiancée his own brothers, it is crucial to note that he goes one step further—one step too far, as the Tartan brothers’ response illustrates—and makes Lucy his sister here, again conflating the various female roles into the one he prefers. For Pierre, no emotional bond would seem more intense or pleasurable than that shared by brothers and sisters; because he is an only child, and has to create that bond with people with whom he shares other links of blood or affinity, his “sistering” of them, in particular, becomes a sort of contrivance or performance of siblinghood.

With only an unsatisfactory supply of mock-sibling relationships in hand, Pierre is therefore primed to succumb to Isabel’s charms, when she arrives in Saddle Meadows and declares her identity as Pierre’s sister. She tells the first part of her story to Pierre in a letter. He reads it, is shocked, holds it to his heart, and cries, “The
letter!—Isabel,—sister,—brother,—me, me—my sacred father!” (65) Though he has just learned amazing news—news that gives him a heretofore unknown sister and challenges his perception of his father as the “fond personification of perfect human goodness and virtue”—Pierre’s first response involves no questioning, no doubt or deconstruction of Isabel’s claim (68). His reaction is instead a string of names and labels that serve at once as a means of connection and individuation. That is, Pierre’s exclamation can be read as the unfolding realization of a link of relation—the letter tells that Isabel is a sister, which makes Pierre a brother, which impugns his father—but it also sets up the confusion and conflation of identity that comprises the bulk of the novel: It is as if the letter is Isabel is his sister is he the brother is his father. Pierre cannot separate one person from another, or even see the distinction between an identity and the piece of paper that announces it. (This is the man, after all, who thinks of his life as a “manuscript.”) The “me, me” that anchors his response establishes Pierre’s essential narcissism and inability to think of others except as they reflect upon, or define, himself.

Melville details Isabel’s seduction of Pierre in a series of long chapters in which she announces her identity in a letter, then narrates her history in person, then allows her guitar to speak when she cannot. The author makes clear that his is a story of seduction not so much by using that term, but by encoding Pierre’s fall in a language of entrancement and spells. When Isabel tells Pierre her tale of woe, he
yields wholly and helplessly to her power over him:

[H]e now first became vaguely sensible of a certain still more marvelous power in the girl over himself and his most interior thoughts and motions;—a power so hovering upon the confines of the invisible world, that it seemed more to incline that way than this;—a power which not only seemed irresistably to draw him toward Isabel, but to draw him away from another quarter—wantonly as it were, and yet quite ignorantly and unintendingly; and, besides, without respect apparently to any thing ulterior, and yet again, only under cover of drawing him to her. For over all these things, and interfusing itself with the sparkling electricity in which she seemed to swim, was an ever-creeping and condensing haze of ambiguities. Often, in after-times with her, did he recall this first magnetic night, and would seem to see that she then had bound him to her by an extraordinary atmospheric spell—both physical and spiritual—which henceforth it had become impossible for him to break, but whose full potency he never recognized till long after he had become habituated to its sway. (151)

As he listens to Isabel's story, Pierre is enraptured by the strange and exotic girl who claims to be his sister; he is “irresistably” [sic] and “wantonly” drawn to her as if by some kind of “spell.” With words like these, Melville is describing a seduction through the power of sympathy (or something like it)—Pierre feels both his body and soul “magnetically” pulled toward Isabel's, attracted to her by an otherworldly force.

The convoluted, entangling language in this passage (and many others like it) lifts Pierre and Isabel's bond out of any rational realm, which is, of course, the state in which sympathy also exists. Melville describes the experience of a dawning sympathy between Pierre and Isabel—at least, as it is felt by Pierre—but his language mocks that experience at the same time. Even as he falls under this spell, though, Pierre
remains conscious of the fact that it will “draw him away from another quarter,” the home and family to which he ought, presumably, maintain ties, and he understands that Isabel’s claim is shrouded in “ambiguities.” The spell is, in the end, strong enough to conquer any doubts, and desirous as he is of having a sister, Pierre succumbs to Isabel’s “sway”; her “electric” and “magnetic” power works easily on him.

In “falling” under Isabel’s “spell,” Pierre experiences a seduction not unlike those in earlier sentimental fictions. Melville’s language here strongly echoes a work such as Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*, in which the heroine, Eliza Wharton, explains to her friend that she could not help falling for the caddish Peter Sanford: “My heart did not approve his sentiments; but my ear was charmed with his rhetoric, and my fancy captivated by his address,” she writes.17 In Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1789), the narrator, Clara Wieland, is so obsessed with and mesmerized by Carwin that she describes how “a nameless ecstasy thrilled through my frame,” and believes that Carwin must be “gifted with supernatural power.”18 This language of enchantment casts the seducer as something mysterious and unreal; it also confuses the distinctions between power and agency and powerlessness and victimization—that is, when a seduction is predicated on such intangible, unquantifiable terms, it is often as possible that it is a construct of the seducee’s imagination as it is a design of

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18 Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland; or The Transformation* (1798); quotes are from 1994 Oxford edition (71, 86).
the seducer’s. Pierre is susceptible to Isabel’s seduction for the many reasons already laid out, just as Eliza Wharton and Clara Wieland were in their respective fictions, but “reason” is powerfully supported in each seduction by something ineffable and mysterious.

Melville demands readers’ suspicion of Isabel by repeatedly referring to her as “preternatural” and “incomprehensible,” and wants them to realize that there is something problematic about Pierre’s attraction to her: He believes her story, but not because of its supposed “facts.” Instead, Pierre is convinced on a less rational, more spiritual level. Pierre doesn’t know what, exactly, draws him to Isabel; it is partly her beauty, partly the “long-suffering, hopeless anguish” he reads in her face, and a “wonderfulness” that “unmans” him (49). Pierre finally realizes that he has a “vague impression, that somewhere he had seen traits of the likeness of that face before” (49). Melville’s language here is again pointed in its ambiguity: It is not that Pierre has seen Isabel’s face before, or even a face like hers; he has instead a “vague impression” of having seen “traits of the likeness” of her face. While he attributes this to a similarity between Isabel and the “chair-portrait” of his father as a young man, the vagueness of Pierre’s impressions suggests that they may not actually exist, that he may be forcing a connection that is tenuous at best. What he sees, or decides to see, in Isabel is something that is at once familiar and strange, similar and foreign. She seems to
resemble his father enough to make her story believable, and to answer Pierre's desire for a sister. For Pierre, for the moment, that is enough.

When Pierre finally goes to see Isabel, and hear her story, the spell only grows stronger, and takes on a more sexual tone. Once she has snared him with her written words and compelled him to visit her in person, the "supernatural" Isabel mystifies and entrances Pierre using three tools: her speech, her hair, and her guitar. As she tells her life story, Isabel refers frequently to the "dimness" and "vagueness" of her recollections, announcing to readers—if not to the captivated and uncomprehending Pierre—that she might actually be remembering incorrectly (if not making her story up out of whole cloth). Melville also makes Isabel's speech a labyrinth of invented words and nonsense. At one point, for instance, she tells Pierre that she has a hard time recalling details because of "the bewilderingness;—and the stupor, and the torpor, and the blankness, and the dimness, and the vacant whirlingness of the bewilderingness" (122). Melville renders Isabel all but incomprehensible—but instead of finding this frustrating or repulsive, Pierre desires only to hear more, and discover more evidence that his sister-wish has been answered.

In addition to speaking in an excess of excessive words, Isabel uses her hair and her guitar to entrance Pierre. Isabel has "immense soft tresses of the jettiest hair," Pierre observes, and finds that this hair makes him think of "some saint enshrined" (118). The blackness and quantity of Isabel's hair underscore and manifest her
mystery; it is the veil that obscures her being and her origins. Pierre is fixated on Isabel's hair and enchanted by the sexuality it suggests. The "shadows cast from her infinite hair into her unfathomed eyes" pull him irrevocably into her story and her life (147). He admits this to her when they meet for the second time: "[T]ruly, Isabel, thy all-abounding hair falls upon me with some spell which dismisses all ordinary considerations from me" (145). Isabel's "unrestrained locks" sweep the floor in "wild redundancy" (149), and make her a source of both mystery and attraction; Pierre sees in them a "wantonness" that he cannot deny—and an attractiveness he cannot resist (126).

Isabel's guitar tells her story when she can (or will) not. At the end of the first part of her tale, Isabel tells Pierre to "listen to the guitar; and the guitar shall sing to thee the sequel of my story; for not in words can it be spoken." The guitar (or Isabel; Melville leaves this unclear) sings:

Mystery! Mystery!
Mystery of Isabel!
Mystery! Mystery!
Isabel and Mystery! (126)

Her playing overwhelms and distresses Pierre, who exclaims that the guitar has "filled me with such wonderings" (127). The guitar has not, of course, told any real "sequel" to Isabel's story; it has merely reinforced her mystery and strengthened the enchantment of Pierre. It is at Pierre's second interview with Isabel, however, that
their interaction becomes more intensely and sexually charged, when she invites him to look inside her guitar. There, he sees her name inscribed; Isabel claims that the inscription came to her along with the guitar—it was not done for her—and is convinced that the guitar was her mother's. "Pierre, I have no slightest proof—but the guitar was hers, I feel it was," she cries, and Pierre is persuaded—or at least captivated by her passion (149). The invitation to listen to and look inside her guitar all but completes Isabel's seduction of Pierre. It is an intimate gesture of openness on her part; she is telling her story and exposing her soul. She is also metaphorically offering a physical opening of her "self" to Pierre, since the guitar is an extension of her body, and Pierre is powerless against her "instrument," and the attractions of its openings and interiors. For Pierre, who sees his life as a text, Isabel, who sees her "self" as a guitar, is the perfect match.

The seduction in *Pierre* is at once more graphic and more oblique than in the earlier seduction novels. Using imagery like the guitar and Isabel's hair, and describing multiple episodes where Pierre feels "overwhelmed" or "entranced" by Isabel, Melville places the pair in a vortex of emotion that—while remaining unsettling and almost incomprehensible—is more passionate and charged than the seductions in the earlier novels, where they are often only discussed after the fact, in letters to disapproving friends and relatives. Simultaneously, because Isabel's attractiveness to Pierre resides (ostensibly, at least) in her sibling relationship to him,
the seduction is predicated—again, at least superficially—on wholly unfamiliar literary terrain. This is not unproblematic, of course—for Melville or for Pierre. The author writes himself into a narrative of incest that he must surely have known would run at cross purposes to his purported interest in writing a novel “calculated for popularity,” and his hero must find a way of reconciling his desire for a sister, and his desire to perform virtuously and heroically, with his desire to sleep with this same supposed sister.

Almost as soon as he feels the spark of sexual attraction, and understands the complications of having these feelings for a sister, Pierre finds a way to shift his relationship with Isabel. Having listened to Isabel and her guitar, Pierre feels the “intuitively certain, however literally unproven” fact of Isabel’s sisterhood to him (139). He wonders to himself why he should believe her, and even decides that she may be of an age to make her an impossible product of the (supposed?) relationship between his father and the French woman (at least according to the story as he understands it). Instead of causing him to doubt Isabel, however, these mysteries, and “mysteries interpieced with mysteries, and mysteries eluding mysteries,” make her something else entirely:

Fate had separated the brother and sister, till to each other they somehow seemed so not at all. Sisters shrink not from their brothers’ kisses. And Pierre felt that never, never would he be able to embrace Isabel with the mere brotherly embrace; while the thought of any other caress, which took hold of any domesticness, was entirely vacant
from his uncontaminated soul, for it had never consciously intruded there.

Therefore, forever unsistered for him by the stroke of Fate ... Isabel wholly soared out of the realms of mortalness, and for him became transfigured in the highest heaven of uncorrupted Love. (142)

As easily as he decided to identify Isabel as his sister when they first met, Pierre now conveniently imagines Isabel out of siblinghood and into some sort of extraterrestrial embodiment of love. He is so drawn to her, and so aware, it would seem, of the erotic nature of his attraction, that he must “unsister” Isabel in his mind. Of course, mere pages later he calls her “sister” again; he exchanges identities for Isabel as it suits him (and much as his mother did with Pierre). While Lucy Tartan is an open book, Isabel is a blank slate, on whom Pierre may inscribe whatever identity suits him at a given moment. His “intuitive certainty about the mysterious girl is “out of the realms of mortalness,” and their mutual sympathy—Pierre decides—is all he needs to know.

Isabel seduces Pierre not only by supplying the previously absent role of sister in his life, she also fulfills his desire for one familial bond where another, his father, has been lost, and gives him an outlet for the heroism he feels bound to perform. In his essay “Family Romances,” Freud explores the notion of “replacement,” wherein a child substitutes one missing or in some way lacking person, generally a parent, with another. He explains that the “whole effort at replacing” someone, in this case a father, with a “superior one” is not an effort at getting rid of the original father, but “an expression of the child’s longing for the happy, vanquished days when his father
seemed to him the noblest and strongest of men." For Pierre, Isabel also represents a means by which he may compensate or atone for the sins of his father: He, the young Pierre, will take care of Isabel as his father did not, and simultaneously acquire her as a replacement Glendinning for the one he lost as a child. Only, Pierre is more like his father than he thinks, and is, like his father before him, drawn with a little more than fraternal interest to mysterious, foreign women with long dark hair. In Melville’s Glendinning family romance, Pierre’s efforts toward replacement are multivalent to the point of absurdity: Pierre wants to replace his father for Isabel, replace his father with Isabel, and replace all lack or omission in his life with Isabel the sister who is also Isabel the wife.

Isabel’s appearance announces an apparent lapse, or failure, on the part of Pierre’s father. Based on the tale told by Isabel, her resemblance to the youthful “chair-portrait,” the stories Pierre has heard from his father’s sister about a mysterious Frenchwoman, and his father’s own delirious deathbed cries to an unknown “daughter,” Pierre determines that his father once had an affair with the Frenchwoman and Isabel is its result. If Pierre is to accept that, he must also accept his father as a sexual being, and Melville takes pains throughout the novel to demonstrate that Pierre cannot deal with sex: he wants it, but he also rejects it. When he visits Lucy Tartan’s bedroom early in the novel, Pierre is both enchanted and

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horrified by the intimacy of standing by Lucy’s bed, longing to “unroll the sacred objects of that snow-white, ruffled thing” but daring to touch “not any object in that chamber” (39). Pierre likewise treasures the “chair-portrait” of his father as a young man, but because his mother has indicated her distaste for it, signifying, as it seems to, according to Pierre’s Aunt Dorothea, a period in Pierre Senior’s life in which he was entranced by a mysterious “other” woman, he hides it in a closet.

Pierre hides the presumed evidence of his father as a sexual being in a closet, neither rejecting it outright nor airing it in full public view. The use of the closet in *Pierre* is a motif that echoes other tales of what John Demos terms the “hothouse family,” including those that describe strange or intense sibling bonds.²⁰ Like the “chair-portrait” in *Pierre*, a source of mystery lurks in a closet in *Wieland*, wherein a brother and sister wonder after the bizarre death of their father. In Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the “closet” is actually the coffin in which Roderick Usher has entombed his still-living sister. The symbolic closeting in these stories and in *Pierre* functions to expose what is hidden, with the selective opening and shutting of doors serving to bring to light the secrets held by current or past generations of a family. Closeting also allows the “both and neither” ambiguity that runs throughout Pierre; by holding onto the “chair-portrait,” but keeping it hidden, Pierre can pretend to have rejected his father as he was in his youth, without fully doing so. And by

²⁰ Demos, “Oedipus in America.”
holding onto two versions of his father (after all, Melville tells us, a second portrait of
Pierre Senior as a husband and father also hangs in the family home), Pierre can
present himself, or imagine himself to be, like or unlike his father, as it suits.\textsuperscript{21}

His father’s ambiguous character and past are hazy and obscured, but the
constant, at least as expressed by Pierre, is Pierre’s desire to protect his father’s (and
his family’s) good name. After hearing Isabel’s tale, Pierre’s primary determination is
that he must protect his father’s perfect reputation, and the reputation of the
Glendinning family, by hiding the supposed fact of Isabel’s genealogy. He will
announce his marriage to Isabel, rather than his blood kinship with her, and even
begins to sense the possibility of heroism in claiming Isabel not as a sister, but as a
wife:

If next to that resolve concerning his lasting fraternal succor to Isabel,
there was at this present time any determination in Pierre absolutely
inflexible, and partaking at once of the sacredness and the
indissolubleness of the most solemn oath, it was the enthusiastic, and
apparently wholly supererogatory resolution to hold his father’s
memory untouched; nor to one single being in the world reveal the
paternity of Isabel.... And what though not through the sin of Pierre,
but through his father’s sin, that father’s fair fame now lay at the mercy
of the son, and could only be kept inviolate by the son’s free sacrifice of
all earthly felicity;—what if this were so? It but struck a still loftier
chord in the bosom of the son, and filled him with infinite
magnanimities. (177)

Pierre is trying to save both Isabel and his father's memory—but his motivations are actually mostly selfish. Having announced, even before introducing Isabel, that Pierre wishes for a sister for whom to perform heroic acts, Melville makes Pierre's actions after meeting her seem like rather less than saintly generosity. In Isabel, Pierre sees the chance to take action—to become, in some way, heroic—thereby earning his claim to the good name of Glendinning. However, in seeking to preserve the sanctity of his father's memory, Pierre is effectively hastening the Glendinning line to its demise. By deserting his mother, Pierre allows the Glendinning fortunes to pass instead to his cousin, Glen Stanly. By deserting his appropriate fiancée, Lucy Tartan, in favor of his (supposed) half-sister Isabel Banford, he effects the end of the family line.22

Of course, the other part of what seduces Pierre about Isabel is the possibility she represents of connection—of a family bond—that is horizontal and (theoretically, at least) equal, free of the oppressive weight of the past, of the hard-to-live-up-to honor and heroism of generations of Glendinnings. In their life in the city, Pierre can relate to Isabel, and share an experience with her, in a way that he never could with Lucy in Saddle Meadows. There, he would always have to yield to the puppeteering of his mother, and be consumed by the expectations held by all around him of the

22 As Eric Sundquist writes, "the paradox of Pierre's resolve to save Isabel and protect his father's sacred public memory lies in the fact that his very desire to keep his father's name untainted ensures that it will die out with Pierre" (Home as Found, 154). Isabel may represent possibility to Pierre, but she is also, as Jennifer DiLalla Toner writes, "a living representation of rupture in the Glendinning line" (252).
Glendinning heir. Pierre imagines—and creates—a family life with Isabel in which he controls the terms of affiliation and affection, as well as the grounds of heroic performance, not his mother—not understanding that, in his desire for control of familial relations, he is merely replicating the power structure of Mary Glendinning’s household and casting himself in the position of power over Isabel. Pierre is so charmed and blinded by the brilliance of his own “infinite magnanimitis” that he fails to see how insubstantial, foolish, and un-heroic they actually are.

The confusion of identities that Melville first articulates in Pierre’s sister-wish, when he equates sisters and wives, and that takes shape in Pierre’s secret acceptance of Isabel as a sister and public acknowledgement of her as a wife. seems inevitably bound for combustion—Pierre and Isabel find it as difficult to sort out their layers of relation and identity as do Pierre’s readers. But whether or not readers accept Pierre and Isabel as brother and sister, the characters believe themselves to possess that relationship, and Melville offers plenty of evidence to suggest that there is an incestuous sexual relationship between the two as well. We have seen that Pierre is attracted to Isabel’s dark beauty, and that Melville focuses readers’ attention on the wild sexuality of her unbound, abundant hair. But Melville also describes Pierre and Isabel’s interactions with a coded vocabulary that is striking for its simplicity, particularly in a book so freighted with excessive, repetitive, entangling language. For instance, just before Pierre and Isabel flee Saddle Meadows, they have a brief, heated
confrontation, then reconcile:

He held her tremblingly; she bent over toward him; his mouth wet her ear; he whispered it.

The girl moved not; was done with all her tremblings; leaned closer to him, with an inexpressible strangeness of an intense love, new and inexplicable. Over the face of Pierre there shot a terrible self-revelation; he imprinted repeated burning kisses upon her; pressed hard her hand; would not let go her sweet and awful passiveness.

Then they changed; they coiled together, and entangledly stood mute. (192)

The physicality of this scene itself suggests the sexual nature of Pierre and Isabel's relationship, but it is the last sentence of the passage (which is also the last sentence of the sub-chapter in which it appears) that carries the most weight. With "Then they changed," Melville manages to announce something important and yet say, really, nothing at all. How did they change? What kind of change did they make? What does it mean? All is left ambiguous—except that, following the descriptions of trembling, mouths wetting ears, and burning kisses, and preceding the description of Pierre and Isabel coiled together, it hardly seems ambiguous at all.²³

The blunt, simple "Then they changed" phrasing is echoed later in the novel when Pierre and Isabel are at the Church of the Apostles. Again, Isabel is "trembling," and Pierre "moved nearer to her, and stole one arm around her; her sweet head

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²³ Critics differ on how to read the sexuality, and the literalness of the incest, in Pierre. Eric Sundquist argues that "the sexual in Pierre is almost but not quite" (Home, 151), while Jane Mushabac claims that Pierre and Isabel's relationship is "allowed full rein" (148).
leaned against his breast; each felt the other's throbbing” (272). Pierre is just beginning to come undone, feeling the reality of his choice to leave his family and home for Isabel, and starts musing aloud to her on the meanings of virtue and vice. He deems himself “a nothing,” and claims that “It is all a dream—we dream that we dreamed we dream.” Isabel agrees that they are living in a dream, which appears to comfort Pierre, who asks, “How can one sin in a dream?":

“First what is sin, Pierre?”
“Another name for the other name, Isabel.”
“For Virtue, Pierre?”
“No, for Vice.”
“Let us sit down again, my brother.”
“I am Pierre.”
“Let us sit down again, Pierre; sit close; thy arm!”

And so, on the third night, when the twilight was gone, and no lamp was lit, within the lofty windows of that beggarly room, sat Pierre and Isabel hushed. (274)

Here again, Melville uses one simple word (“hushed”) to describe what Pierre and Isabel do when they are alone together. And, again, their physicality is emphasized—this time, with Isabel asking (rather, demanding) Pierre to embrace her. Finally, Pierre’s conflicted feelings about vice, virtue, and sin, and his insistence that he is “Pierre,” not “brother,” reinforce his desire to relate to Isabel in a more sexual, less fraternal, manner.

In the end, it is Lucy Tartan who seems to confirm the incest between Pierre and Isabel. After Lucy has joined Pierre, Isabel, and Delly at the Church of the...
Apostles, Pierre is discomfited by the new living arrangements—as well he might be, having merely recreated the female-dominated household he fled when he left his mother’s home. Following a conversation about money, Lucy leaves the room and Isabel places her hand upon Pierre’s knee, then bends over him “intently.” Pierre flushes, and “involuntarily he started a little back from her self-proffering form.” Isabel notices his anxiety, and says, “If thy sister can ever come too nigh to thee, Pierre, tell thy sister so, beforehand” (332). Pierre is “riveted” by her, and responds “Too nigh to me, Isabel? Sun or dew, thou fertilizest me!” He then implores her to “sit close,” in order that “my one frame may be the continent of two” (333). They talk for a bit, then Pierre “caught her in his arms” and

While the first fire of his feeling plainly glowed upon him, but ere he had yet caught her to him, Isabel had backward glided close to the connecting door; which, at the instant of his embrace, suddenly opened, as by its own volition.

Before the eyes of seated Lucy, Pierre and Isabel stood locked; Pierre’s lips upon her cheek. (334)

Pierre and Isabel are revealed to Lucy “at the instant of embrace,” and the chapter ends. The door behind which Pierre and Isabel conduct their secret relationship has opened, and Lucy bears witness to their intimacy. Of course, Lucy does not fully comprehend what she sees; she still thinks Pierre and Isabel are husband and wife. When she discovers the truth, in the final pages of the novel, it kills her: when in the jail, Isabel wails “my brother, oh my brother,” Lucy simply “shrunk up like a scroll,

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and noiselessly fell at the feet of Pierre” (361). She dies from shock, and her dramatic
demise springs from sudden knowledge of the truth of Pierre and Isabel’s relationship.
While she might have been envious of their intimacy when she understood them as
husband and wife, she is horrified by it when she finally understands what she has
actually seen. The awfulness of incest kills her; her death confirms for readers not
only that incest has occurred, but that incest is destructive and wrong.

Of course, incest can only be committed in *Pierre* if Isabel and Pierre are, in
fact, sister and brother, children of the same father—and that fact is never
definitively proven. Though Pierre does not begin to question Isabel’s identity in any
substantive way until his plans for “saving” her have gone well awry, he has in fact
received ample warning throughout the text that succumbing to her concomitant
mysteriousness and (perceived) similarity / shared identity may be folly. Melville
makes this clear to readers from the instant Isabel stakes her claim, with his
hyperbolic insistence on the “Mystery! Mystery! Mystery of Isabel!” ringing
sardonically to any ears but Pierre’s. Pierre, of course, hears words of warning and
dismay from his friends and family in Saddle Meadows, and even hears them repeated
by strangers when he, Isabel, and Delly arrive in the city. Searching for Glen Stanly’s
house, but lacking a specific address, Pierre frustrates the driver of their coach into
dumping the three passengers and their luggage on the street in front of a police
station. Pierre apologizes to the officer on duty with the explanation that “It is a
rather strange accident, I confess, my friend, but strange accidents will sometimes happen.” To this, the officer scoffs, “a little ironically,” “In the best of families” (235). Though Pierre and the officer are supposedly discussing the driver’s unceremonious deposit of Pierre and company here, the officer has observed Pierre’s silliness at driving the streets looking for the lion-heads that he remembers on Glen’s house, and mocks him for it. His words also suggest the way Melville uses Isabel: She, the (supposed) illegitimate daughter, is the strange accident that happens in the best of families. Furthermore, with his repeated descriptions of her darkness, Melville seems to be suggesting that Isabel’s racial identity may be something of a question—which would mean Pierre is defining himself alongside, and seeking sympathetic union with, a racial “other.”

Melville clearly intends for readers to question Isabel’s race; the author rarely describes her without mentioning her “dark, olive cheek” and her excess of black hair, which contrasts with Pierre’s own lighter complexion (46). Isabel’s hair, as we have seen, signals her excessive sexuality, but the constant references to its blackness also allow Melville to call Isabel black without exactly calling her black. The hair that entrances and blackens Pierre, when it falls upon him or enshrouds him, is the central symbol of Isabel’s mysterious identity: it marks her as different from Pierre, as an “other” who may be racially separate even as they embrace their supposed genealogical similarity and shared identity.
The use of black imagery also extends beyond Isabel’s appearance and “dark” past; after Pierre’s dramatic expulsion from his mother’s home, he passes the “white curtains” of the “white cottage” where Lucy Tartan lives, which has a “white saddle-horse tied before the gate,” and takes up residence at an inn known as the “Black Swan” (186). The insistent, repetitive rhetoric of lightness and darkness in this section signifies Pierre’s journey from innocence to experience, but also, in its excess, mocks both Pierre and the sentimental conventions that would have had a hero make the reverse of that journey, from darkness to light. When Isabel joins Pierre at the inn, and he speaks angrily to her, she cries, “Now does the very worst blacken on me” (190); later, while still at the Black Swan, Pierre burns his hand, and the soot gets on Isabel—here, Pierre is blackening Isabel, rather than the usual reverse, when her black hair covers him. Pierre even refers at one point to the “Nubian power” in Isabel’s eyes, making a connection between her and Africa (145).

The constant reminders of blackness and darkness help reinforce the mystery of Isabel, and the depths to which Pierre will fall once he has acknowledged her, but because they occur in a book that is concerned with the peculiar mechanics of American genealogy, they seem clearly meant also to make readers just that much more suspicious of Isabel, and call into question not only her identity as a Glendinning, but her race, as well. Melville informs readers that Pierre’s grandfather was himself a slave-owner, situating the Glendinnings firmly in an American
tradition fraught with issues of race and identity. And Isabel tells Pierre that the first people she remembers, the elderly couple with whom she resided, appeared to her (or appear in her memories of them) as being “almost black” (114). Isabel is, as Anna Brickhouse points out, never finally revealed as black, white, both, or neither, but functions as “a suggestive figure for inter-American racial crossings” in the novel (432). As the “rather strange accident” that happens in “the best of families,” and to a not inconsequential degree in the nineteenth-century United States, Isabel represents the dark child fathered by the light man outside of his legally and socially sanctioned marriage. She is not a mystery at all, but a familiar fact of American life, particularly within the plantation household. Like the offspring of a slave mother and a slave-holding father, Isabel has been denied an identity, denied a name, and suffered ignominy, poverty, and hardship throughout her life. Isabel is Pierre’s dark sister—at least, metaphorically; at most, biologically—and represents a secret Glendinning history that resonates with the publicly unacknowledged genealogical history of the American nineteenth century.

Like William Wells Brown’s Clotel or Pauline Hopkins’s Sappho Clark, Isabel is in many ways the tragic mulatta of Melville’s tale, unacknowledged by her father and destined to suffer as a result of her love for a white man. As an emblem of the many nameless, unacknowledged, illegitimate dark children of the nineteenth-century United States, Isabel is therefore both the perfect object for Pierre’s
affections—a vessel lacking personal agency in need of salvation and
acknowledgement—and an impossibility as the partner in shared identity that he
seeks. Melville starts his novel with an extended treatise on the importance of names
and lineage, which serves primarily to establish Pierre's own position as a privileged
member of a historically proud—and locally and nationally important—family,
whose heroics he wishes to emulate in his own time. But this discussion also sets up a
framework of family and inheritance from which Isabel is utterly and pointedly
divorced, underscoring her difference, her foreignness, from Pierre (and from
everyone else in the novel). After writing at length about the difference between
American and European aristocracy, Melville explains the importance of this apparent
digression to the rest of his tale:

In general terms we have been thus decided in asserting the great
genealogical and real-estate dignity of some families in America,
because in so doing we poetically establish the rich aristocratic
condition of Master Pierre Glendinning, for whom we have claimed
some special family distinction. And to the observant reader the sequel
will not fail to show, how important is this circumstance, considered
with reference to the singularly developed character and most singular
life-career of our hero. Nor will any man dream that the last chapter
was merely intended for a foolish bravado, and not without a solid
purpose in view. (12)

Not only does Pierre enjoy a "rich aristocratic condition" that puts him in stark
contrast to the pathetic Isabel, he is distinctly American in a way that Isabel may not
be. That is to say, his "genealogical and real-estate dignity" is obvious and undeniable,
while Isabel, almost utterly without an identity or a past, has no distinguishable history whatsoever, and certainly not a clearly American one. She is absolutely foreign, absolutely other, whether we understand those terms to mean that she is part French and grew up across the ocean or that she is part black, and excluded from the America in which Pierre and his family reside. Melville also slyly pairs “our hero” and “foolish bravado” here, casting aspersions on Pierre’s supposedly heroic action in “saving” Isabel in the narrative to come.

Sacvan Bercovitch argues that Isabel represents a dark side of the American story, but suggests that she more likely signifies the racism and intolerance inflicted on the immigrant classes of the nineteenth century. In *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1992), Bercovitch writes that “however we interpret the mystery of Pierre, Sr., the family taint is symbolic—the legacy of the fathers, Pierre’s own in particular and the country’s in general.... Whatever her actual origins, she [Isabel] is a true daughter of the Glendinnings—the excluded immigrant sewing-girl who embodies the hidden, illegitimate side of their history” (296). Brickhouse argues that while Isabel’s mother is “purported to have fed the Reign of Terror,” the emphasis on Isabel’s blackness suggests “that her Frenchness ... may have come by way of the multiracial Americas rather than directly from eighteenth-century France” (431). While he spends pages describing the bloodlines and heroics of the Glendinning family, Melville leaves Isabel’s ancestry utterly
ambiguous, keeping her an empty vessel, open to manipulation and mystery. She is, as Bercovitch says, “a kind of walking allegory of the catastrophic view of history,” bringing into view “various kinds of corruption” in the American setting of the novel (296).

Pierre worries over these various kinds of American corruption, and attempts to save his father’s good name by keeping the secret of Isabel’s paternity—and giving her, or so he thinks, the identity she has been denied. When he argues with his mother and Reverend Falsgrave about the connections between legitimate and illegitimate siblings, he is trying to work out the appropriate course of action, but does not in the least absolve himself of complicity in the Glendinning corruption Melville describes. Pierre’s grandfather was a slave-owner, his father has an illegitimate daughter of obscure racial identity, and Pierre himself (ab)uses Isabel for his own purposes. Rather than giving her a name, he owns her by naming and renaming her howsoever it suits him, hides her away in the name of protecting her, and expects her to do his bidding. He effectively enslaves her—which means that the terms of Pierre’s seduction (which, again, he’s participated in so willingly that he has almost effected it himself) ultimately reinforce his own sense of power. As Christine Macdonald writes of Richard Hildreth’s 1836 abolitionist novel *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore*, Pierre is participating in a system in which “the white male power to decide who is a family member—and to ignore adultery and even
incest—is in effect passed down from father to son” (647). Pierre ultimately denies Isabel personhood by controlling the terms not only of her identity, but of her very existence. No less than his father and grandfather, he is using his power as a white man to control a person of indefinite relationship to him, and indefinite racial identity.

Pierre seems to attempt—albeit too late—to halt, or alter, the complicated brother-husband role in which he has placed himself, essaying a shifty maneuver around incest, and does so by questioning Isabel’s claim of siblinghood. It is important to remember that even while Pierre sees something familiar in Isabel, something that may well be his own likeness, Melville insists throughout the novel that she is actually something very different from Pierre. She is dark where he is light, she can barely piece together the pieces of her past while he has an oppressively lengthy and heroic heritage. Pierre has the good name of Glendinning to win the respect and deference of his fellow countrymen, while Isabel has no name to recommend or identify her. They are utterly different, and Pierre ultimately realizes (or decides) this. As their lives continue to disintegrate, and as he finds his suspicions of Isabel growing, Pierre visits a museum with Isabel and Lucy on either arm. Spying a portrait that resembles Isabel at least as much as, if not more than, the “chair-portrait” of his father, Pierre asks, “How did he know that Isabel was his sister?”:

Setting aside Aunt Dorothea’s nebulous legend [and] Isabel’s still more
nebulosity story ... both of which thus blurredly conjoining narrations, regarded in the unscrupulous light of real naked reason, were any thing but legitimately conclusive ... and setting aside all his own manifold and inter-enfolding mystic and transcendental persuasions,—originally born, as he now seemed to feel, purely of an intense procreative enthusiasm ... how did he know that Isabel was his sister? (353)

Pierre finally recognizes that not "real naked reason" but "an intense procreative enthusiasm" is the source of his conviction in Isabel's sisterly relation to him: Even as he would later present her in the shape of a wife, he initially imagined her into being as a sister. For a hero whose every relationship throughout the novel is predicated on instability and ambivalence, this should come as no surprise—and indeed, it is only after his "creation" of Isabel as a sister-wife has not gone as planned that Pierre acknowledges that he might have imagined a relation on the basis of little convincing evidence.

Pierre is attracted to Isabel as a sister, but he is finally incapable of relating to her along sympathetic lines, resorting instead to those of power and domination. She is an outlet for him, not a partner—he acts upon her, he doesn't relate to her—and while she resolves for a time his anxieties of likeness and difference and gives him a way of recreating family on his own terms, these terms are not reasonable ones, and their relationship is not at all fraternal. There is no absolute evidence in the novel to indicate that Pierre finally realizes Isabel is black, but he definitely sees her differently by the end of the novel—he sees her as unfamiliar, as unknown, as unlike

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him, and that, to Pierre, becomes a betrayal. When he doubts Isabel’s identity—when he realizes that in “conning his novel lessons,” he has forgotten to heed the warnings about captivating strangers, Pierre regrets his benevolence in acknowledging Isabel—he feels, as Susan Ryan writes of Melville’s “dramas of benevolence gone awry,” the fear of many nineteenth-century Americans that there could ever be an “intrusion of artifice into their acts of benevolence” and that they might be “tricked into aiding the unworthy” (686, 685). Having failed to create Isabel in a successful mode, or to create a successful mode of relation with her, Pierre decides that his “infinite magnanimities” have been taken advantage of, and that his heroic performance has been predicated on lies and spells rather than the truth of siblinghood in which he had invested his whole self.

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In Pierre, both the protagonist and his creator are attempting to exist within familiar modes of conduct (and fiction) and exceed them at the same time. In so doing, Pierre the character, at least, is doomed. Though he plays the role of the seduced in the novel, he strives to escape the shackles of the seductive mode and live in a family, in a world, of his own making, where he is the active hero, not the passive victim. His success, albeit temporary, signals the unique flexibility of
siblinghood, which offers Pierre a way of living life according to his own desires, creating a family on his own terms, and performing the heroic deed of saving a sister. Pierre and Isabel's immoderate performance of siblinghood, and the exaggeration and contrivance of their connection, demand a reconsideration of the emotional bonds and responsibilities that characterize other—less passionate, but always complicated—relationships between brothers and sisters. By leaving the oppression of his family home to run away with Isabel, Pierre selects the ostensibly equal, horizontal relation of siblinghood over the submission mandated by the parent-child bond. He idealizes siblinghood in much the same way as did the many nineteenth-century men and women who sought to recreate family in communal utopian societies; like his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Blithedale Romance*, a novel published in the same year as *Pierre*, Melville may finally suggest that such designs are foolish, or naive, and cannot be sustained.24

*Pierre* marks a shift in the way siblings were represented in nineteenth-century American literature. While the unique tensions of likeness and difference that are characteristic of the sibling relationship would remain central to depictions of brother and sister characters well into the years following *Pierre*, Melville's novel serves—in its conflation and corruption of sibling and romantic relationships—to

24 For extended readings on the similarities between Hawthorne and Melville (particularly, between *The Blithedale Romance* and *Pierre*), see Brodhead, *Hawthorne, Melville, and the Novel*; Kelley, "Pierre's Domestic Ambiguities"; and Monika Mueller, "This Infinite Fraternity of Feeling": Gender, Genre, and Homoerotic Crisis in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Melville's *Pierre* (1996).
explode the modus operandi of sentimental fiction, and signals a true, if delayed, end to the incest themes of the early national seduction novel. That is to say, Melville brings the hidden—or willfully ignored, at least by contemporary readers—narrative of incest to the fore in *Pierre*, thereby forcing acknowledgement that these earlier fictions promoted sympathetic attachment to such an extreme that it threatened to result in incest. This is a lesson Brown had taught in *The Power of Sympathy*, but one that the later domestic novels presented as desirable, not problematic.

Further, written as it was in 1852, *Pierre* not only signals a moment of change in American fiction, but reflects and comments on American life in the years before the Civil War. By challenging fictional representations of family, Melville is also asking questions about the way the United States conceived of itself as a national family in the nineteenth century. Like Stowe and others, Melville, in *Pierre*, questions whether or not such a metaphor for citizenship can possibly be tenable when some are excluded from it—and when some within the so-called family are complicit, in varying degrees, in the oppression of others. The very American Pierre is described as the inheritor of a distinguished legacy, and feels an obligation to live up to it—but, as we discover, he has also inherited secrets and lies, and he is finally unable to put to rights the mess with which he's been left. If we read Pierre's sense of obligation to Isabel as the rightful duty of one citizen to another within the national family, or within the Christian ideal of the brotherhood of man, we must
acknowledge Melville’s critique of such ideas as insupportable self-deceptions.

In this, Melville anticipates later nineteenth-century American authors such as Charles Chesnutt and Mark Twain, who would further interrogate the fallibility of the notion of the national family (see Chapter Four). While these authors wrote in and after the Civil War and Reconstruction—and were therefore dealing with a different concept of American nationality and family—their concerns with identity and otherness are markedly similar to Melville’s. In still later decades, of course, other American authors would continue to explore the same ideas; William Faulkner is perhaps the most obvious inheritor of Pierre’s troubled sibling tale. And it is no accident that the American author and illustrator Maurice Sendak contributed the art for Hershel Parker’s “Kraken edition” of Pierre in 1995, as he—even in his children’s stories—demonstrates a fascination with the secrets and mysteries lurking in American families that rivals Melville’s in Pierre.25 As much as Quentin Compson or Max in Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are, Pierre Glendinning is haunted by mysteries, confounded by duty and virtue, and distressed—to the point of destruction—by his family ties.

25 Parker claims that this edition of Pierre reflects the original manuscript Melville presented to Harper’s in 1852, and contains none of the material on American authorship that constitutes such a large part of the second half of the novel as it was first published; see Herman Melville: A Biography (1996).
CHAPTER TWO

Such Devoted Sisters: Little Women and the Alcott Vision of Siblinghood

Louisa May Alcott's 1868-69 novel Little Women and Michael Curtiz's 1954 film White Christmas might seem, at a glance, wholly unrelated texts—but they actually share an uncanny series of similarities. Both take place during and in the aftermath of war, both feature characters preoccupied with having the "perfect" Christmas—in White Christmas this means snow; in Little Women, presents—and both include sister acts, of sorts: in White Christmas, we have Betty and Judy Haynes, a girl singing duo, and in Little Women we have Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March. But it is the song "Sisters" from the movie musical that suggests the title for my analysis of Alcott's best-known and most-beloved work. The song begins with the affectionate declaration, "Sisters, sisters, there were never such devoted sisters," but the refrain adds a threat to this announcement of loving sisterhood:

Lord help the mister
Who comes between me and my sister
And Lord help the sister
Who comes between me and my man!1

Sisterhood means devotion, but even sisterhood has its limits—and woe to the lover, whether that lover be man or sister, who threatens to violate its unity. The sister-

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1 "Sisters" was written by Irving Berlin for White Christmas in 1953.
speaker here essentially equates the attachment she feels to her sister to that she feels for her man, proclaiming the importance of both and cautioning whoever would put either bond asunder to beware her wrath. There's a complicated circularity to this stance, as it asserts both siblinghood and romantic love, yet ultimately suggests that these two relations may be irreconcilable with one another, or, at the very least, exist in an uneasy tension that requires the consideration, diplomacy, and understanding of all involved players.

This is the tension that Alcott's *Little Women* is all about. Following the relationships and coming-of-age of the four March sisters and their "brother-friend" Laurie, as one early review identified him, the novel both manifests and challenges two of the lessons of nineteenth-century domestic fiction—namely, that sympathetic attachment is an ideal to strive for and to cultivate, and that its apogee (for well-raised young women) is marriage. Within the March sisterhood—which is expansive enough to include Laurie as a fifth member—the bonds between the sisters are encouraged by Marmee and Mr. March, with the understanding that they are practicing, in youth, social behavior and feeling that they will later extend into their adult relationships with those beyond their immediate familial orbit. Yet even as this closeness is cultivated within the March home, so too is the certainty that the girls'...
destiny is to marry and leave the natal family—effectively bringing an end to the sisterhood. There is, therefore, a very real, yet largely unacknowledged, cruelty inherent in sympathetic education, as practiced in the March household: As Alcott reveals through Jo, who protests most passionately against the marriage imperative, it is rather brutal to encourage sisters to be everything to one another in youth, yet expect them to relinquish those bonds when they reach the age of marriage.

In *Little Women*, the March siblinghood is the site of both play and practice, both of which suggest its temporary nature—that it is a relation of childhood, where the intense sister-love the girls share in youth must be transferred to husbands and children in adulthood. There's a measure of the Bakhtinian “carnivalesque” to Alcott’s depiction of siblinghood, as the potentially subversive gender play that is allowable—even encouraged—in youth, especially for Jo and Laurie, is ultimately ordered and normalized as they mature, by the book’s marriage imperative. In its treatment of sympathetic (and sometimes symbolic) siblinghood and the marriage plot, *Little Women* both inherits and signals a shift in the sentimental mode of fiction. While sympathy, the “act of identification” in which one registers an “emotional response to

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reading or seeing an expression of another's feelings" so intensely that one virtually puts oneself in another's position, is a condition Alcott repeatedly describes as being shared by two or more of her sibling characters, it is not, in *Little Women*, the idealized rationale for marriage that it was in the sentimental novels of the 1840s and 1850s.4 Though Alcott describes the "unspoken sympathy" enjoyed by Laurie and Jo, she makes this the very reason they can't make a marriage match—they are instead presented, as Richard Brodhead writes, as "wrong for each other just because they are so right for each other," their sympathetic siblinghood the reason that they cannot marry (*Cultures* 101).

In this chapter, I explore the high stakes of siblinghood in *Little Women*, and reframe the analysis of Laurie and Jo by suggesting that, with their shared enthusiasm for the family, they are united most strenuously by Alcott in their individual identifications as siblings, and that acknowledging those roles as predominant—vis-à-vis both each other and the other March girls—illuminates both the attractions and the problems of siblinghood in the universe of the novel and beyond. I will look closely at Jo and Laurie through the lens of siblinghood: at what siblinghood means to Jo; at how she assimilates the lessons of sympathetic siblinghood so well she cannot, for most of the story, bear the thought of marriage (for herself or for her sisters); at how Alcott constructs Laurie's relationship with Jo and the other March girls using a

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4 Hendler 3.
vocabulary of fraternity/sorority, and how this becomes a barrier to one match for him, with Jo, and the reason for another, with Amy. Both Laurie and Jo are driven by the desire to remain, or to become, part of the March family, but while Jo loves her sisters so much that when she fears Meg is starting to think about marriage she exclaims, "I just wish I could marry Meg myself, and keep her in the family," Laurie, having had his first proposal of marriage rejected by Jo, decides to propose to Amy, consoling himself with the thought that "when [Mozart] couldn't have one sister he took the other, and was happy." 5 For Jo, keeping the family whole is so important that she yearns to "marry" her own sister, rather than losing her to marriage, while for Laurie, marriage provides access to the family—and one sister will do for a wife almost as well as any other.

Alcott paints the March sisterhood with tender, true strokes, as a relation of great intimacy, passion, and intensity, and the best critical work on *Little Women* has focused on the sibling story at the center of the novel—building, as mine will, off the work that critics such as Nina Auerbach and Judith Fetterley completed in the late 1970s. In *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (1978), Auerbach argues that Alcott's novel asserts the "primacy of the female family, both as moral-emotional magnet and as work of art," and explains that both Jo and Beth share a "desire for perpetual sisterhood" (61, 63). More than any other critic before or since, Auerbach

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5 I am using the 2004 Norton critical edition of *Little Women* for the purposes of citation in this paper; these and all subsequent citations will be drawn from that edition (161, 331).
weaves Laurie into her analysis of the novel, based on Alcott’s success in “engulfing”
the reader in the lives of the four March girls (60). In an article appearing just over a
year later, Fetterley describes the tension in *Little Women* between its “overt” and
“covert” messages, arguing that the March girls are taught self-renunciation, and
devotion to the needs of their sisters and those beyond the family orbit, while the
covert message of the book suggests that “the acquisition of the little woman
character is less a matter of virtue than of necessity”—and that while they may be
encouraged to pursue dreams of independence and artistic achievement, their destiny
is, necessarily, marriage and domesticity (376). Both Fetterley and Auerbach
acknowledge the centrality and attractiveness of the March sisterhood as a condition
of youth, and one that must be set aside in favor of marriage as the girls mature, yet
both, in their feminist readings of *Little Women*, conduct broader analyses that forgo
deep inquiries into the precise mechanics of sisterhood—providing suggestive
foundations for the reading I submit in this chapter.

With a household that seemingly vibrates with the activity of four sisters and a
brother-friend—that hums, as Walt Whitman wrote in “Carol of Words,” of “the
interminable sisters, / Of the ceaseless cotillions of sisters, / Of the centripetal and
centrifugal sisters, the elder and younger sisters”—and with a heroine who is
yearning to “burn [her]self on the shrine of sisterly devotion,” *Little Women* is a
sibling story *par excellence*, and Alcott’s narrative is never more alive than when all
four sisters (and Laurie) are present together in a scene (256). The sisters' bonds of blood and love provide mutual support and prepare them for womanhood and participation in the world outside their home, but their relationships are also destined to be altered and disrupted by marriage and the creation of new family ties as they mature. These are the dueling mandates in Alcott's novel, just as they were the immutable truths of her own life, and one of the most interesting, and least examined, aspects of *Little Women* is the way in which she contrives, for Jo, a happy ending that allows for both—the preservation of youthful sibling bonds *and* the forging of new attachments, and families, in marriage.

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Two metaphors for the March sisterhood suggest themselves early on in *Little Women*. We might opt, first of all, to see Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy as the prototypical girl group, described as they are by Alcott with the same careful balance of common and differentiated identities employed by twentieth-century record-label svengalis in their manufactured sister acts. Meg is the pretty one, Jo is the sporty one, Beth is the shy one, and Amy is the flirty one—they're a Civil War-era Spice Girls. From the opening pages of the novel, Alcott delineates each girl's character in relation to the other three, making her distinguishable and appealing in her own right but casting
that appeal as always dependent on the presence of her sisters—crafting, in the end, a
unit that succeeds best when all its constituent elements are present and accounted
for. This weighing of collective and individual identities is a critical component of
Alcott’s sibling study, in which she carefully uses siblinghood as a way of looking at
character and characters: Readers, like the sisters themselves, learn who each sister is
by the way she treats the others, and by what the others say or feel about her. Each
March girl monitors and influences the others’ behavior, and gauges her own
successes or failures against the measure of her sisters.

Or, we might view the four March girls as a little army, bonded in battle
against their baser instincts and the hardships of their (in some ways) impoverished
existence. They are enlisted by their father in such a struggle early on, as he advises
them in a letter written on a far-off battlefield to “do their duty faithfully, fight their
bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves ... beautifully” (17). Mr. March
brings the atmosphere of war into his daughters’ household, asking them to fight their
own battles at home and making them like Henry V’s “band of brothers” at
Agincourt: sisters because they fight together. The four girls are united in combat
against their lesser selves, and sometimes against one another—though they are often
bonded by shared ambitions, activities, and loves, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy also test
and annoy one another, knowing each other so well they can prey upon their

6 See Act IV, Scene III: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; / For he to-day that sheds his
blood with me / Shall be my brother” (lines 65–67).
weaknesses when such seems the way to achieve a desirable end. For better or for worse, the sisters are everything to one another, and if part of what they share is conflict, this only makes their sisterhood more relatable. In the end, for all their sense of want and strife, the March girls seem to have everything they really need in each other.

While the March family of Little Women is, in large part, modeled after the Alcott family, it would be hard to argue that the members of the real-life family had, in the girls’ youth, everything that they needed. Their father, A. Bronson Alcott, was a Transcendentalist philosopher and a teacher, more interested in the life of the mind than the survival of the body, who continually moved the family from one place to another according to the demands of his latest scheme. The most trying of these, for his wife and children, was the stint at Fruitlands, a utopian community founded upon the ideal of the “consociate family” by Alcott and Charles Lane. This experiment, parodied by Louisa in Transcendental Wild Oats (1873), failed after eight months, but not before the Alcott family had suffered a most trying winter and Abba, Louisa’s mother, had threatened to leave. Bronson’s friend and defender Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal that it was “Very sad, indeed … to see this halfgod driven to the wall, reproaching men, & hesitating whether he should not reproach the gods” (86). Abba, on the other hand, simply found it impossible to reconcile her

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7 In Richard Brodhead’s words, Mr. Alcott was “not just improvident but virtually antiprovident” (Cultures 75).

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priorities—her children and husband—with the demands of a communal society that asked all members to view all others, related by blood or not, as equal members of the family.

Bronson Alcott was among the vanguard of his time in his attitude toward children, whom he believed to be blank slates, clean souls emerging into the world free of sin or immorality. He was fascinated by his daughters, especially Anna, the firstborn, and made copious notes on her actions and spirit. By contrast, argues biographer Martha Saxton, Bronson “never liked Louisa,” finding her “too aggressive, willful, and fierce for his definition of feminine” (7). Once younger sister Elizabeth was born, Saxton continues, “Louisa found herself in the least desirable location in the family grouping. Neither her father’s favorite nor her mother’s baby, she got most of her attention by making trouble” (87).\footnote{Saxton’s biography is a somewhat suspect source (see Ann Douglas’s critical review in the New York Review of Books), though Ruth MacDonald agrees with her that the Alcott home was not as cozy as the Marches’: “The Alcott family, although tightly knit, was never as normal or as free of hostility as the March family is; a lifetime of living with the various quirks and failings of her otherwise exceptional parents and siblings had left Alcott with many ill feelings which could not be aired in as public a statement as a book” (11). Interestingly, Alcott’s contemporaries, in their recollections of the family, have a rather different (and remarkably consistent) take on Alcott family relations—though it is of course possible that they are conflating the Alcotts and the Marches. Cornelia Meigs, in her 1939 biographical sketch of the “invincible Louisa,” writes that “Few children loved their parents and each other as did the little Alcotts” (67); in her reminiscences of May Alcott Nieriker, Caroline Ticknor states that “a quite ideal relationship existed between her and her father and mother and sisters” (xvi). Lydia Hosmer Wood, a childhood friend and lifelong correspondent of Louisa’s, likewise recalled the family in a 1913 memoir: “They were such a dear, conscientious family, so harmonious and so lovable. The atmosphere of their house was almost sanctified, so much better did you feel for having been in it. There was so much love in their make-up, and love was the only medium through which the parents ruled and disciplined their children” (quoted in Shealy, 165).}

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of Louisa record her strong will and misbehaviors. One line in *Observations* does give a good clue about how Bronson's daughters were raised: He describes teaching Anna, Louisa, and Elizabeth that "Very good little girls give up their own wants to the wants of their little sisters whom they love."

Louisa Alcott seems to have taken this lesson to heart, for it appears time and again in *Little Women*. The March girls are, like the Alcotts, raised to be almost inhumanly selfless, acceding to the desires of their sisters and others—most notably, their poor immigrant neighbors, the Hummels—before thinking of their own wants and needs. From the beginning of the novel, where Mr. March enlists the girls in battle against their individual weaknesses and Mrs. March reminds them of their youthful game of "Pilgrim's Progress," the sisters are bound by love, obligation, and a shared battle against their respective failings. They refrain from laughing when Beth is guilelessly silly ("A Merry Christmas"), they give up their own meager, hard-earned money so that Amy can keep up with the fashion of sharing limes at school ("Amy's Valley of Humiliation"), they ignore the gossip of neighbors who cluck over their family's ruined fortunes and take solace in one another ("Burdens"). Though their yearning and envy of others is relentless, the very good little March girls almost always, in the end, give up their own wants to the wants of the sisters they love.

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9 Quoted in Strickland, 27.
In the journals she kept throughout her life, Louisa Alcott spends much less time discussing her sisters than she does herself or her parents. As she gets older, however, and becomes increasingly responsible for winning the family's bread, a tone of, alternately, resentment of and resignation to her sisterly role seeps into the entries. Younger sister May is repeatedly characterized as "lucky" or "fortunate," as Alcott describes how her sister "always finds some one to help her as she wants to be helped. Wish I could do the same, but suppose as I never do that it is best for me to work & wait & do all for myself" (Journals 128). Of course, Alcott herself is one of those who provides help to May; in February 1871 she records her decision to "leave May for another year" in Europe: "the new book [Moods] will provide $1000 for the dear girl, so she may be happy and free to follow her talent" (Journals 177). Having felt pressured into writing Little Women and its sequels, and, according to some critics, trapped into writing in something other than her "true" style, Louisa might have followed these words with "as I have not"; the journals reveal, with each passing year, less passion for art and authorship than determination to ply her trade in support of her family.

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10 She does wish for a brother, though; in a childhood journal entry dated December 23, 1843, Alcott writes: "I often wish I had a little brother but as I have not I shall try to be contented with what I have got" (Graves 19).

11 Judith Fetterley finds evidence in Alcott's later publications and private writing that she was at odds with writing outside of her "true style," and writing instead in the style of Little Women, to meet the demands of her audience (369).
All of which is not to say that Alcott did not love her sisters dearly. Indeed, after May died in 1879, Alcott’s heavy grief is almost tangible in her journal entries. On January 1, 1880, she writes, “A sad day mourning for May. Of all the trials in my life I never felt any so keenly as this” ([Journals](222)). She is cheered only after the arrival of May’s daughter, Lulu, whom she would raise until her own death in 1888. In her last years, health failing, and activity curtailed, Alcott made only the most cursory of entries in her journal, but the preponderance of those records letter from, letters to, or visits with Anna Pratt, her only surviving sister, who became, in the end, Alcott’s caretaker and closest companion. All evidence indicates that the relationships between the Alcott sisters, like those between any siblings, were constantly in negotiation—that special allegiances and balances of power shifted throughout their lifetimes, but that all four remained bound to one another so long as they lived. The nature of their sibling bond was negotiable; the fact of it was not.

This was also the case for the March sisters, whose siblinghood is rooted in their close identification with and their struggles against, and alongside, one another. Each March girl knows who she is based on her relationships with her sisters; their differences lend them distinction and their likenesses keep them bound as a strong, cohesive unit. In different degrees, each girl judges her success as a sister, a daughter, and a woman against her sisters, even as she claims her own space as an individual. Such is the imperative of the sibling, or any relative, identity: it demands that one
take an other, or others, into account in any definition of one's self. And the March girls' identities are wholly wrapped up in one another. They are constantly asking, "Who am I, and who are you, and who are we in relation to each other?" This calculated balance of collectivity and differentiation functions as the sort of division of identity labor critical to nineteenth-century domestic ideology—what Louisa Alcott's idol, and Bronson Alcott's friend, Margaret Fuller, called "unison in variety, congeniality in difference" (55), or what twentieth-century literary critic Gillian Brown identified as a "system of differences" that helps maintain "cultural coherence" (9).12

Within the March home, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy identify themselves alongside and against their sisters, and are encouraged by their parents to cultivate their sisterhood. Each girl knows who she is by her relationships with the others, but she is also defined—literally, overtly, and repeatedly—by them, especially in the first section of the book. This is partially a narrative device employed by Alcott to establish the girls' characters easily and early, but the effect of such "you are this" conversations between the girls is to demonstrate how much influence the others' impressions and interpretations have on the way each one perceives herself. When Jo burns Meg's hair while curling it, Jo protests, "You shouldn't have asked me to do it; I always spoil everything" (28). You know me, Jo is telling Meg, it's your own fault for

12 Sarah Elbert: "Louisa May Alcott's lifelong heroine was her father's friend and contemporary, Margaret Fuller" (xiii).
asking me to do what you know I’ll ruin. Later, rambling on at Laurie, Jo checks herself by saying, “I’ll talk all day if you’ll only set me going. Beth says I never know when to stop” (46). Jo, especially, hears her sisters’ voices, and their assessments of her character, even when they are not physically near her, telling her who she is. In another such passage, replete with emphatic declarations by one sister about who another is, we even see Beth requesting identification from her sisters:

“Poor Jo; it’s too bad! But it can’t be helped, so you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls,” said Beth, stroking the rough head at her knee with a hand that all the dishwashing and dusting in the world could not make ungentle in its touch.

“As for you, Amy,” continued Meg, “you are altogether too particular and prim. Your airs are funny now, but you’ll grow up an affected little goose if you don’t take care. I like your nice manners, and refined ways of speaking, when you don’t try to be elegant; but your absurd words are as bad as Jo’s slang.”

“If Jo is a tom-boy, and Amy a goose, what am I, please?” asked Beth, ready to share in the lecture. (13)

Here, Beth tells Jo what she “must” do (and identifies her as the “brother” in the March sisterhood, a topic that I’ll take up later). Meg follows this comment by informing Amy about her own foibles and failings. Beth’s words strive to soothe Jo, while Meg is more sharply critical. Yet Beth is “ready to share in the lecture,” and begs Meg to describe her character, to define her identity, suggesting that there is a comfort, of sorts, in being known to one’s sisters, to having one’s definite role in the family cosmos.
There is also a power in identifying, in being the sister who labels the others, which first Beth and then Meg possesses in this scene. In her depiction of the March sisterhood, Alcott pays close attention to the networks of power among the girls, illuminating the powers of influence and identification as capital that is always in contest among siblings. Power shifts and reverses itself on the basis of events and sentiments both major and minor, interior and exterior, real and imagined. There is no doubting the power of the parents in the March household—Marmee and Mr. March rule with iron fists of love—but the ever-changing power each sister exerts over each other is what drives the narrative and makes it so compelling.\(^{13}\) Little Women proves that, contrary to the common and excessive idealization of the bonds of fraternity and sorority, the sibling tie is not a purely "horizontal" one, with siblings existing, as writer Francine Klagsbrun argues in her study of sibling relationships, "on the same plane, as peers, more or less equals" (6). Such assumptions fail to account for what Alcott describes as the manifold qualities of power, influence, and management, and for the many different ways in which power may be exerted, resisted, or manipulated in any relationship—especially one as flexible as siblinghood.

This flexibility is established early on, as Alcott creates subdivisions within the sisterly unit by pairing the March sisters off, describing particularly strong relationships between Meg and Amy, and Jo and Beth:

\(^{13}\) See Brodhead (Cultures) and Barnes ("Whipping Boy") for extended discussions of the structures and uses of discipline in the March household.
Meg was Amy's confidant and monitor, and, by some strange attraction of opposites, Jo was gentle Beth's. To Jo alone did the shy child tell her thoughts; and over her big, harum-scarum sister, Beth unconsciously exercised more influence than anyone in the family. The two older girls were a great deal to each other, but both took one of the younger into their keeping, and watched over them in their own way; 'playing mother' they called it, and put their sisters in the places of discarded dolls, with the maternal instinct of little women. (40)

This passage illustrates the complicated and negotiable networks that link the four March sisters. We first learn that Meg and Amy are a special pair within the four, as are Jo and Beth, with the two older girls playing "confidant and monitor" to the two younger. However, Beth also "influences" Jo in an "unconscious" way, providing a monitor of her own for her older sister's behavior. Meg and Jo also share a special connection as the two oldest, Alcott tells us here, though there is no mention of the two younger girls possessing a similar bond. Alcott describes the pairing of an older girl with a younger one as a sort of motherly practice or play, making their sibling relationship a practice field for the duties each girl will assume later in life. The networks of influence and power in siblinghood, as Alcott constructs it, operate therefore along lines of vertical structure and authority, in imitation of parent-child relationships, but also according to the sympathetic model of power through feeling.

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14 Earlier in the narrative, with almost identical language, Alcott describes how Meg's "sweet and pious" nature "unconsciously influenced her sisters" (19).
Within Alcott's framework of siblinghood, the girls also perform a sort of gender play, with Meg, Beth, and Amy labeling Jo as the "brother" in their siblinghood and Jo happily acting that part. Jo has the boy's name and tomboyish ways; she cuts off her hair, her "one beauty," to raise money to support her family; she's the ringleader and the provider, once she starts publishing stories. "I hate to think I've got to grow up and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China-aster," gripes Jo. "It's bad enough to be a girl, any-way, when I like boy's [sic] games, and work, and manners. I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy" (12). Jo's desire to be a boy, and her function as a virtual brother to the other three March girls, complicates Alcott's depiction of the sisterly March world. In a way, Jo-as-brother makes the family more complete: she adds an otherwise absent presence, that of son or brother, to the household, and balances the "feminine" or "domestic" inclinations of Meg, Beth, and Amy with a wilder, worldlier, "masculine" energy and ambition; she expands the worlds of her sisters with her inventiveness and lack of inhibition. But by the same token, her "boyishness" poses a threat to their sisterly unity: if Jo is a boy, or brother, the March sister-foursome no longer really exists. Alcott must therefore not allow Jo to be "too" boyish, and draws her instead as protesting against the demands of young womanhood (attending balls, doing domestic chores), but ultimately fulfilling them. The March sisterhood thus provides a space for
Jo's gender subversiveness and the force that orders it, in the end, along conventional lines.

It is Beth who exerts the greatest ordering force over Jo; indeed, in spite of her frailty—or, perhaps, because of it—Beth is the sister with the most influence in the March family. Her power, like Little Eva's in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), lies in her purity and goodness—she may be physically weak, but she lacks the ambitions, jealousies, and passions that weaken her sisters, and her angelic spirit calms and chastens the others, especially Jo. Meg, Jo, and Amy are influenced by Beth, and by an unspoken mandate not to upset Beth, throughout the novel. In the opening chapter, as the other girls bemoan the prospect of a Christmas without any presents, Beth focuses instead on the positive: "We've got father and mother, and each other, anyhow," she says "contentedly" from one of the corners in which she is continually placed by Alcott (11). This remark reminds the others to be thankful for what they do have, and they ultimately decide that, instead of buying the things they want for themselves, they'll buy gifts for their mother. This is the "disciplinary intimacy," of which Richard Brodhead writes, in action, with Beth gently and unconsciously directing her sisters to the appropriate point of view. Her power is no small thing, either: Once one suggests they should be grateful, the other three must

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15 See also page 16, where, just a few pages later, Beth "crept away, to sit in her shadowy corner." Alcott physically sidelines Beth but makes her a forceful, influential presence in the household—she's there, hovering around the main action, but rarely a part of it.
adopt a similar outlook in order to be “as good as” the first. Like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Little Women* alerts readers that there is such a thing as a “right” response, and that in a closely bonded sisterly world one must influence one’s sisters properly—and respond to others’ influence in the right way.

Beth’s influence over Jo lasts even after Beth has died; indeed, Beth’s death is a transforming event for Jo. Alcott depicts Beth as a calming, taming influence on Jo in life, but after she has died, Beth, and her memory, become even more obvious agents of domestication. After describing Jo’s grief at Beth’s passing, Alcott writes of her emotional healing thusly:

Other helps had Jo, humble, wholesome duties and delights, that would not be denied their part in serving her, and which she slowly learned to see and value. Brooms and dishcloths never could be as distasteful as they once had been, for Beth had presided over both; and something of her housewifely spirit seemed to linger round the little mop and the old brush, that was never thrown away. (338)

If Jo doesn’t exactly stop worrying and learn to love the broom, she does discover how domestic chores might help her: they both provide occupation, and a reprieve from grieving, and help her honor her late sister and her “housewifely spirit.” While Marmee tries throughout *Little Women* to teach her daughters the value of hard work and the female necessity of keeping a house in good order, it takes Beth—and her death—for Jo to accept and digest this lesson. This scene is also one of the most important moments signaling the beginning of Jo’s transformation from childhood to 94
adulthood in *Little Women*, as she accepts the requirements of femininity that she
has hitherto found distasteful. Here, Alcott invests a significant power of
domestication and conservatism in Beth's death, making it the source of a major
change in Jo's character and laying the groundwork for her eventual transition from
tomboyish girl and sister, with dreams of independence, to wife and mother.16

Beth's death helps facilitate Jo's development into the sort of little woman the
narrative demands each girl become, and such lessons pop up throughout the book,
and are driven by Meg and Amy as well. Meg advises Jo on proper dress and manners
from the opening chapters onward, as the two oldest March girls step out into the
world; later, Amy directs Jo on similar matters in the chapter "Calls." Though Amy is
the youngest March sister, she plays perhaps as great a role as Beth in making Jo
conform to the mandates of March sisterhood and little womanhood, and not just in
terms of social mores. In one of the most famous (and most violent) scenes from *Little
Women*, the chapter titled "Jo Meets Apollyon," Amy is both the cause of sisterly
strife and the force of correction. The chapter begins with Amy sulking after Jo has
refused to let her accompany Jo, Meg, Laurie, and John Brooke on a theater outing.

16 Brodhead points to the power of "grief and loss" to "discipline and domesticate" in this scene, as Jo
attempts to honor her sister's memory by behaving like the little woman she should be (*Cultures* 91).
Estes and Lant also recognize that it is "Beth's influence over Jo and her affinity with Jo" that allow her
to ask Jo to, in effect, replace her, but are horrified by the way in which Alcott "kills Beth and then
forces Jo to assume a kind of death in life, to impersonate the dead Beth." Ultimately, they argue,"Alcott's true victim is ... the self-celebrating Jo" who she replaces with "the self-effacing Beth" (577).
The violence that Estes and Lant perceive in Alcott's "replacement" of Jo with Beth is the result of a
surfeit of similarity, or sympathy, between sisters, as Jo tries to reshape herself in her sister's image
after Beth's death.
They fight, and a seething Amy warns, “You’ll be sorry for this, Jo March! see if you ain’t!” (63) The older girls go to the play, and return to find Amy reading quietly. The next morning, however, Jo discovers that the manuscript she had been working on has disappeared. When she asks her sisters if they know where it is, Amy flushes, and smugly confesses that she has thrown it in the fire. “I told you I’d make you pay for being so cross,” Amy declares, in a piqued assertion of power over her older sister (64). Jo’s having none of it, and asserts her own power by physically shaking Amy. This leads to tears and arguments and soothing words from Marmee, but even Marmee is no match for the sisterly ire that swarms around Amy and Jo. Amy finally begs forgiveness, but Jo won’t listen. And Amy knows Jo is supposed to forgive her: Alcott writes that Amy “kept making remarks about people who were always talking about being good, and yet wouldn’t try, when other people set them a virtuous example” (65). Amy understands that the older sister is supposed to be a model—yet by critiquing the older sister, Amy turns that model on its head, providing the voice of moral influence where Jo will not.

The next day, Jo flees the March house, now a place of tension and suffocation, to go skating with Laurie. Amy, not sensing that now might be a time to leave her temperamental sister alone—one of the rare instances of one March sister failing to intuit another’s state of mind—follows at Jo’s heels, but not closely enough to hear Laurie warn that the ice is thin in the middle. She crashes through, nearly drowns,
and must be saved by Jo and Laurie. It takes this near-death event to chasten Jo, who cries, "if she should die, it would be my fault" (68). Though one may read this scene as Amy expecting too much from Jo too soon, the real lesson here is Jo’s. She has not forgiven Amy as she should have done, and almost causes a fatal disaster as a result. While battles of the self may be encouraged in the March household, battles between sisters—battles of will, to say nothing of physical battles—are to be avoided at all costs.17

Physical violence, then, has desperate consequences, and this may well be Alcott’s point. If, as Anne C. Rose writes, “In the midst of heightened and … persistent public uncertainties, the Victorians turned to their families for solace more decisively than ever,” those families needed to be sources of comfort and emotional support, not sites of violence and strife, and this is the lesson of “Jo Meets Apollyon” (147). Set during and in the years following the Civil War, Little Women both domesticates and acknowledges the very real, very violent, horrors of battle. By using the language of combat to describe each girl’s pilgrim’s progress, each girl’s triumph over her weak and fallible self, Alcott brings the war home—while Mr. March fights an enemy far away, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy fight their own inner foes in individual daily battles. Both are righteous causes—Alcott makes sure her readers know her

17 Brodhead conceives the lesson of Little Women as “be angry or selfish and your sister will die, as compared to the lesson of The Wide, Wide World, which is “don’t burn the toast or your mother will die” (Cultures 93).
feelings on that point. But by including scenes of physical violence between sisters, Alcott is alluding to the war of brother against brother, a war which, while justified, would ideally have been avoided in the first place. Mr. March himself suffers an injury in the war, experiencing the violence of combat firsthand. And Amy falls through the ice, and could have died—so be nice to your sisters, Alcott tells her young readers, because if you shake them, stay angry at them, and don’t tell them about the thin ice, they might die.

The petty (and not so petty) violences of *Little Women* domesticate the horror of the novel’s Civil War setting and supply a proving ground for the March sisterhood, but they also serve to highlight perhaps the greatest violence in the book: that of the rupture of siblinghood by marriage. The March girls are taught, in their youth, to love and live for their sisters—their parents remind them time and again that they shoulder both tremendous love and tremendous responsibility for their sisters—but this mandate is supplanted, as they mature, by another, which seems wholly irreconcilable with the first. Marriage is the undeniable destiny of the March girls; they are raised in the knowledge that they are meant to marry, become good wives and mothers, and create their own households to manage—with the tacit understanding that this will require them to forsake the intense—and intensely cherished—sisterly unity that they have been encouraged by their parents to cultivate.
in their youth. Having identified so closely as sisters throughout their lives, when they reach marriageable age, the sisters must come to terms with what it means to separate themselves mentally and physically from one another, and do so with some difficulty.

Unsurprisingly, it is Jo, the March who most cherishes and most deeply inhabits her role as a sister, who resists the marriage imperative, and protests against it most strenuously; Meg, as the oldest and perhaps most traditional sister, is the first to appear interested in and clearly moving toward marriage. Jo first senses this, and sees Meg stepping beyond their shared sisterly sphere, when she listens to Meg telling Marmee about the Moffats' ball, and understands that Meg is thinking about things like love, romance, and masculine admiration that interest Jo not in the least. "Jo felt as if during that fortnight [that Meg spent with the Moffats] her sister had grown up

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18 Historian Carl Degler explains that this was a pervasive tension in nineteenth-century middle-class family life, and one that was not easily or quickly reconciled: "The internal cohesion of the family of origin, especially when that cohesion is tested against the counter pull of the family of marriage ... presents a paradox. Since all families of origin began as families of marriage, how and when did a young woman (or man) make the transition from attachment to her family of origin to attachment to the family of marriage in which she would become the centerpiece of a new family of origin?... Most likely the transition occurred in the course of child-rearing, that is to say, over a period of a decade or more.... That the process may have taken some years was a further measure of the closeness of the family of origin as it developed during the 19th century" (109). See also Sarah Wadsworth, who writes that "the problem with which Jo contends throughout Little Women was evidently a pervasive and enduring one for American girls: the problem of how to bridge the gap between the relative liberty of girlhood and the potentially stifling constraints of womanhood" (29).

19 As Ruth MacDonald writes, "every time one of the [March] sisters leaves the family circle, either by marriage or by death, the departure is seen as a wrenching away and a disruption of the family, rather than as a celebration of the normal processes of maturing" (25). Ultimately, the painful lesson of Little Women, as Nina Baym says, is that "maturity destroys the family, because 'family' to each person means the natal family, and in adulthood one achieves only melancholy imitations of that earlier paradise" (303).
amazingly, and was drifting away from her into a world where she could not follow,” Alcott writes (84). The “could not” in this passage is key—does Alcott mean that Jo has a sense of her own youth, and sees Meg moving in an adult world in which the younger Jo cannot participate? Or, does Alcott imply that Meg possesses some quality that suits her for that world, which Jo can never hope to claim for herself? The best answer is probably a bit of both. For most of the book, Jo cannot imagine herself as a wife, and refuses both Laurie’s proposal and his snide suggestion that she harbors romantic feelings for Professor Bhaer. Later in the passage above, Jo makes a comment that likewise reveals her as less emotionally mature—that is, less equipped to deal with adult romantic relationships—than Meg, and uninterested in, or unsuited for, marriage. After Marmee tells her eldest daughters that “To be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing that can happen to a woman,” Meg sighs that “Poor girls don’t stand any chance.” Jo’s reply to this is a defiant, “Then we’ll be old maids” (84). Jo is happy without marriage, and envisions a future of contentment without a husband—but, in her use of the first person plural, reveals a fantasy of growing old alongside her sisters.

Marriage is a problem for Jo, caught as she is between her parents’ expectations that she will marry and her deep desire to preserve the sisterhood that has meant so much to her throughout her life. When she describes her vision of sisterly old maidenhood, Marmee affirms the sentiment—at first. “Right, Jo,” she says,
"better be happy old maids than unhappy wives, or unmaidenly girls, running about to find husbands." But in her next breath, Marmee, either unconsciously or rather cruelly, qualifies this statement. Asserting that she has known many poor women who were chosen by adoring husbands, Marmee calls such women "so love-worthy that they were not allowed to be old maids" (84). While at first seeming to validate the "old maid" role, Marmee ultimately explains that any "love-worthy" woman will be married—therefore, old maids are those women who were deemed unworthy of love. How, then, can we expect Jo to do anything other than marry? Her own mother, by whose approval she lives and dies, has informed her that if a woman deserves to be loved, she will become a wife. By telling her daughters that "to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman" (84), Judith Fetterley argues, "She might as well have said it is the only thing that can happen. There are no other viable options" (376).

Though it is well understood by Jo and her sisters that they are expected to marry, if they are to fulfill their destinies as good little women, Jo protests, verbally and physically, against this mandate, in which she can see only the disruption of her

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20 Elizabeth Keyser takes Fetterley's analysis of the marriage mandate one step farther, arguing that "By virtually denying her daughters other choices and by repressing the parts of themselves that would make other choices available, Marmee keeps her daughters dependent, undeveloped, diminutive—like Beth, who literally fails to attain adulthood" (69).

21 Alcott addresses readers directly on several occasions in *Little Women*, and the most extended of these digressions is actually a "be nice to old maids" speech later in the book (Chapter 43). Jo is trying to convince herself that becoming a "literary spinster" isn't such a bad fate, and Alcott instructs her readers, "Don't laugh at the spinsters, dear girls .... Even the sad, sour sisters should be kindly dealt with." She adds, "Gentlemen, which means boys, be courteous to the old maids" (343).
beloved sisterly world. Throughout Meg’s courtship with John Brooke, Jo fails to interpret their marriage as the pleasant acquisition of a brother—only as the loss of a sister: “she’ll go and fall in love, and there’s an end of peace and fun, and cosy times, together…. Brooke will scratch up a fortune somehow,—carry her off and make a hole in the family; and I shall break my heart, and everything will be abominably uncomfortable. Oh, deary me!” (161) Brooke, as Jo sees it, is taking Meg away, ruining Jo’s family rather than expanding it, acting the part of the villain instead of the romantic hero in the tragic narrative Jo sees unfolding before her. Yet Jo also sees, in the inevitability of this narrative, that Meg will “go and fall in love.” For Jo, this is an unhappy certainty. She knows how this story will unfold, but she mourns its impact on her own contentment.

With words like “break” and “uncomfortable,” Alcott reveals Jo’s physical pain at the prospect of losing Meg, the way that her emotional anguish becomes a tangible, uncontainable grief. Descriptions of the physical manifestations of Jo’s passionate spirit appear throughout the novel, and the thing that Jo is most passionate about is her bond with her sisters. When she sees Meg lost in daydreams of John Brooke, Jo frets over Meg’s behavior, and asks, “Whatever shall we do?” with a look suggesting

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To this point I agree with Nina Auerbach, who argues that in *Little Women*, “sisterhood was dissolved by marriage” (68); Anne Dalke takes issue with this position, suggesting instead that “the book does not fall apart when Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy leave the family. It reaches a climax when Father, John, Friedrich and Laurie join their ranks” (572).
she is “ready for any measures, however violent” (163). Later, Jo observes Meg agreeing to John’s proposal, after she had thought Meg had turned him away:

But poor Jo never got her laugh, for she was transfixed upon the threshold by a spectacle which held her there, staring with her mouth nearly as wide open as her eyes. Going in to exult over a fallen enemy, and to praise a strong-minded sister for the banishment of an objectionable lover, it certainly was a shock to behold the aforesaid enemy serenely sitting on the sofa, with the strong-minded sister enthroned upon his knee, and wearing an expression of the most abject submission. Jo gave a sort of gasp, as if a cold shower-bath had suddenly fallen upon her,—for such an unexpected turning of the tables actually took her breath away. (183)

Again using a vocabulary of battle, Alcott has Jo describing John as the “enemy” and interpreting Meg’s affection for him as the shocking weakness and betrayal of a supposed ally. In Jo’s mind, she and John have been locked in combat over Meg’s affections, and she is astonished to find that Meg has forsaken Jo’s love for John’s. There is no middle ground for Jo here, Meg is either her sister or John’s wife; she believes that sisterly affection cannot survive when romantic love thrives.

Meg does marry John Brooke, of course, but Alcott litters the chapter in which the wedding takes place with liberal mention of “her sisters,” as if to reassure readers that Meg is not trading, wholesale, the role of sister for that of wife. The sisters dress the bride, braid her hair, and then Meg “opened her arms to her sisters, who clung about her with April faces, for a minute feeling that the new love had not changed the old” (199). Alcott deftly wields the double-edged sword that is Meg’s marriage,
here, asserting that things have not changed, and Meg is still bound to her sisters—but the sisters, she also tells us, feel the comfort of that only fleetingly. Far from being unfounded, Jo’s fears of losing Meg are actually very real, and Meg’s embrace is only a temporary solace. Finally, while Alcott writes that, at Meg’s wedding, “only gentle words” fell from Jo’s “sharp tongue,” she also describes Jo knocking over the wedding cake, and Laurie’s disbelieving query, “Has Jo smashed all the bottles by accident?” (199–201) While Jo may not be speaking any other than gentle words, her emotions are too much for her—and are bursting out of her body. She is, unconsciously or not, full of anger and violence, or at least anxiety, on Meg’s wedding day, and cannot control herself.

Like Jo, Alcott experienced her sisters’ marriages as losses, not as cause for celebration. In her memoir of May Alcott, Caroline Ticknor describes how, after her sister Lizzie’s death, came soon news of the engagement of Anna Alcott to John Pratt, “which meant the slipping from the family circle of another sister” (47). Alcott recorded the event in her journal in language that mimics the way Jo responds to Meg’s engagement: “On the 7th of April, Anna came walking in to tell us she was engaged to John Pratt; so another sister is gone…. I moaned in private over my great loss, and said I’d never forgive J. for taking Anna from me; but I shall, if he makes her happy, and turn to little May for my comfort” (Journals 89). As in Alcott’s narrative, in her personal experience, men take sisters away, and romance and marriage have
the potential for bringing about the end of sisterhood. In fact, Julian Hawthorne, son of the writer (and the Alcotts' Concord neighbor) Nathaniel Hawthorne, recalled in the early twentieth century how Louisa once, when they were young, constructed an elaborate ruse to discourage what she imagined were his romantic inclinations toward May. In a 1922 piece for *Ladies Home Journal*, Hawthorne described how Louisa and May began talking frequently about a British cousin who would soon visit, and was intended as a match for May. He recalls that one day he passed the Alcott house and saw May in deep conversation with a strange man, whom he took to be this cousin. He joined them, and it was only after a fairly long stretch of time that the strange man peeled off his moustache and let his hair down to reveal himself as Louisa. While this incident of playful deception was likely a lighthearted caper meant to tease the young Hawthorne, it supplies yet another exertion toward preservation of family and sisterhood, as evidenced so often in Alcott's life and in that of her heroine, Jo.23

If Jo's primary motivation is preservation of the family, Laurie—Theodore Laurence, the boy next door—is driven by nothing so much as a desire for membership in that family, and plays one of the most crucial, and least acknowledged, roles in the novel.24 Laurie functions as a brother, a fifth March sister, a benefactor, a suitor, and a husband in the narrative, rounding out the March siblinghood and, in the various ways he manages to become a part of it, revealing

23 Quoted in Shealy.
24 For the most thoughtful and extended treatments of Laurie, see Auerbach and Dalke.
both its appeal and its flexibility. It is through Laurie that the twin dictates of the March universe—be everything to your sisters, and leave the home to get married—are, if not wholly, then approach being reconciled in the narrative. Laurie's "true" masculine presence gives Jo a way out of playing the "brother" in her family; his declaration of love for Jo forces her to confront the ideas of adult love and marriage, and consider what makes a potential mate appropriate or inappropriate; his marriage to Amy fulfills her destiny as a wife and gives him the official status as a member of the March family that he has sought throughout the novel, but achieved only symbolically. With his status as both an outsider and an insider vis-a-vis the March family, Laurie helps bring order to the girls' sisterly world in multiple ways, ensuring their adherence to the codes of normativity that Alcott, even in her subversions against them, ultimately enforces in *Little Women*; he also serves as a surrogate reader within the text. Alcott puts in his mouth the observations of and questions about the girls that a reader is likely to possess, giving him a unique position of both participation and distance in the Marches' world. Finally, Laurie's perspective on the March girls, and his desire to be a part of their family, heightens their presentation and appeal as a unit—as a sisterly core of which Laurie (and conceivably, by extension, the reader) wants desperately to be a part.

Jo thinks of Laurie as a brother from the start. After an indecorous meeting behind a curtain at Mrs. Gardiner's ball, Laurie and Jo become fast friends, and Jo
takes “several good looks at him, so that she might describe him to the girls; for they had no brothers” (31). The March girls, for all their cozy sisterhood, seem to feel the want of a fraternal presence, and Jo memorizes Laurie at their first meeting so that she can relay what she knows will be eagerly ingested information to her sisters.

Having already depicted Jo as “the tomboy of the family,” and having had her sisters identify her as their “brother,” Alcott also, in introducing Laurie to the Marches’ world, gives herself an out here: While the girls may tease Jo about playing the brother role in their family, and while Jo may happily enough assume that role, it’s only pretend, only good-natured, youthful fun.

Of course, even as Laurie provides a control to Jo’s gender play, he also participates in it. One of the first things Laurie says in the novel is that he has given himself the nickname “Laurie,” because when he went by his given name, Theodore, his friends called him “Dora.” To modern readers, the two names may seem equally feminine, but Alcott’s implication seems to be that Laurie, in renaming himself, is combating an imputation of femininity. And Laurie may have reason to be sensitive about his gender identity (as it is perceived by others), for at the beginning of the narrative, his sphere seems to extend little beyond his house, where he sits in an invalid’s seclusion and his favored pursuits are delicate, artistic ones. While Jo yearns always to be outdoors rather than in, and even says “I wish I was a horse; then I could run for miles in this splendid air,” Laurie’s setting is the parlor of his grandfather’s
house—he is most often seen peering out his window at the girls in their yard (125).

As Gustavus Stadler, Elizabeth Keyser, and Beverly Lyon Clark have argued, Alcott creates a manner of “gender dialectic,” to borrow Clark’s term, between Jo and Laurie, in which each plays the opposite gender role—and, ultimately, orders the other into the expected feminine (Jo) or masculine (Laurie) part.25

Beyond supplying a fraternal presence, one of Laurie’s other essential functions in *Little Women* is providing an eye into the March home for readers, voicing their interest in the girls’ activities. He also serves as an eye outside the home, following individual sisters where the others do not go. When he stands in his window, watching the girls march off on one adventure or another, he asks, “What in the world are those girls about now?”, amplifying the avid reader’s own anticipation and wonder (115). He is in, but not really of, the narrative at such a moment; instead, he plays proxy for the young girls Alcott imagined as her audience, asking their questions and, when he decides to follow the Marches on their adventure, doing what readers themselves cannot (but may well wish to do). Laurie is also a sort of surrogate family eye outside of the home, most notably in the chapter “Meg Goes to Vanity Fair.” When Meg allows her wealthier girlfriends to dress her up at a ball, Laurie makes his disapproval of her immodest appearance known, standing in for Meg’s family and forcing Meg to face her own misgivings and feelings of guilt. Powdered,

25 As Kathryn Kent writes, “Marriage challenges both of their positions as boys: Jo must become a woman and Laurie must be transformed into a man” (55).
curled, and corseted within an inch of her life, Meg sees Laurie across the room, "staring at her with undisguised surprise, and disapproval also ... something in his honest eyes made her blush, and wish she had her old dress on" (79). Meg responds to Laurie's disapproval as she would to a brother's, or to that of any member of her family. She has only allowed her friends to dress her up because she knew herself to be far from home, and out of sight of her family, but Laurie's presence supplies the moral monitor that Meg thought she had escaped; as Anne Dalke writes, "The relationship between Laurie and the March girl[s] is very much a reciprocal one [as he] helps them in their journey toward self-improvement, but needs and receives instruction himself in return" (573). Laurie's unfixed role in the narrative, as the occasional surrogate reader or March family member, is carefully negotiated by Alcott, so that she may keep him both within and without the central sisterhood of the book. Laurie may be the girls' "brother," but because he is eventually going to end up as the husband of one of them, he needs to be kept at something of a remove.

In fact, Laurie's induction into the March family occurs not with his marriage to Amy, but much earlier in the narrative, when Jo proposes his admission to the sisters' literary society, the Pickwick Club. Though he is installed as a March only symbolically here, Alcott describes the scene with great pomp and circumstance that stands in dramatic contrast to Laurie and Amy's wedding—his official entrée into the March family—which occurs off-stage. Having only just been forced to confront the
alarming notion that Meg might one day marry and leave the March household, Jo
seems determined to preserve their youthful sisterhood, and even extend it, by adding
Laurie to their foursome:

"Mr. President and gentlemen," he began [Jo is playing her Pickwick
role of Mr. Snodgrass here], assuming a parliamentary attitude and
tone, "I wish to propose the admission of a new member, one who
highly deserves the honor, would be deeply grateful for it, and would
add immensely to the spirit of the club, the literary value of the paper,
and be no end jolly and nice. I propose Mr. Theodore Laurence as an
honorary member of the P.C. Come now, do have him." (89)

Meg, Beth, and Amy are initially reluctant to allow a bona fide boy into their midst,
but are ultimately convinced by Jo's argument that "we can do so little for him, and
he does so much for us." A vote is taken, and passes, unanimously, in Laurie's favor;
he stumbles out of the closet where Jo has hidden him, and pledges to devote himself
"to the interest of this immortal club." The whole scene unfolds with playful
officiousness, with a mix of hilarity and seriousness that makes it seem as if something
momentous is taking place. Not only is Jo attempting to strengthen the March
siblinghood here, of course, she is also going to elaborate lengths to fraternalize
Laurie, lest he become, as they age, one of the dreadful suitors who threaten to
disrupt the March home with love and romance. Though Laurie's passionate
attachment to Jo has, to this point, seemed predicated at least as much on his desire
for membership in the March family as on romantic feelings for one girl, specifically,
the threat has been raised, and Jo makes a great production out of inducting him as a brother, not as a husband. Following on the heels of Jo's realization that marriage will take her sisters away from her, this scene advances Alcott's premise, in *Little Women*, that siblinghood is a condition of youth, a relation that, however strong it may be in childhood, must cede dominance to romantic bonds in adulthood.

It is for this same reason that Laurie and Jo cannot marry. As they grow up, Laurie falls in love with Jo, and ultimately proposes to her, but she rejects him by quoting Marmee's belief that they are "not suited to each other, because our quick tempers and strong wills would probably make us very miserable" (286). Within the economy of sympathetic siblinghood on which *Little Women* operates, Laurie and Jo are a perfect match, but the "unspoken sympathy" that Alcott describes between them throughout the book makes them perfect *friends*—and siblings—but inappropriate mates. They are, as Brodhead argues, so right that they’re wrong. More than any of the four March girls, Laurie is the true sentimental heroine of *Little Women*, yearning to find happy completion and marriage with a sympathetic other. One of the real triumphs of Alcott's story is the way that she shifts the paradigm of sentimental fiction by investing its romantic concerns in a male character, rather than a female, and makes it clear that there is a difference between sympathy, or "being like," and being a good match. Meg and John serve as the first and best example of the latter in the novel; they think and feel in similar ways, but differ sufficiently in their
temperaments—Meg is all sweetness and fretfulness, while John possesses a steadier will—to complement, rather than imitate, one another. And Alcott never presents John as a brother, real or imagined (indeed, as we have seen, Jo resolutely refuses to view him as such), while she emphasizes the siblingly sympathy between Laurie and Jo, making that the most vivid and central relationship in *Little Women*. Though they do not marry, there is a real, crackling romance in Jo and Laurie’s relationship, but when Laurie proposes to Jo, she remains animated by a purely sibling-oriented attraction, not by romantic lust or love. Laurie is Jo’s sympathetic other, but that makes him an unsuitable mate for her. And Jo cannot, as yet, view marriage as an appealing option. To have Jo accept Laurie’s proposal would be utterly counter to Alcott’s narrative project, not sensible within it.

Though Laurie is too much a brother to Jo to become her lover and husband, Alcott does allow his relationship with Amy to change from a fraternal to a romantic one. Interestingly, however, this is made possible not through any kind of denial or skirting around their sibling-like bond; throughout *Little Women*, Alcott describes Laurie’s “elder-brotherly” concern about Amy’s suitors, or how he puts his arm around Amy “with a brotherly gesture” (318, 157). Even after Jo rejects his proposal, and he reencounters Amy in Europe, Laurie continues to relate to Amy in a brotherly fashion. When they first meet again in Europe, both Amy and Laurie are comforted by the warm familiarity of having a sibling-like friend nearby. Amy feels that her
“heart was lightened,—for the look, the act, the brotherly ‘my dear,’ seemed to assure her that if any trouble did come, she would not be alone in a strange land” (298), and calls Laurie “mon frère” (323). To Laurie, “Amy’s familiar presence seemed to give a home-like charm to the foreign scenes in which she bore a part. He rather missed the ‘munching’ he used to receive, and enjoyed a taste of it again,—for no attentions, however flattering, were half so pleasant as the sisterly adoration of the girls at home” (313). When he asks Amy if she is engaged to Fred Vaughn, Laurie says he is going to “play brother” and looks to Amy “very elder-brotherly and grave all of a sudden” (318). Separated by an ocean from their strongest family ties, finding themselves somewhat older and somewhat new to each other in their burgeoning adulthood, Amy and Laurie are soothed by the reanimation of their brother-sister tie.2

Even as they are falling in love, then, Alcott continues to use a language of siblinghood to describe Amy and Laurie’s relationship. Though she titles one of the chapters of their reacquaintance “New Impressions,” she provides little evidence that Laurie and Amy are truly revising the way they think of one another; though they are both older, and, at least in Amy’s case, more mature and composed, they still think of one another in sibling terms. Indeed, as Laurie considers proposing to Amy, he

2Holly Blackford suggests that Amy’s comfort with and attraction to Laurie in Europe may be in “substituting the fraternal Laurie for the life-giving mother” who is still across the ocean; she adds that the problem with this is that “their incestuous union seems to cause a rather sickly offspring, doomed with the name Beth” (13).
remains primarily occupied with the two concerns that have been his throughout the narrative: his love for Jo, and his wish to be a member of the March family:

He had not foreseen this turn of affairs, and was not prepared for it ... he was reluctantly obliged to confess that the boyish passion was slowly subsiding into a more tranquil sentiment,—very tender, a little sad and resentful still,—but that was sure to pass away in time, leaving a brotherly affection which would last unbroken to the end.

As the word "brotherly" passed through his mind in one of these reveries, he smiles, and glanced up at the picture of Mozart that was before him,—

"Well, he was a great man; and when he couldn't have one sister he took the other, and was happy." (331)

Alcott goes on to detail Laurie and Amy's mutual happiness, but this passage reinforces the impression that Laurie's primary goal in life has been to achieve official status as a March, and that, having been refused by Jo, he decides he can meet his goal and be happy by marrying another March sister. By this point in the narrative, Alcott has already established that Laurie has experienced romantic love and assimilated the marriage imperative in a way that Jo has not; like Jo, however, he remains animated by a lust for siblinghood and family membership, and ultimately accesses both by marrying Amy. He may share a less perfect sympathy with her, but that is beside the point: sympathy, in Alcott's narrative universe, is for siblings; husband and wife need to be complementary. Laurie proves himself worthy of Amy by accepting his role as a dutiful (and wealthy) Laurence, and Amy, with her inalienable March-ness, provides Laurie with the family membership he desires.
When Laurie and Amy return to the United States, he remains obsessed with defining his relationships to the Marches—particularly, to Jo. Amy is not even present in the scene where Laurie and Jo encounter each other once again, lending further credence to the idea that while Laurie has married Amy, Alcott is still focused on his relationship with Jo. Laurie goes to great lengths to explain their new relationship to Jo:

Jo, dear, I want to say one thing, and then we'll put it by forever. As I told you, in my letter, when I wrote that Amy had been so kind to me, I never shall stop loving you; but the love is altered, and I have learned to see that it is better as it is. Amy and you change places in my heart, that's all.... when I saw her in Switzerland, everything seemed to clear up all at once. You both got into your right places, and I felt sure that it was well off with the old love, before it was on with the new; that I could honestly share my heart between sister Jo and wife Amy, and love them both dearly. Will you believe it, and go back to the happy old times, when we first knew one another?” (346)

Jo assures Laurie that she believes him, but warns him that because they are older now, it will be impossible to assume the roles and relationship they once shared. "We never can be a boy and girl again—the happy old times can’t come back, and we mustn’t expect it,” she tells him. "We can’t be little playmates any longer, but we will be brother and sister, to love and help one another all our lives, won’t we, Laurie?” (346) He doesn’t answer her at first, reluctant to accept that things must change (or that he can’t, by sheer force of will or declaration of his relation to Jo, control the terms of their relationship). But in both their speeches, Laurie and Jo lay down the
ground rules of their new relationship, which is really no different than it was when they first met, if now codified by marriage: they are brother and sister; no more, no less.

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The return of Laurie and Amy brings Jo’s story, and all of *Little Women*, full circle, restoring both the sisterhood that is the center of Alcott’s tale and Jo’s best and most complete self. Soon after Jo’s role-defining conference with Laurie, Alcott writes that her heroine begins to grow “quite her own saucy self again since Teddy came home,” with the suggestion that not only does Laurie bring out something essential to Jo’s character, he also fills a gap in the family (354). With Beth gone, someone must round out the March sisterhood, and Laurie, always happy to play the part of brother or sister, assumes that duty willingly. Marriage and sisterhood, though initially oppositional and irreconcilable forces in *Little Women*, have finally achieved a happy coexistence, to the delight of both Laurie and Jo. Laurie has realized his long-desired status as a full member of the March family, and Jo has her three sisters—with Laurie now effectively taking Beth’s place—back within easy reach (if no longer all under one roof).
Indeed, the intimacy of the March sisterhood is so well preserved through marriage and into adulthood that it may read as unlikely or even fantastical; in the period in which Alcott was writing, and, of course, even more so in the present day, siblings seldom in lived in such close proximity from childhood to adulthood. But if the March sisterhood, as it exists at the end of Little Women and in its sequels, Little Men (1871) and Jo’s Boys (1886) seems the stuff of fantasy, it makes sense in Alcott’s narrative universe and for the post-Civil-War audience for whom she was writing. Keeping the sisterhood intact is necessary within Alcott’s project of writing a comforting tale of hearth and home; having disrupted the family and taken one sister out of the unit by killing off Beth, Alcott then provides the reassurance that marriage does not, in fact, signal another kind of death, but is a natural progression of family life that can keep its members close.

Jo’s accomplishment in preserving the family paves the way for Alcott to tie up the other two main threads of Jo’s story: her professional ambitions and her marriage plot. By restoring Jo to her former spirited self, and settling Laurie and Amy and Meg and John all within shouting distance of the March home, Alcott reassures Jo, and readers, that sisterhood and marriage are not, in fact, irreconcilable; once Jo knows this, she is able to entertain the thought of marriage for herself. We already know that according to Marmee’s dictates Jo must marry, and by the final chapters of Little...
Women, she is at last ready to accept this ruling—and, by extension, Professor Bhaer's proposal.26

Alcott also grants Jo the gift of professional success, in the form of Aunt March's estate, Plumfield, which she leaves to Jo upon her death in the final chapter of Little Women. There, Jo and Professor Bhaer start a school—which, as chronicled in Little Men and Jo's Boys, becomes the site of a sort of recreated siblinghood among the "family of six or seven boys" who live there (376). Most importantly, as readers of the subsequent novels learn, Jo continues to write, and achieves wide fame as an author. What Alcott manages in Little Women is a really quite extraordinary challenge to the formal expectations of nineteenth-century popular literature:

Though she tweaks conventions of gender and sympathy throughout the novel, and supplies the traditional marriage plot for her heroine at the end, she also gives Jo the professional success and everlasting sisterhood that have been her expressed desires from the book's opening pages.

26 I am also persuaded by Sarah Wadsworth's argument that Alcott makes a deliberate point of skipping several key years of adolescence between Parts One and Two of Little Women, years that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and that, ostensibly, would have made the thought of marriage more palatable to Jo. Wadsworth argues that this is a tactic Alcott adopts in her other fictions for young people as well, "elid[ing] the period, ranging from two to six years in length, during which the girl evolves into a young woman" (31). Wadsworth's discussion of the elision of key passages of time for her young female characters suggests other elisions on Alcott's part, especially in terms of the girls' femininity and maturity. See, for example, the account of Meg's pregnancy in "Domestic Experiences," where nine months are detailed with the single sentence, "So the year rolled round, and at midsummer there came to Meg a new experience,—the deepest and tenderest of a woman's life" (276). If we read Jo as simply immature, and unprepared for romance and marriage, in the earlier parts of the novel, Wadsworth's focus on the elided years of adolescence suggests one of the ways Alcott shows her maturity and development over the course of the narrative. The answer to how the sisterhood and marriage mandates are reconciled, in this reading, may simply be that Jo grows up.
In fact, Alcott hints at this sort of “happy ending” for Jo early in the novel.

One of Jo's happiest moments in *Little Women* consists of a scene in which she shares a published story with her sisters, and weeps with joy over the warm reception it receives. She feels that “to be independent, and earn the praise of those she loved, were the dearest wishes of her heart, and this seemed to be the first step toward that happy end” (128). Success as a writer, in conjunction with the approval of her sisters, is the “happy end” for Jo, not marriage, not children, but independence, success, and respect. Alcott seems to be proposing alternatives of happy female adulthood in Jo, alternatives that align with her own experience, but these other possibilities struggle for dominance against the imperatives laid out by Marmee in the narrative and by her readers and publisher in real life that all the sisters in *Little Women* marry. Alcott would have preferred to leave Jo unmarried, but after Part One of *Little Women* had been published and won the hearts of young readers, she was pressured to marry her off. In an 1869 letter to Elizabeth Powell, Alcott admits that her own orneriness, rather than romantic (or any other kind of) design led her to marry Jo off to Professor Bhaer in the end: “[S]o many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I don't dare refuse & out of perversity went and made a funny match for her.”[27] Jo's marriage, while not foreordained in Alcott's narrative project, came to seem necessary to please her

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audience, so the author made her a match that, far from being “funny,” allows Alcott to give Jo the things that have always been her true hopes in life.28

If Alcott raises the question, in *Little Women*, of whether siblinghood is a relation of youth, her own experience taught her that it might be preserved—or recaptured, in new forms, in adulthood. Alcott earned money to support her sisters and parents throughout almost her entire life, first through her needle and later through her pen; she raised her sister May’s daughter after May’s death. Unlike Jo, Alcott never married, and so remained rooted in the natal family throughout her life; her primary obligations remained to her parents and sisters. In her biography of Alcott, Martha Saxton argues that the author enjoyed the role of “indispensable family prop,” and felt betrayed by the “abandonment” of Lizzie in death and Anna in marriage (217). Saxton posits that Alcott felt these leavings as a threat to her own status—if she wasn’t the other girls’ sister, who was she?—and felt that “as long as the family remained intact, Louisa didn’t have to confront her spinsterhood” (219). While her description of Louisa’s pride in providing for her family seems well-supported by

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28 To this day, the preponderance of Alcott scholarship either expresses dismay at or attempts to account for the fact that Jo marries Professor Bhaer at the end of *Little Women*, offering a wide variety of explanations for why it makes sense in Alcott’s narrative—and, in some cases, maintaining that, in fact, it does not. Brodhead argues that in a text obsessed with disciplinary intimacy, or “discipline through love,” Jo could hardly do anything but find a husband who simulates her father, whose “attractiveness lies in his moral superiority” (*Cultures* 101). Angela M. Estes and Kathryn Margaret Lant, on the other hand, point to Jo’s marriage as the final stage of Alcott’s virtual annihilation of Jo, with the author choosing to “murder her dearest child rather than force that child to live in a world hostile to her” and her independent spirit (569). A somewhat more dismissive view is recorded by Barbara Sicherman, who suggests that the “absence of a compelling love plot” in the novel “has also made it easier for generations of readers to ignore the novel’s ending when Jo becomes Mother Bhaer and to retain the image of Jo as the questing teenage tomboy” (251).
existing correspondence and journal entries, Saxton assumes that Louisa felt the need to marry, or at least felt there was some problem with remaining single, and here may be reading a bit too much of Jo March into the life of Louisa Alcott.

Clearly, though, the role of sister was fraught with complicated questions of identity for both. The fictional Jo and the actual Louisa both seem to sense a loosening of sisterly bonds attendant to age, time, and marriage—and for both, that loosening was a threatening prospect. However, both Jo and Alcott manage to maintain their central identities as sisters even through change and, in Jo’s case, marriage. Alcott extended her sisterly bond to countless readers through the novels and stories in which she adopted the voice of the “moralistic older sister” (Saxton xii), though she professed not to like writing in this fashion, and did so “because it pays well.”29 After her initial success with Little Women, Alcott also became very involved with reform movements of all kinds, from women’s suffrage to education to temperance, and positioned herself alongside other female reformers using a vocabulary of sorority. “Help one another, is part of the religion of our sisterhood,” she wrote in her novel An Old-Fashioned Girl (1870) and Alcott was seemingly eternally willing to write for, or speak at, the assemblies of her reform-minded sisters.30

The “religion of sisterhood” portrayed in Little Women helped give the book the enduring popularity that it enjoys to this day. A century and a half later, Little

30 See Stern, Signature of Reform.

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Women remains in print, with new adaptations seeming to appear every year or so—varied in form, but always emphasizing the sibling story that is at the heart of Alcott’s tale. Gillian Armstrong’s 1994 movie, with a screenplay by Robin Swicord, finds Winona Ryder’s Jo declaring “I shall never love anyone as I love my sisters,” words not written by Alcott but apparently intended to reinforce the intense sister love of the tale (and, perhaps, suggest Jo’s passion for her sisters while skirting the wish she has in the novel of marrying them). Katharine Weber’s 2003 novel The Little Women highlights the primacy of the relationship between the March sisters by removing them from their parents’ home entirely, and in the 2004 Broadway musical version, the most poignant love song is shared not by Meg and John or Jo and Laurie (or Jo and Professor Bhaer)—it is, instead, a duet sung by Jo and Beth to one another. (This staging also includes a duet between Jo and Amy titled “I Will Love You Anyway, I Swear.”) Even a novel such as Jeffrey Eugenides’ The Virgin Suicides (1993), with its five intensely bonded sisters, owes a debt to Alcott’s nineteenth-century tale. Readers, and re-creators, of Little Women understand it as a sibling story—one that is at once comforting and challenging in its presentation of the nineteenth-century American family.

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31 A notable exception is Geraldine Brooks’ 2005 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel March, which follows Mr. March during his service in the Union Army.
In Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story "A Far-Away Melody," two elderly twin sisters live together and do everything in tandem, from hanging the laundry to squinting over the seamstress work by which they earn their living. The sisters, Priscilla and Mary Brown, are virtually indistinguishable from one another, "curiously alike" in their appearance, and have experienced nothing that the other has not experienced as well. When Priscilla begins to hear music that Mary cannot hear herself, and then dies, Mary is thrown into a deep grief and regret that she too did not hear the music and go along with Priscilla. For the first time in a long shared life, the sisters' connection is disrupted, their paths diverge. Freeman writes that Mary "had an idea that she could not die" unless she heard the music that Priscilla had heard, and that "her whole soul seemed filled with longing to join her beloved twin sister.... This sister-love was all she had ever felt, besides her love of God, in any strong degree."1

Freeman's extensive corpus is full of stories of adult and elderly sisters, women who are generally both single and living alone together, wholly dependent upon one another for survival. "Sister-love" takes many forms, as Freeman's sisters support each other with complementary strengths and weaknesses, sacrifice and save for one

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1 For the purposes of citation, I am using "A Far-Away Melody" as it appears in *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (1887) (217).
another, and fulfill each other's dreams—even, in the case of "Sister Liddy," existing only as a cherished and comforting dream. Freeman's sisters are partners in life, united in a sort of "marriage" predicated not on romantic love but on, for the most part, circumstance and convenience: They have never left the natal home, and have perpetuated their youthful sibling bond far into adulthood. In the local color fictions of Freeman and others, the close and sustained relationships of siblings—almost always sisters—reveal that it is in fact possible, as Jo March wished in *Little Women*, to maintain intimate sibling ties across the life span—to, in effect, marry your sister.

But even a cursory look at the fictions of such writers as Freeman, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Edith Wharton reveals that this kind of sustained sibling bond is much more complicated, and often less fulfilling, than Jo March imagines it to be. Sister pairs recur again and again in these fictions, but the circumstances that have kept them together in a relationship generally curbed or altered by marriage often result in one or both sisters feeling oppressed or cheated, as if they have not been granted the lives they deserved. The dissatisfaction in these narratives is usually centered around a wish for romance and marriage, and the sisters reach a moment of crisis when a man comes between them. Other pairs of local color sisters find greater satisfaction in their lives together, and their conflicts are more with society or progress than with each other. They cling to one another for support in a world that threatens the
existence they have forged together, finding in the presence of a similar other the
reassurance that they are not alone, and won't be left behind.

While many critics have examined the figure of the spinster, or “woman
alone,” in regional and local color fictions, few have attended to the many sister pairs
in that same body of literature, to the detriment, I would argue, of a more complete
and expansive understanding of the genre. Sister pairs, who might be considered as
“women alone together,” have like others with whom they may openly discuss their
fears about the tyranny of progress and the loss of the past, amplifying the same
concerns that run throughout local color literature. They see themselves in each
other, and rely upon their sisters to prove their own identities—to extend their
presence and authority in their world (however small that world may be). Their
shared status as members of the same family, and of the same generation, gives them a
common narrative and understanding of their roles—in relation to each other, and in
relation to their broader community. Their intense, complex relationships make
personal the local color issues that are all too often rendered as clinical or impersonal
in studies of the genre—where a focus on isolated figures too often makes their
concerns about authenticity, tradition, and rural life seem more odd and idiosyncratic
than relatable and universal. Local color sisters share, and talk about, common
concerns, and are, finally, almost always depicted as meaning everything to each
other—nothing less than their survival depends on the strength of the bonds of sisterhood.

I want to suggest in this chapter that a close examination of the many sister pairs in local color literature offers a useful new way of thinking about a familiar genre. My contention is that authors such as Freeman, Jewett, and Wharton used sister pairs to explore the same tensions of individual and collective identity seen in earlier sibling tales, and did so, furthermore, with an eye on the conflicts of modernization vs. tradition, insider vs. outsider, local vs. national that we recognize as characteristic of the broader local color tradition. As in other local color fictions, these stories of “women alone together” present a way of life on the verge of disruption or extinction, but in the stories of “sister-love,” this way of life is all the sisters have ever known—and all they have ever had. Moreover, if, as I am arguing in this dissertation as a whole, siblinghood offers a chance of (re)creating family on one’s own terms, the local color sibling stories show us that it is also possible to sustain the same family ties, and the same relational and individual identity, throughout one’s life—and that, when that identity is challenged in some way, the stakes are very high indeed. When the sisters in these fictions clash over their respective definitions of themselves and their families, or when they must assert their sisterhood in the face of forces that threaten it, the authors at hand are describing nothing less than a threatened loss of selfhood and family—not some abstract notion of “encroaching
modernity.” If, finally, we take the “local” in these local color fictions not as the village or town in which the sisters live but the very house they inhabit—the very family they comprise—we can better understand the power and purpose of the stories Freeman, Jewett, Wharton, and others were writing at the end of the nineteenth century.

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First, a few words on local color:

A widely accepted definition of what constitutes local color literature has yet to gain purchase in American literary scholarship, perhaps because many believe, along with Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, that the label is a pejorative one, applied to authors who wrote from an outsider status of small, rural places for the entertainment of a more cosmopolitan audience, who could feel superior to the rustic “folk” described in the local color tales.2 Donna Campbell, in Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885–1915 (1997), defines local color writing as fiction that “celebrates the preservation, through writing, of the lives of humble, ordinary people in an environment threatened by time, change, and external

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2Fetterley and Pryse argue that “regionalists differentiate themselves from the ‘local colorists,’ primarily in their desire not to hold up regional characters to potential ridicule by eastern urban readers but rather to present regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader’s sympathy and identification” (xii).
disruption [and] seeks to affirm what is usable about the past and the ordinary” (7).

And in *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2001), Stephanie Foote challenges the “minor” label often applied to local color writing by suggesting that “regional writing developed strategies to transform rather than to passively resist the meaning of the social and economic developments of late-nineteenth-century urban life” (3). As Foote’s choice of terms here indicates, more often than not, the terms “local color” and “regionalism” are used interchangeably.³

Campbell and Foote’s descriptions of local color literature point to one of the most widely accepted markers of the genre, an interest in the tension between past and present, tradition and progress, preservation and change. This interest arose, as Amy Kaplan has written, out of a sense that, in the post–Civil War effort to put the pieces of the broken union back together again, the nationalist impulse risked the loss of the regional and the particular. Concomitantly, however, as Kaplan notes, it also served the unified, nationalist ideal:

Just as these communities appear prenational, they take fictional forms that seem prenovelistic, consisting mostly of collections of short stories often incorporating vernacular storytelling and lacking overarching linear narratives. Yet the provincialism DeForest lamented as blocking

³ For further discussion of the term “local color,” see Coby Dowdell, “Withdrawing from the Nation: Regionalist Literature as Ascetic Practice in Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*” (2004); Brad Evans, “Howellsian Chic: The Local Color of Cosmopolitanism” (2004); and Emily Satterwhite, “Reading Craddock, Reading Murfree: Local Color, Authenticity, and Geographies of Reception” (2006).
a national novel, William Dean Howells celebrated thirty years later as our “decentralized literature.” Paradoxically, this profusion of literature known as regionalism or local color contributed to the process of centralization and nationalization, as Jewett recognized by linking family and national reunions in the same passage as forms of “Clanishness,” which she calls “an instinct, or a custom; and lesser rights were forgotten in the claim to a common inheritance.” The decentralization of literature contributes to solidifying national centrality by reimagining a distended industrial nation as an extended clan sharing a “common inheritance” in its imagined rural origins.4

Following Kaplan, then, we can see local color operating on a presumed “kinship” among readers—sugestng that we all have beloved places in which our memories and traditions are rooted—and using family ties and ancestry both as themes that strike unique chords in individual readers and create, in a given readership, an sort of “imagined community.”5

As I discuss local color sisterhood in this chapter, I will also be relying on Richard Brodhead’s suggestive description of the “protocols of inclusion and exclusion” that characterized the local color writing of Jewett and others (Cultures 159). This is in some ways another manner of referring to the insider-outsider tension that runs throughout local color literature, and that, as Fetterley and Pryse point out, may be found in the positions of both the author and audience (outsiders) and the subjects of the text (insiders) and those of a text’s narrator (outsider) and “folk”

4 Amy Kaplan, “Nation, Region, and Empire” (250).
5 This is Benedict Anderson’s term, and one that Kaplan uses in extending her argument. See Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1991).
(insider). In Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, for instance, critics such as Pryse, June Howard, and Sandra Zagarell have debated the extent to which the narrator is a participant, an observer, or a participant-observer in the life of Dunnet Landing. Brodhead's articulation of the "protocols of inclusion and exclusion" refocuses the debate somewhat to ask, specifically, how the characters in a given local color text negotiate their respective statuses, and how each member of a community—even if it is a community of two sisters, alone together in their isolated family house—recognize the parameters and expectations of their roles. It might seem that the protocols of inclusion and exclusion would be clear in the stories of local color siblinghood, since the siblings, usually sisters, tend to be presented as a family unit, with nothing so remarkable about them as their membership in the same family. But Jewett, Freeman, and Wharton almost always distribute power unevenly between their siblings, whether that means giving one more influence over another, more knowledge of and devotion to family traditions and respectability than the other, or greater investment in sustaining the sibling bond (this last can be both a source of power and a threat to it). As they negotiate their relationships and positions in the family, then, the local color siblings are asking questions about the "authenticity" of

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6Pryse, "Sex, Class, and 'Category Crisis': Reading Jewett's Transitivity" (1998); Howard, "Unraveling Regions, Unsettling Periods: Sarah Orne Jewett and American Literary History (1996); Zagarell, "Troubling Regionalism: Rural Life and the Cosmopolitan Eye in Jewett's *Deephaven*" (1998). In *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (1995), Dona Brown underscores this theme of insider-outsider identifications, arguing that "tourism complicates the questions of ownership and control that lie at the heart of 'sense of place'—questions about the meaning, value, and uses of actual places" (3).
their own roles and those of their sisters (and, occasionally, brothers)—asking who is more truly adhering to the standards or practices of the past, or relying on a sibling to provide a connection to that authentic past, as it exists in their individual or shared memory.

It may be instructive to look first at one of the most widely known and broadly analyzed local color fictions, Sarah Orne Jewett’s short novel *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). While the novel does not prominently feature a sister pair, as do most of the other texts under consideration in this chapter, the relationships of aged siblings haunt the peripheries of the main narrative, to such a degree that they become signposts, of sorts, ways of reinforcing the story’s concern with family as well as the connectedness of Jewett’s local characters—a unity and history that stands in marked contrast to Jewett’s cosmopolitan, outsider narrator, who describes her observations of and interactions with the “folk” during a visit to a small coastal Maine village. As she experiences life in the village, the narrator records numerous instances of the ways brothers and sisters depend upon and look to each other for

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7 I’m intrigued by Kate McCullough’s contention that the narrator and Mrs. Todd comprise a “Boston marriage” of sorts in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. The model of the Boston marriage—one in which two women lived together, with varying degrees of intimacy—has obvious resonance with my present focus on the sister pairs of local color literature, and McCullough’s claim begs the question of whether or not we might read Mrs. Todd and the narrator as “local color sisters,” like the others included in this chapter. One major difference, of course, is that matter of biology versus voluntary affiliation—as the other sister pairs I’m looking at here have been connected all their lives, bonded through their common family ties, while Mrs. Todd and the narrator choose each other, however temporarily, in *Firs*. In both instances, however, the bond is often the “central relationship” in these women’s lives, providing “a source of sustenance and support” that sustains them as nothing else in their lives can (McCullough 23). See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s influential work on “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America” (1975).
confirmation of their identities and histories—as well as how they keep each other
trapped in the identities and roles of the past. The narrator’s focal point is Mrs. Todd,  
the older woman with whom she stays in Dunnet Landing. Mrs. Todd is something of 
a mystical healer, foraging for potent weeds and flowers with which to concoct  
lotions and potions for the healing of aches and pains, the warding off of mosquitoes.
Her talent for these concoctions is portrayed by Jewett (through the narrator) as  
signifying her link to the land, and to a less urbane, technologically and medically 
advanced society than the one in which the narrator makes her home. Indeed, one of  
the narrator’s first impressions upon entering Mrs. Todd’s home is of the “strange and 
pungent odors” of her plants, which “roused a dim sense of remembrance of  
something in the forgotten past.” As many have demonstrated in their studies of  
*Firs*, 
the story is an exemplar of the classic local color tension between past and present, 
urban and rural, tradition and modernization, and one of the subtle ways Jewett 
describes this tension is through sibling characters and discussions of siblinghood.

Mrs. Todd has a brother, William Blackett, who lives on a nearby island with 
their mother, Mrs. Blackett. While Mrs. Todd and William’s actual interactions in the 
narrative are relatively few, the narrator is intrigued by their relationship, and  

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8 I am using the 1956 Anchor edition of *The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories*; this and all 
subsequent citations are drawn from that edition (48).
9 Philip G. Terrie, “Local Color and a Mythologized Past: The Rituals of Memory in *The Country of the 
Pointed Firs***” (1987); Karen L. Kilcup and Thomas S. Edwards, eds., *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: 
Reshaping the Canon* (1999); Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Women’s 
carefully notes both the way Mrs. Todd describes William and the way he actually appears (to the narrator). When the narrator accompanies Mrs. Todd to nearby Green Island to meet William and Mrs. Blackett for the first time, she listens to an endless litany of William's shortcomings (shyness, solitariness, and so forth) from Mrs. Todd, but realizes, upon meeting him, that he is a sweet, mature, sixtyish man, not the "not far from thirty and a little loutish" fool that Mrs. Todd's characterization had suggested (44). Mrs. Todd's description of William seems, to the narrator, to bear little resemblance to the man as she observes him; instead of recognizing the man as he is today, Mrs. Todd persists in thinking of him as the boy she knew in her youth. She also presumes to judge his choices in life:

"I take after father, large and heavy, an' William is like mother's folks, short an' thin. He ought to have made something o' himself, bein' a man an' so like mother; but though he's been very steady to work, an' kept up the farm, an' done his fishin too right along, he never had mother's snap an' power o' seein' things just as they be. He's got excellent judgment, too," meditated William's sister, but she could not arrive at any satisfactory decision upon what she evidently thought his failure in life. (47).

Even as she easily lists the many duties William has admirably discharged, Mrs. Todd expresses regret that he has not "made something of himself," and distinguishes herself from her brother by seeing him as destined for something greater, where she is not. Her interpretation of their lives seems to both make her dismissive of her own "accomplishment" in leaving the island, and—by virtue of that same attainment—
gives her license, as the more worldly and experienced sibling, to cluck over her brother's limitations. The limited, no longer relevant way Mrs. Todd views William, and her blindness to the ways he has changed over the years, reveals the unique power of long-lasting sibling relationships to lock brothers and sisters in outdated identities—and allow a sister to see, in her aged brother, the boy who was her companion in youth.  

For Mrs. Todd, viewing her brother in an outdated fashion may be unconscious, but it serves both as a means of controlling him and comforting herself. William, unmarried and still living with their mother in their childhood home, is frozen in an eternal youth in Mrs. Todd's imagination, and as such provides a psychological link to her own past—he is still living it, in Mrs. Todd's mind, and she can therefore revisit it through him. Jewett presents this as a source of comfort to Mrs. Todd: She is glad to know William is taking care of their mother, and reassured that her own family and history remain, at least in her mind, as she has always imagined them. Thinking of William as he used to be, rather than as he is, also gives Mrs. Todd a position of superiority, for she can imagine herself to have progressed, to have lived, where he has not; she has left the island both physically and metaphorically, while he is stuck there in the old family home. Throughout The Country of the Pointed Firs, William is subject to a double interpretive gaze—Mrs.

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10 Kate McCullough, in Regions of Identity: "Mrs. Todd and William, for instance, are mirror images of each other, both in the sense that they are oppositional and identical" (41).
Todd's and the narrator's—that views him only in terms of the past, as an artifact, locking him into a role that he has not chosen, and has almost certainly surpassed.

Mrs. Todd is not the only character in *Firs* who uses a sibling as an imaginative link to the past. The narrator records many other such instances of siblings, real and imagined, and these observations serve to reinforce the story's concern with family as well as with the connectedness of Jewett's characters—which stands, of course, in marked contrast to her narrator, whose solitariness is underscored by her namelessness. Near the end of Jewett's tale, the narrator accompanies Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Blackett to a family reunion; almost more important than the gathering itself is the journey there, during which the local women visit with and talk about their relatives, living and dead, and tell stories of the past. At one point Mrs. Blackett's gaze turns pensively toward a point up the coastline, and Mrs. Todd explains that "Mother used to have a sister that lived up that shore," suggesting that Mrs. Blackett marks her own history through a sibling, much like Mrs. Todd does (121). The narrator also records Mrs. Todd's visit from the chatty Mrs. Fosdick, who reports that all eight of her siblings have died, and that she is the only one of her family left. She then thanks Mrs. Todd for speaking with her of the past: "there, it does seem so pleasant to talk with an old acquaintance that knows what you know" (94). Mrs. Fosdick mourns her lonely position at the end of her family line, and, lacking any living brothers or sisters, appreciates the way in which Mrs. Todd can play a sort of surrogate sibling.
and give her a link to the past. And at another point, the narrator notes of neighbor Captain Littlepage that “He looked, with his careful precision of dress, as if he were the object of cherishing care on the part of elderly unmarried sisters” (58). Jewett, through her narrator, articulates this image as if the figure of an elderly man dressed by his elderly sisters would have an easy resonance with her readers, as if it would suggest something familiar and tangible. It suggests that her audience would have experience—if not in their own lives, then in their reading of local color literature—with elderly, unmarried siblings living together and caring for one another.  

Another Jewett story, “The Dulham Ladies,” first published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1886, suggests more directly the kind of “sister-love” that recurred time and again in late-nineteenth-century local color literature, describing as it does the marriage-like relationship of two elderly sisters, Miss Dobin and Miss Lucinda Dobin. The only children of a small-town minister and his high-born wife, the Dobin sisters are raised to think of themselves as somewhat above the rest of their community, obliged to uphold the “ministerial dignity of their father” and to “give a lenient

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11 Indeed, the figure of the “maiden aunt,” or older, unmarried woman, seems to have held popular sway in the late decades of the 1800s. In his 1888 discourse on Women and Men, Thomas Wentworth Higginson analyzes the Massachusetts census of 1875 to discover if there really was so great an “excess of women” in the state as had been asserted, and what the value of these “excessive” women might be. Their worth, he argues, is great: “we must remember that there is in any community an immense and constant demand for this class. They are the natural stop-gaps, the flying buttresses, the emergency lectures, of all families. When in difficulty, you send for a maiden aunt” (39).
sanction to the ways of the world for their mother's sake."12 After both their parents have died, the Dobin sisters perceive it as their duty to extend their family's moral and cultural influence in Dulham, regarding the "retrogression in society" with "increasing dismay," and feeling "as if they were a feeble garrison, to whose lot it had fallen to repulse a noisy, irreverent mob, an increasing band of marauders who would overthrow all landmarks of the past, all etiquette and social rank" (198). Jewett paints Miss Dobin and Miss Lucinda as guardians of the past, living more in it than in the present, unified in the project of monitoring their community and preserving the old, superior ways.

Each Dobin lady's entrapment in days past is exacerbated by the presence of her sister, with whom she shares not only a worldview but a family and community history. Miss Dobin and Miss Lucinda have never had to cultivate relationships outside their home, or consider perspectives other than those nourished within its walls, because they have always had each other close by. Jewett gives the sisters an excuse for their naivety and limited view of the world by explaining that they were kept in a sort of suspended childhood by their father's long life, and the requirement that they take care of him:

Sometimes there is such a household as this ... where the parents linger until their children are far past middle age, and always keep them in a

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12 I am citing "The Dullham Ladies" as it appears in the 1956 Anchor edition of The Country of the Pointed Firs and Other Stories (195).
too childish and unworthy state of subjection. The Misses Dobin's characters were much influenced by such an unnatural prolongation of the filial relationship, and they were amazingly slow to suspect that they were not so young as they used to be. (197)

Because their father lives for so long, and because the Misses Dobin have stayed in his home to care for him, rather than, Jewett seems to suggest, leaving to marry, they identify—together—primarily as his children, not as the wives and mothers they might otherwise have become. When their father dies, Miss Dobin and Miss Lucinda realize they are “no longer constrained by home duties,” and dedicate themselves to the service of their community. Jewett reveals their social ineptitude and dearth of graces as the unfortunate but not unsurprising result of an overly intense, and overly extensive, parent-child relationship, reinforcing, as she does so, the normativity of marriage, and the Dobin sisters' strangeness in living so far into old age without marrying or leaving the natal home. That is, while she explains why the Dobin sisters are the way they are, she also makes clear that, at least in the eyes of their fellow townsfolk, there is something not quite right or acceptable about this.

Jewett's story reaches a moment of crisis when the sisters are forced to acknowledge to each other the possibility that they might be something other than they imagine themselves to be, and that the world might have passed them by. Without ever speaking of it, the Dobin sisters have each noticed that their hair has thinned with age, and have taken to wearing “breakfast caps” at all hours of the day.

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The people of Dulham (more civil than the Dobin sisters give them credit for) never mention this strange behavior, but one day at a meeting of their sewing society, a child asks, “Do Miss Dobinses wear them great caps because their heads is cold?” (200). The sisters are horrified by the impertinent question, and Miss Lucinda decides the time has come to broach the subject of their hair:

“I am sure we have our friends,” said Miss Lucinda anxiously, but with a choking voice. “We must not let them think we do not mean to keep up with the times, as we always have. I do feel as if perhaps—our hair”—

And the sad secret was out at last. Each of the sisters drew a long breath of relief at this beginning of a confession.

It was certain that they must take some steps to retrieve their lost ascendancy. Public attention had that evening been called to their fast-disappearing locks, poor ladies.... The straightness and thinness had increased so gradually that neither sister had quite accepted the thought that other persons would particularly notice their altered appearance.

They had shrunk, with the reticence born of close family association, from speaking of the cause even to each other, when they made themselves pretty little lace and dotted muslin caps. (199)

The sisters are moved to improve their appearances by a mixture of social obligation and vanity, and a reluctance to appear mired in the past. The “sad secret” of their diminishing beauty is almost a tangible object between them, an elephant in the room: Because each is constantly confronted by the fact of it in her sister, it is more difficult to ignore than it would be if each sister lived alone with, and could forever opt not to face, her changing appearance. But Jewett adds too that the truth of their
thin hair went so long unspoken because of "the reticence born of close family association," suggesting the power of denial, or selective ignorance, among relatives, for whom recognizing or admitting something undesirable about someone else is to admit something about one's self. Likewise, when they have resolved to go in search of fake "fringe" to (ostensibly) improve their appearances, the sisters feel "a new bond of sympathy in keeping this secret with and for each other" (201).

The Dobin sisters are united by their shared secret, as well as by their common sense of duty to preserve their family's dignity and high standing in their town. Jewett presents them as a unit, rather than as two individuals—and, indeed, the only thing that threatens to differentiate, or separate, Miss Dobin and Miss Lucinda is each sister's impression that the other's hair is looking less than presentable. They have seen each other the same way, and shared the same place in and relation to the world, for so many years, that to admit to change would be to invite dissension or even disaster. It would, finally, be to acknowledge a fault line in their sisterhood, the very source of their individual and collective identities.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman takes up a similar theme in "A Mistaken Charity," which also follows two interdependent, elderly sisters and their relationship to their community. Freeman, whose oeuvre comprises hundreds of local color stories, perfected the characterization of local color sisters, presenting them time after time as the protagonists of her narratives and describing the ways in which issues of personal
history and identity offered comfort or presented challenges. Like the Dobin sisters in Jewett's story, Freeman's sisters often live in the family house, the last living members—or, at least, the last in that place—of an otherwise extinguished family line. Their old maidenhood, and their rattling around in old homes, signifies the end, or finality, of not only their own lives, but of a family—they are alone save each other, their very walls falling in around them. They are often isolated in some way from their communities, depicted by Freeman as somehow apart from the fray of village life, stuck with only each other—for better or for worse.

Freeman uses her sister characters to explore the concerns generally attributed to local color fiction—an interest in tradition and the preservation of old ways in the face of an encroaching modernity, the significance of place (namely, small New England places), and so forth—but there is a real menace in many of her sister stories that makes them more frightening, sometimes violent, than those of other local color authors. Part of the menace lies in the sister relationships she describes. Freeman tends to grant unequal investment in their relationship to her sisters, making one excessively reliant on the other, while the latter seeks connection or fulfillment elsewhere. She also repeatedly draws sister pairs in which one is much older than the other, and views herself (or is viewed) more as a mother than a sister—a complication of relationship that often finds the older sister worrying over the romantic interests and inclinations of the younger. Furthermore, Freeman almost always makes a point
of describing the degree to which the sisters share a physical resemblance, linking them through similarity of appearance and making any threat to their unity most alarming. Finally, the other unsettling elements in Freeman’s stories are the crises that arise and threaten her sisterhoods, from those who would violate, or harm, or separate the sisters. This contributes to the sense of encroachment, the idea that the long sisterhood that has so long remained inviolate may be on the verge of disruption or disaster.

In “A Mistaken Charity,” the community around the sisters becomes a threat not only to their unity but to their very survival. As in “The Dullham Ladies,” an outside force—in the shape of a misguided benevolently benevolent neighbor—brings about a change in the way the sisters relate and identify themselves, and almost kills them. Harriet and Charlotte Shattuck live alone in an old and all but uninhabitable house, the same house where they have lived, since their parents’ death, “from youth to old age,” and where they are allowed to stay rent-free by its wealthy owner. Harriet is “deaf and rheumatic,” and Charlotte is blind, and they survive only by scrabbling for dandelion greens in their yard and what food their neighbors bring them. Their existence is grim, and Freeman does nothing to ameliorate its pathos—even the “sister-love” here is somewhat discomforting, as Freeman describes how Charlotte “cower[s] before her aggressive old sister” and how Harriet “sniffs” doubtfully at Charlotte’s claims of “chinks” of light and vision in her blindness, which appear at the
And yet, sisterhood—and the independence, dignity, and comfort it represents—are all the Shattucks have. When their neighbors decide to “help” the sisters by securing them a place in an old folks’ home, Harriet and Charlotte feel as if they’ve been kidnapped, and their lives stolen from them. Unlike the Dobin sisters in Jewett’s story, the Shattucks have no interest in acceding to the manners and mores of the town, and resent having to speak, dress, and behave as they are directed in their new residence. Charlotte begs, “Can’t we get back no ways, Harriet?... I’ve felt as if I was slantendicular from heaven ever since I’ve been here, an’ it’s been so awful dark. I ain’t had any chinks. I want to go home, Harriet” (245). Even though they now have a comfortable room, warm clothing, and decent meals, Harriet and Charlotte mourn the loss of their liberty and their independent existence—alone together—and resolve to escape. When they do so, they leave the white lace caps they have been forced to wear at the home hanging defiantly on their bedposts, in a sort of inversion of the same symbol of respectability that Jewett uses in “The Dullham Ladies.”

“A Mistaken Charity” is a characteristically melancholic Freeman sister story, with “sister-love” presented as a thing of value, under siege by some outside force, but also a meager, potentially unsatisfying quantity. Once Harriet and Charlotte have returned to their house, Charlotte begins to see “chinks” again, and on the one hand,

\[13\] Citations are from *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (235, 236, 240).
the Shattucks—now restored to their independent existence—seem to have reached a happy ending. Yet Freeman has unsparingly described the desperate conditions in which they live, so readers are left with the image of two old sisters who have each other, but little else. They have elected for themselves the status of outsiders, but Freeman has made clear that, if they isolate themselves completely from their community, they will not survive. Jewett's Dobin sisters seemed aware of this truth; the Shattuck sisters either are not, or choose to accept the consequences of their isolation.

In "The Three Old Sisters and the Old Beau," Freeman takes a somewhat more lighthearted approach to sisterhood, and calls into question issues of sisterly identification and differentiation more directly. Again echoing Jewett's "The Dullham Ladies," the three sisters in this short story have lived a long, uninterrupted siblinghood that has either been the cause or the condition of their entrapment in childish roles and behaviors:

"The three old sisters, Rachel and Nancy and Camilla, lived in the house in which they had been born. They were very old in years—the youngest was nearly seventy—but they were, after all, the most youthful maidens in the village. Not a child dragging her doll-carriage past their windows ... was as young as they, for the youth in them had actually triumphed over age, and gained, as it were, a species of immortality in this world."14

14 Citations are from The Love of Parson Lord and Other Stories (185).
Living together, as they have for their entire lives, the seventy-year-old sisters still play the games of their youth, and still wear the styles of clothing that were in fashion when they were decades younger. Their outfits, Freeman writes, “answered to their conceptions of themselves and one another,” and it is “inconceivable how one, surveying the others, as they sat there in their gay array, could not have seen in their faces, if not in her looking glass, the loss of her youth; but if she did, she made no sign” (187). The narrator of Freeman’s story is incredulous that, unlike the Dobin sisters in Jewett’s tale, these three aged sisters do not see the foolishness in the others’ appearance, even if they cannot see it in themselves. Instead, one might understand Freeman to be making fools of the women, old ladies in a suspended childhood and a sisterhood so exclusive that its members, with only each other to regard, do not know how ridiculous they appear. Their individual senses of themselves have no frame of reference outside of each other, so they don’t have, like the Dobins, any sense of needing to measure up to the estimation of outsiders.

The “imagined community” of the three old sisters, to return to Benedict Anderson’s useful term, brooks no outside influence or taint, and keeps Rachel, Nancy, and Camilla bound to outdated practices, in an outdated state of being. It is as if—to call upon another signal characteristic of the local color genre—their very sisterhood is a kind of “dialect” for them, a singularly unique, shared vocabulary and manner of speaking, acting, and viewing the world that is incredibly, almost
painfully, local, functioning only in their shared home. Local color writers often used dialect to particularize the characters and settings of their tales, contrasting the "insider" status of those who speak in dialect with the "outsider" status of those who speak in standard English. In "The Three Old Sisters and the Old Beau," Freeman offers a world in which there are, really, only insiders—even the old beau, though he lives in another house, understands the "dialect"—and where the present is nothing to fear, because the characters are inextricably rooted in the past.

After all, though Rachel, Nancy, and Camilla are wholly pathetic, Freeman is less interested in making fools of them than she is in asking greater questions about identity, obligation, and tradition. The story's fourth character is the "old beau," who continues, in the space of the narrative, to call on the three sisters as he has for decades. The townspeople are obsessed with knowing which sister he is courting, but he never marries one—until, that is, Nancy and Rachel have died, and the youngest, Camilla, is left. Freeman merely presents the facts of this situation, noting that "He did not make his call every afternoon after [the second sister's death]" because Camilla "had doubts about the strict propriety of such solitary visits," but otherwise leaving the narrative's many questions unanswered (190): Was the beau courting Camilla all along? Was he really courting one of the other sisters, and married Camilla only when she was the only one left? Had one of the sisters—Camilla or another—always refused to marry the beau and leave her sisters?
By refusing to connect the dots in “Three Sisters and the Old Beau,” Freeman makes complex issues of differentiation and identity the central themes of a seemingly innocuous story. The townsfolk want a story—they ask for differentiation between the sisters, and want to know who plays the starring role in the romance with the old beau. But from the sisters’ inability or unwillingness to identify individually—in their consistent embodiment of a bygone past, through their clothing and their games, in their use of and reliance on their common dialect—they defy such distinctiveness, and identify collectively instead. Whether the beau marries the only sister who is left, or the one he wanted all along, doesn’t matter: he could not marry one while the others lived.

The close, even blind, identification of sisters is a theme to which Freeman returns repeatedly, usually in stories of sister pairs, as in “A Far-Away Melody.” As we have seen, that story finds Mary Brown unable to support the idea that her existence might be separate from her sister’s, and traumatized when her sister Priscilla dies and she does not. Freeman describes Priscilla and Mary as “curiously alike” in appearance, and consistently makes a point of describing, early in each narrative, the physical resemblance of other sister pairs in her other stories (209). In “The Scent of the Roses,” Anne and Clarissa May are “wonderfully alike,” while in “Amanda and Love,” Amanda, the elder sister, views Love as her “looking-glass” (even though, Freeman tells us, this is a misguided perception). Emily and Elizabeth Babcock, in “A Gala
Dress," are "about the same height," but in this case, Elizabeth, with all her severity and straightness, "usually impressed people as being the taller." The physical similarity of Freeman's sisters serves to underscore the closeness of their connection—they are as like as possible—and their distance, in all ways, from the outside world. Their similarity, or sympathy, is not used to suggest incest, as in Pierre or Little Women, but it does hint at the same sort of closing off of blood lines, and refusal of outside influence or contamination, as incest.15

Though Emily and Elizabeth Babcock in "A Gala Dress" are perceived—albeit mistakenly—by their neighbors as being of rather different height and appearance, the crux of this story is that the two sisters are bound by their common poverty and their need to preserve the semblance, at least, of their richer, more respectable past. The drama of the story revolves around the one decent black silk dress that they share, and take turns wearing to church—with each wearing it decorated in a slightly different way, so that it might appear each has her own dress. The story follows Emily and Elizabeth as they debate how and when each should wear the dress, as they pull out seams and sew on trim, and as they try to maintain their deception in the face of questioning by their nosy neighbor Matilda. Finally, at a church picnic, Matilda and Emily are walking along when Emily steps into some unexploded firecrackers,

15 Citations from "The Scent of the Roses" and "A Gala Dress" are from A New England Nun and Other Stories (1891) (198, 38); citations from "Amanda and Love" are from http://home.comcast.net/~WilkinsFreeman/Short/AmandaAndLove.htm.

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burning the black silk dress. This event presents a crisis to the sisters, for it means
Emily will not be able to appear in the dress as she has previously, and their deception
may no longer succeed; the sisters are eventually saved by the gift of other dresses
from a deceased aunt—a gift that, moreover, means the sisters may now appear in
public at the same time, each in her own fine dress. Matilda tells Elizabeth how glad
she is to see the sisters out together, since it had “been round consider’ble lately that
you an’ Em’ly didn’t get along well, an’ that was the reason you didn’t go out more
together” (50). This comment infuriates Elizabeth, who sets Matilda straight—
forsaking the illusion she and Emily have fought so long to preserve in the face of a
greater threat: the suggestion that their sisterhood might be troubled. The “gala dress”
therefore represents not only the Babcock sisters’ better and cherished past, but is the
thing that unites them and allows them access to the “faint savor of gentility and
aristocracy” that constitutes their remembered family history.

“A Gala Dress” is not only a story about isolated, united sisterhood and an
effort at preservation (of family and of history), it is also one in which Freeman
introduces a more violent menace to underscore those other themes. At the very end
of the story, the meddlesome Matilda, having been given the Babcocks’ old black silk
dress, is shamed into saying, “I want to tell you—I see them fire-crackers a-sizzlin’
before Em’ly stepped in ‘em” (53). The story ends with this abrupt, unexpected
confession, startling the reader and forcing consideration of why Matilda did what
she did and why she chooses to confess. Matilda is the threat from outside the sisterhood, and the sisters' home, here, and while we may have understood earlier in the story that she posed such a threat—either through her incessant nosiness or by failing to warn Emily about the firecrackers—the way that Freeman ends the story with her confession makes all of what has happened previously seem like a real, even life-and-death, problem. "A Gala Dress" is in no way just a quaint little story about two old ladies—all the details of their lives, Freeman tells us, are matters of life and death.

In "The Tree of Knowledge" and "The Scent of the Roses," Freeman continues to invest her sister stories with weighty concerns and threats from without, but in these two tales, the threats take the form of suitors, who would disrupt the sisterhood by marrying one sister or the other. "The Tree of Knowledge" follows Annie and Cornelia Pryor, who are merely half-sisters and therefore possess "a great dissimilarity in their figures." Cornelia is much older than Annie, and her relation to her younger half-sister is more that of a mother, and has been, throughout Annie's life. The narrative describes Annie's misguided belief that the stranger she meets one day on the road near her home is the anonymous suitor who has been leaving her love letters for some time. He is, in fact, a cad, and Cornelia is the actual writer of the letters. She does so in order that Annie might expect any actual suitor to meet the high standards

16 Citations are from The Love of Parson Lord and Other Stories (90).
of “David Amicus,” the pseudonym with which Cornelia signs the letters. Annie persists in her affection for the stranger, Harry Carew, and over time he redeems himself sufficiently that Cornelia finds peace with Annie’s marriage to him. However, Freeman once again complicates the romance or warmth of this sister story in her final lines:

Cornelia wondered, standing under the tree, clad still in the dress of splendid brocade which she had worn at Annie’s wedding: there were gold and silver threads in it. The sun sank, and the orange light on the tree paled. Cornelia gazed down at the darkening curve of road. Annie was wedded and gone, all her own romance was dead, and she was left alone; yet her peace did not fail her, nor her anticipation of joy to come, for she had thrust herself and her own needs and sorrows so far behind her trimmed and burning lamp of love that she had become, as it were, a wedding-guest of all life. (139)

The scene Freeman paints here is almost unbearably sad—Cornelia, standing by herself in her shining dress, staring down an empty road as the sun sets over her. The language of the entire paragraph is relentlessly bleak—“darkening,” “gone,” “dead,” “alone”—but Freeman seems to suggest that Cornelia has so determinedly set her own hopes and needs aside that she now lives fully for and through Annie, and will be happy because Annie will be happy. Rather than bringing the story to a satisfying close, though, this final insistence on Cornelia’s happiness, following as it does the litany of grim and lonely words, seems tragic indeed. The sisterhood in “The Tree of
Knowledge" has been disrupted by Annie’s marriage, and Cornelia’s selflessness has born no fruit—she is, at the end of the tale, wholly alone.

In “The Scent of the Roses,” Freeman presents another sister pair in which one (Clarissa) is much older than the other (Anne), and in which the interference of a suitor threatens to break up their sisterly unity. Though the names of the May sisters are remarkably close to those of the Pryor sisters in “The Tree of Knowledge,” both the sister relationship and the use of the suitor in “The Scent of the Roses” is quite different. First of all, while Clarissa is quite a bit older than Anne, they appear, as noted above, “wonderfully alike,” but in this case, Anne “showed Clarissa what she had been,” bringing “the regret and humiliation of loss”—of a beau—to her, and making her feel like Anne was “the rose of this spring,” and she the “one of last” (198). Anne serves as a constant reminder to Clarissa of her own romantic past, while Anne fears becoming, like Clarissa, an obsessive maker of potpourri—a product of preservation and age that Freeman presents as not unlike Mrs. Todd’s potions in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Clarissa learned to make potpourri with her lost beau, Gilman Lane, and when she smells it “something stronger than any rose fragrance floated from it…. It was the fragrance of the old memory” (204).

Clarissa and Anne’s moment of menace or crisis arises when Gilman Lane returns to their village after many years away, during which time Clarissa and Gilman had each thought themselves engaged, then imagined themselves dismissed when
their letters ceased to reach each other. Anne meets Gilman and fancies him interested in her, but it turns out that he is only hoping, through Anne, to resume his acquaintance (and romance) with Clarissa. When Anne finally realizes where Gilman's affections truly lie, she has a moment of regret and chagrin, then laughs “with the most unselfish amusement” (214). Freeman presents Anne here as recovering fairly easily from her disappointment, but—as in “The Tree of Knowledge”—complicates the resolution of her story with a decent measure of pathos. After Anne’s little laugh, she begins picking roses, and when a passing friend asks her why she’s picking so many, Anne replies, “I don’t know but I shall go to filling up jars with them, like Clarissa” (214). The story ends here, with the sad suggestion that while romance has returned to Clarissa’s life, Anne believes she may be looking at years like Clarissa has spent, with only the memory of a romantic past—and without the consoling presence of a strong sisterly relationship, which Clarissa, at least, did have. The rupture of the May siblinghood is therefore effected not as the story might have suggested—that Gilman Lane would break Clarissa’s heart yet again, by falling in love with Anne—but it seems bound to happen, nonetheless.

In her study of Freeman’s short stories, Mary Reichardt describes the author’s overarching concern as being with “the inner world of women,” and the way in which “turn-of-the-century New England women of every type struggled toward selfhood despite straitened circumstances and often repressive familial and
community relationships” (xiii). While this reading—specifically, the idea of a “struggle toward selfhood”—applies to a broad swath of Freeman’s short stories, the author describes, with equal frequency, women beyond any “struggle” for individual identity, who are more concerned with survival than with “selfhood” and who turn to their relatives, usually their siblings, for support, whether their bonds are “repressive” or not. As we’ve seen, the typical Freeman sister’s sense of self is inextricably linked to her sister, and while one may seek to form new connections—usually of the romantic sort—she does so within Freeman’s tightly constructed framework of siblinghood, and her desire or decision has a great impact on her sister. In her preoccupation with sister pairs, Freeman does construct an “inner world of women,” but one that is often shared between two women, sisters, rather than existing in the heart and mind of one alone.17

I want to turn now to Edith Wharton’s novella Bunner Sisters, which complicates the traditional local color story of sisters alone by shifting the setting from rural New England to urban New York, and tearing apart, with both devastating and ambiguous results, the bond between Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner. Wharton is not best known as a local color writer, but many of her longer works, such as Ethan Frome (1911) and Summer (1917) are working alongside, or in response to, the

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17 Reichardt does acknowledge the importance of sister characters in Freeman’s fiction: “Freeman’s frequent depiction of the bond between sisters, an especially close and inseparable one, often carries with it a ... threatening note; one sister’s tyranny over or jealous domination of the other lurks just beneath the surface if not overtly forming the events of the plot” (104).
regionalist and local color genres that were popular in her time. Though she
disparaged Jewett and Freeman in her memoir *A Backward Glance* for writing
through “rose-coloured spectacles,” Wharton clearly understood the local color
formula, and played with its themes of tradition and modernization, its attention to
the details of setting, and its use of old and/or isolated characters in many of her
stories and novels (293).18

*Bunner Sisters* was one of the first pieces the new writer submitted for
publication in the 1890s, but it was rejected by Scribner's for, as Elizabeth Ammons
writes, lacking a “cheerful juncture” at which to split the tale into two installments,
and was not published until it appeared as part of the collection *Xingu* in 1916.19
The short tale describes two sisters, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner, who live alone,
together, in New York and make their living with the small, rundown millinery shop
that they own. The sisters keep mostly to themselves until they make the
acquaintance of a bachelor, Mr. Ramy, who lives nearby. He slowly insinuates himself
into their lives, and asks first Ann Eliza and then Evelina to marry him. After the
practical Ann Eliza, who can't fathom leaving her sister, rejects Mr. Ramy, he
proposes to, is accepted by, and runs away with Evelina. Mr. Ramy turns out to have

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18 As Donna Campbell writes, in later novels such as *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*, Wharton “confronts and rewrites the genre of local color fiction on its own terms, using its settings and characters to disrupt and transform its narrative conventions, the assumptions underlying its iconographic and symbolic structures such as storytelling, preserving and healing, and its insistence on the value of self-denial” (13). Campbell’s is one of the only recent, extended analyses of this Wharton story.
19 Ammons, 12.
been a drug addict, interested in only the Bunner sisters’ meager savings, and leaves Evelina in sad straits. She finally returns to New York and dies, leaving Ann Eliza wholly alone in the world—and free to live for herself for the first time.

In its focus on two unmarried sisters, who live in an uneasy tension between preserving their family dignity of the past and surviving in the present, *Bunner Sisters* resembles many other local color stories, especially those by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. Wharton also includes such markers of the genre as a preoccupation with time; Ann Eliza’s purchase of a clock for Evelina’s birthday introduces her to Mr. Ramy, the clockmaker (and drug addict) who will lure Evelina away from her home, and Wharton uses the ticking of the clock as perpetual reminder, to Ann Eliza, of the events she has set in motion. Wharton’s opening description of the Bunner sisters’ neighborhood firmly establishes the novella as a product of the local color era, even as its New York setting lends the tale a distinctly urban flavor:

In the days when New York’s traffic moved at the pace of the drooping horse-car, when society applauded Christine Nilsson at the Academy of Music and basked in the sunsets of the Hudson River School on the walls of the National Academy of Design, an inconspicuous shop with a single show-window was intimately and favourably known to the feminine population of the quarter bordering on Stuyvesant Square.... It was a small shop, in a shabby basement, in a side-street already doomed to decline ... its fame was so purely local that the customers on whom its existence depended were almost congenitally aware of the exact range of “goods” to be found at Bunner Sisters’. (309)
With these opening lines, Wharton makes clear that not only is her story set in some time past, but that within this past, progress has already surpassed the Bunner sisters, whose shop is “shabby” and “doomed to decline.” It is as if the sisters themselves exist in a sort of suspended memory: no one who doesn’t already know their shop is likely to find it, and their longtime patrons supply their custom from memory, with a “congenital” knowledge of the contents of Bunner Sisters’ shelves—which, Wharton writes, “had the undefinable tinge of objects long preserved in the show-case of a museum” (311). The mentions of technology and art that begin the story situate the sisters outside of but on the immediate fringe of a more glamorous and progressive world, making their plain and meager lives even more pathetic.

At the beginning of Bunner Sisters, at least, Ann Eliza and Evelina have the sort of sibling “marriage” that recurs time and again in local color fiction. Indeed, Ann Eliza, especially, is depicted by Wharton as having the same sort of devotion to and intense feelings for her sister that she might be expected to have for a lover. For instance, preparing to surprise Evelina on her birthday, Ann Eliza fusses with her dress and the wrapping of Evelina’s present, then flirtatiously affects sanguinity when Evelina enters the room:

When she had tied the parcel to her satisfaction, and laid it with furtive accuracy just opposite her sister’s plate, she sat down, with an air of obviously-assumed indifference, in one of the rocking-chairs near the window; and a moment later the shop-door opened and Evelina
entered.... "Why, Ann Eliza," she exclaimed, in a thin voice pitched to chronic fretfulness, "what in the world you got your best silk on for?"

Ann Eliza had risen with a blush that made her steel-bowed spectacles incongruous.

"Why Evelina, why shouldn't I, I sh'ld like to know? Ain't it your birthday, dear?" She put out her arms with the awkwardness of habitually repressed emotion. (313)

Ann Eliza's whole life revolves around her sister, and she is worked almost into a frenzy by the excitement of the surprise. She prepares her gift and gets dressed with the care and attention of a love-struck suitor, and is embarrassed when Evelina points out the unaccustomed ceremony. For Ann Eliza, her bond with her sister deserves all the niceties of celebration she can summon, while Evelina is less emotionally moved by the display.

The same is true throughout Bunner Sisters, with Ann Eliza always the person more focused on her sister and their household than Evelina, who yearns for excitement. Wharton draws Ann Eliza as identifying fully, and embodying her role to the utmost, as a sister, while Evelina wants only to leave the home they share together. Like the younger sisters in the Freeman stories, Evelina has not yet abandoned the hopes of romance and a life outside the family home that the elder sister gave up years before. And Wharton suggests that, like the motherly older sisters in Freeman's stories, it may be Ann Eliza's own confusion of her sisterly relation to Evelina that ends up causing her so much pain:
She saw that Evelina wanted her sympathy as little as her admonitions, and that already she counted for nothing in her sister's scheme of life. To Ann Eliza's idolatrous acceptance of the cruelties of fate this exclusion seemed both natural and just; but it caused her the most lively pain. She could not divest her love for Evelina of its passionate motherliness; no breath of reason could lower it to the cool temperature of sisterly affection. (376)

Here, casting the mother-daughter relationship as more intense than that of sisters, Wharton positions Ann Eliza as irrationally devoted to Evelina, misguidedly thinking of herself as Evelina's mother rather than her sister. Earlier in the story, as we have seen, Wharton depicts Ann Eliza as a sort of besotted suitor, so this further aspersion on her character seems to suggest that while Evelina may seem unkind or even hateful in her lack of consideration for Ann Eliza, the apparently virtuous, selfless elder sister loses her self and her sense of propriety in the intensity of her feeling for the younger. Indeed, as the story progresses, and Evelina becomes increasingly attached to Mr. Ramy, Ann Eliza actually feels Evelina's feelings for her: When Evelina shamelessly presses Ann Eliza for information about Mr. Ramy, then flees the room, Wharton describes Ann Eliza standing "burning with the same of Evelina's self-exposure" (355). She feels not only for, but as, her sister, with a sympathy that, to the reader, seems not only inappropriate but unwarranted, as it is returned not even the slightest by Evelina.

The "local color" sisterhood that Wharton depicts in *Bunner Sisters* therefore shares the intensity—both of feeling, and of isolation and proximity—of the local
color stories of writers like Jewett and Freeman, and likewise picks up the threads of menace or pathos that comprise or underscore the themes of change, loss, and death in those other authors' stories and novels. There is no doubt that Ann Eliza and Evelina are just barely surviving—their store is located on the fringe of a thriving city; its shelves are dusty and its few customers dwindling in number; their memories, much less their wallets, can scarcely sustain them any longer. All they have is each other—and in the course of the story, they lose that. The intensity of Ann Eliza's "sister-love" compels her to first refuse Mr. Ramy's proposal herself, on the grounds that she could not leave her sister, then give Evelina all their shared savings when Evelina—having no compunctions about leaving her sister—accepts Mr. Ramy's proposal and moves to St. Louis. Ann Eliza is left with nothing, and must resort to selling off her few remaining possessions in order to put bread on her table. Wharton leaves Ann Eliza in truly dire straits, and for naught—rather than finding success and happiness in her marriage, Evelina discovers Mr. Ramy's addiction to opium, and he finally leaves her, pregnant, for another woman. The meager domestic warmth in which Wharton initially presents Ann Eliza and Evelina at the beginning of the novella is wholly destroyed by its end, and the Bunner sisterhood is left in ruins. The past that offered them scanty sustenance turns out to be preferable to the future Evelina selects for herself and, by extension, her sister.
That is, almost. At the very end of the novella, Ann Eliza is liberated by the loss of her sister. A sick and jaded Evelina eventually returns to New York, tells of her conversion to Mr. Ramy's Catholicism, her pregnancy, and her husband's desertion, and finally dies just as spring is blooming. After burying her in the Catholic cemetery—a concession which Ann Eliza feels as a "last negation of her past" (433)—Ann Eliza sets off to find some new way of supporting herself. She heads out on a "beautiful morning" when "the air was full of a warm sunshine that had coaxed open nearly every window in the street," and notes the contrast between the freshness of the spring day and the gloomy appearance of the old Bunner Sisters shopfront. Ann Eliza suffers a final indignity when she is summarily dismissed as an applicant for a sales position at a fashionable shop because she is too old and dowdy, but the last lines of the novella suggest that this will not keep her down for long: "Ann Eliza went out into the thronged street. The great city, under the fair spring sky, seemed to throb with the stir of innumerable beginnings. She walked on, looking for another shop window with a sign in it" (436). Ann Eliza has lost everything, her shop, her sister, her security, and yet Wharton seems to give her some salvation in the opportunity to start over anew, under the "fair spring sky." Perhaps, just as Evelina felt dissatisfied with being trapped in the life they had for so long shared together, Ann Eliza was also oppressed by her sense of obligation to that life, and to her sister. The weight of their
shared history no longer dictating the life Ann Eliza must live, she is free to pursue a new path, unwelcoming as the fashionable ladies' shops of the world might be.

Wharton's *Bunner Sisters* picks up on the themes of local color sisterhood that Jewett and Freeman returned to again and again: a connection forged through long years together, a sense of self based largely in identification as (and with) a sister, a rupture caused by one sister's desire to change or to cast off the sibling identity in favor of a new one. And like Freeman and Jewett, Wharton positions her sister characters right on the verge of poverty and death, making them no less relics than the out-of-fashion furbelows and frills that they display in their shop windows. The effect, in all these sibling stories, is to highlight the fast-moving pace of the world around the sisters—to make them, in their clinging to one another and to the past, symbols of stasis and tradition, around whom life advances at an ever-increasing clip.

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It is often said that our siblings are the people we have with us for the largest part of our lives. The ramifications of this truism—and the tone in which it is
asserted, and heard—tend to remain less specific. To put it another way, and as my own sister would have asked in her sarcastic youth, “Is that a threat or a promise?”

It is probably a little—or a lot—of both. Siblings are, often, with us from our youth through our old age; they share our own family histories and memories and can, as adults, tell all our embarrassing stories: about the way we wore Mr. Potato Head’s spectacles as part of our own attire at age three, or how we got caught sneaking out of the house to meet a boyfriend at age sixteen. They know our secrets, they know our pasts, they often remember the things we try to forget. Sometimes, they remember us as the people we no longer think we are, and who we may no longer wish to be—trapping us, mentally, in old identities and roles. In the closest thing approximating a shared life span, siblinghood is often the relationship that extends across the greatest portion of our lives, and that can be a source of comfort or discontent.

Local color writers like Jewett and Freeman, along with Wharton, carefully delineate the manifold ways in which siblings share, preserve, and contest their families’ historical memories, and the identities of their members, throughout the long span of their lives. Though the “women alone” who populate so much local color fiction have received much more critical attention than have the sister pairs that

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20 In *A Backward Glance*, Wharton remembers the influence of her brothers along similar lines: “The wholesome derision of my grown-up brothers saved me from pomposity as my mother’s smile guarded me against slovenliness; I still tingle with the sting of their ridicule when, excusing myself for having forgotten something I had been told to do, I said, with an assumption of grown-up dignity (aetate ten or eleven): ‘I didn’t know it was imperative’” (49).
occur with nearly as great a frequency, it may be that these brothers and sisters—who are still often alone, albeit with each other—embody even more fully the genre’s concern with the tensions between past and present, tradition and modernization, perception and reality. The presence of two related but distinct individuals, who are often in conflict in some way, contributes to the unsettledness of the narratives, and the looming sense of change (and resistance to change) that permeates so much local color and regionalist fiction. And just as the concept of “region” necessarily functions in relation to the concept of a whole, so too do the sibling pairs in these regional and local color fictions function in relation to, and as a microcosm of, a larger family or community. Because they are relative beings to one another, yet separated in, often, both physical and philosophical or theoretical distances from their other family members or their fellow townspeople, local color siblings make the differences they represent more vivid, amplify in their conversations what is implied in stories of old people alone, and—when they are separated, or when a crisis threatens to separate them—reveal the very human need for connection, relation, and identification.
Chapter Four

Passing as Brothers and Sisters in the Fictions of Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Twain

Mark Twain makes the practice of identifying a person based on race—or what the observer supposes a person's race to be—the central problem of his 1894 novel, *Pudd' nhead Wilson*. Not only does the narrative revolve around what happens after a slave swaps her child with the child of her master—they look so similar, no one can tell the difference—Twain's tale also features a pair of Italian conjoined twins, of whom Twain writes, "One was a little fairer than the other, but otherwise they were exact duplicates." The Italian twins, Luigi and Angelo, seem to be as like as two people could possibly be—they not only share the same family, the same blood, as any two siblings might, they also share one body—yet there remains a delicate point of distinction between them, which keeps them from ever being taken for exactly the same. Within the space of just a few lines, Twain clarifies, or amends, his statement about the two: it is not just that one is "a little fairer" than the other, one twin actually has brown hair, and the other blond.1 This fine distinction seems almost negligible, and suggests that, in fact, the degree of difference or similarity between Luigi and Angelo is a matter of interpretation. This degree of difference is critical to the story Twain tells.

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1 I am using the 1980 Norton edition of *Pudd' nhead Wilson*; these and all subsequent citations will be drawn from that edition (27).
Pudd’nmhead Wilson, along with other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fictions such as Charles Chesnutt’s The House Behind the Cedars (1900) and The Marrow of Tradition (1901), or Pauline Hopkins’ Contending Forces (1900), explores the problems that arise when people are identified—by custom, by law, by sentiment—according to their race, blood, or family. Where Twain satirizes the race problem of the nineteenth-century United States through the Italian twins—and through the swapping of the slave and master babies, and through Pudd’nmhead Wilson’s forensic expertise—authors like Chesnutt and Hopkins set their fictions in motion by situating brothers and sisters on opposite sides of the color line. In this chapter, I want to suggest that the family stories—more specifically, the sibling stories—told by Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Twain are crafted to expose what Ashraf H.A. Rushdy terms “the family secret of America”: namely, that black and white Americans were, at the turn of the twentieth century, in the shadow of the Civil War and Reconstruction, members of the same family, linked by blood and experience, even if most Americans didn’t want to admit it (2). Suspect, secret, and so-called siblings populate the works of these authors and others of the era, with fractured sibling relationships framing the problems of race, integration, and national reunion faced by the United States in that time. From Chesnutt’s brother and sister in Cedars, who alternately pass as white and live as black; to Hopkins’ expansive tale of rape, race, and family in America; to Twain’s odd tale of twins and virtual “brothers”
switched in infancy, the brothers and sisters in these texts have strange, strained relationships that reflect the tensions of white and black, north and south, male and female in the late-nineteenth-century U.S. These novels call identity into question, challenging ideas of kinship and family and exposing these as conditional and malleable terms—subjectivities and performances rather than biological absolutes. They suggest that for every man who passes as white there is a sister who lives as black; for every black family living in freedom in the north there is a black family facing persecution in the south; for every apparent truth, there is another, and often contradictory, reality.

Through their sibling characters, Chesnutt and Hopkins, especially, communicate subversive messages about race in the United States within the popular and familiar structures of sentimental fiction. Inheritors of the sentimental mode—specifically, of the sentimental mode as deployed in relation to American slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852)—Chesnutt and Hopkins write family stories, in which the universal sympathy of mankind is invoked to lay bare the very real problems of racism, racial violence, and segregation.2 However, by focusing on siblings who are identified as both black and white—who are able (or forced) to

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live together or separately on either side of the color line, these authors and others
make America's "family secret"—sex across the color line, often termed, in the
nineteenth century, "miscegenation"—an undeniable fact. The purpose, and
accomplishment, of their sibling stories is therefore twofold: to lay bare the false
pretenses of any claim of universal brotherhood, and to show that identifications of
race actually cross family lines.³

Unlike the post-Civil War "romances of reunion," which featured marriages
between northerners and southerners to symbolize the reassembling of a broken
nation, the post-Reconstruction novels of African-American writers such as Chesnutt
and Hopkins dealt with the politics and social issues of the late-nineteenth-century
United States by using the color line, rather than the Mason-Dixon Line, as a line of
demarcation and division—as well as crossing.⁴ The placement of members of the
same family on opposite sides of the color line forced the question of what kind of

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³ On miscegenation, see Elise Lemire, "Miscegenation": Making Race in America (2002) and Joshua D. Rothman, Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787–1861 (2003). Rothman writes, "Even more than sex across the color line itself, mixed-race children produced by interracial sexual intercourse posed a formidable conundrum for the social order.... Especially when they were not enslaved, people who could trace their ancestry both to Europe and to Africa (and sometimes to North America as well) threatened the abilities of whites to draw clearly the distinctions and set the boundaries between free and unfree that were necessary for defining status in a society rooted in racial slavery" (9).

⁴ See Nina Silber, The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900 (1993); Gregory S. Jackson, "'A Dowry of Suffering': Consent, Contract, and Coverture in John W. De Forest's Reconstruction Romance" (2003); and Karen Keely, "Marriage Plots and National Reunion: The Trope of Romantic Reconciliation in Postbellum Literature" (1998). Jackson argues that "the use of marriage as a model for social contract provided the most significant unifying theme of all reunion romance" (277); as Keely puts it, "If a cold Northerner and a fiery, resentful Southerner could survive courtship and eventually find marital tranquility, the argument ran, could not the nation as a whole mirror their domestic peace?" (621).
identification took priority: whether a brother who lived as white and a sister who lived as black would remain more united by their common blood or divided by their unique experiences, or whether law or feeling made a white woman and a black woman sisters, and so forth. Because the color line in these novels runs horizontally, between siblings, rather than vertically, through generations, Chesnutt and Hopkins suggest the ways the racial violence of Americans' past—the family secret of "miscegenation," as well as the other violences of slavery, Reconstruction-era lynching, and so forth—maintained an enduring hold on the experience of African Americans.

As has been well documented by historians in recent years, sustaining any semblance of family life within the system of slavery was always difficult, often impossible; as Catherine Clinton writes, "deprivation of an individual's labor was not the most striking feature of slavery, but rather the deprivation of one's own kin" (54). Children were sold away from mothers and fathers, who might not themselves have been permitted to live together; brothers and sisters frequently grew up unaware of one another's existence. And, of course, there were what Philip Morgan has termed

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5 Eugene Genovese has claimed that there was another side of this coin, arguing that the expression "our family, white and black" appears with striking frequency in the letters and diaries of white Southerners through the nineteenth century, and "cannot be dismissed as a propaganda response to the critics of slavery or as mere ideological rationalization. The slaveholders assimilated that special sense of family to their self-esteem, their sense of who they were as individuals and as a people, their sense of moral worth, their sense of honor. The claim that slavery created an extended, biracial family or, more accurately, an enlarged household, contained a large dose of rationalization and self-serving cant, but it also contributed to a broadly held critique of the reigning transatlantic theories of property, government, and social order" (69).
the "shadow families" of the plantation, where black and white children fathered by
the same white slave-owner lived, respectively, in the slave quarters and in the big
house (55). After the Civil War, African Americans began to move around and out of
the South in order to find living arrangements more conducive to fulfilling the
promise of their newfound freedom—and, above all else, to reestablish the family ties
that had been severed during their enslavement. As Eric Foner has explained, "Strong
family ties, it is clear, had existed under slavery, but had always been vulnerable to
disruption. Emancipation allowed blacks to reaffirm and solidify their family
connections, and more freedmen seized the opportunity with alacrity." However,
Foner continues, "while emancipation thus made possible the stabilization and
strengthening of the preexisting black family, it also transformed the roles of its
members and relations among them" (84). By the waning years of the 1800s, then,
when Twain, Hopkins, and Chesnutt constructed their tales of race and relation in
the United States, African Americans were often still struggling to negotiate and
strengthen their family ties, as well as deal with the legacy of slavery, and the
enduring threat of racial violence.

In their focus on sibling characters and relationships, these authors reflected
one way African Americans attempted to do this: Since history had tangled the

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6 See also Brenda Stevenson, Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South
(1996); and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of
the Old South (1988).
branches of their family trees—since lineage could be unknown, or troubling, or a source of sadness or shame—these authors show characters relating horizontally, as siblings, both of blood and choice. History informs their individual and collective identities, to be sure, but through their sibling characters these authors seem to depict an effort at relating laterally, rather than vertically, both within and across racial lines, in order to escape the traumas of the past and find a new success in newly found, or newly created, intimate and national families.7

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The year 1900 saw the publication of both Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* and Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, two novels interested in the intersecting issues of family and race in the United States in the years following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Chesnutt and Hopkins each focus on a pair of siblings living on opposite sides of the color line: Chesnutt describes the return of John Walden, who has been passing as white, to the home of his black mother and

7 As George B. Handley argues in *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas: Family Portraits in Black and White* (2000), “Family history is the thematic and structural sine qua non of postslavery narrative. Writing about family history allows the authors to revisit the metaphorical meanings of genealogy that have been assumed by the plantocracy and by emergent nationalists and that have contributed to a consolidation of their landowning social power. That is, by following biological links across races, sexes, and generations, family history exposes the genealogical ideologies that have concealed evidence of sexual contact across racial and class lines in order to protect a white elite patrimony and to evade the widely syncretic and contestatory nature of plantation cultures” (3).
sister; Hopkins details the horrific murder of a white woman who is rumored to be black, and the enslavement and later separation of her two young sons. Though they employ unique metaphors, the two authors describe their family and race dramas in similar fashion, with Chesnutt writing that “family trees not seldom have a crooked branch; or, to use a more apposite figure, many a flock has its black sheep,” while Hopkins declares that “there are many strangely tangled threads in the lives of many colored families.”8 With these lines and others, the two authors unsettle family and kinship, admitting to what is so often hidden or denied. While Chesnutt’s language here is broad enough to apply to any number of family secrets, and hints at questions of racial identity only with the suggestive use of the “black sheep” image, Hopkins addresses the problem of “miscegenation” more directly. But in both cases, these authors are concerned with telling stories of the American family that expose slavery and its lasting effects—that reveal all the ways that the supposedly separate black and white Americans are, indeed, members of the same national family.

Perhaps more than any other American author of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Charles Waddell Chesnutt recognized the potential in the flexible, unfixable nature of siblinghood, and deployed sibling characters as a strategy for commenting on social issues both within and beyond the intimate domestic

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8 I am using the 1993 Penguin edition of The House Behind the Cedars and the 1988 Oxford University Press edition of Contending Forces; these and all subsequent citations are drawn from these editions (127, 373).
sphere. Himself the product of interracial relationships (his grandfathers on both sides were white), Chesnutt lived variously as both white and black, and understood the intricacies, susceptibilities, and oppressiveness of the color line in the United States.\textsuperscript{9} While he may, as William M. Ramsey has argued, have seen himself “biologically as part of one whole human family,” in both \textit{The House Behind the Cedars} and \textit{The Marrow of Tradition} (1901), Chesnutt suggests that this may be an empty dream, and that race—or, at least, Americans’ ideas and perceptions of race—will always hinder any true realization of a universal brotherhood (31).

In \textit{The House Behind the Cedars}, Chesnutt uses a pair of siblings to expose the frailty of the myth of separate races in the United States, with interracial love and sex—the threat of these, and the result—at the heart of his tale of Rena Walden and her brother John, children of a free black woman and a wealthy white man. When the story begins, John Walden, now known as Warwick, has returned to his mother and sister’s North Carolina home after leaving years earlier to make his way as a white man in South Carolina. With their mixed parentage, Warwick and Rena are each light enough to pass as white, and Warwick has successfully shed all traces of his life as the son of a black woman, establishing himself as an attorney and marrying a rich white woman—a feat he was able to accomplish, as a young man with no known

\textsuperscript{9} Eric J. Sundquist’s introduction to the 1993 Penguin edition of \textit{The Marrow of Tradition}, along with his chapter on Chesnutt in \textit{To Wake the Nations}, supply the most useful and comprehensive biographical information on Chesnutt.
family, only in the years just after the Civil War, when appropriate men were rare, and the stability of marriage so desirable amidst post-war chaos. He has, effectively, reinvented himself.

Chesnutt depicts Warwick as an answer to Crevecoeur’s famous question from a century earlier, “What then is the American, this new man?” Having changed his name, his race, his very history, Warwick signifies not only the Emersonian ideal of American individualism, self-creation, and self-reliance, he also represents the more quotidian reality of the new population of free blacks in the postbellum United States. Warwick accomplishes, on a scale far surpassing the opportunities of most, the act of passing and the assertion of his rights as an American citizen; the very ancestry that allows him to pass as white—his black mother and his white father—signals him as a member of a “new people”: that great, unacknowledged or willfully ignored population of mixed-race Americans. In the act of passing—making himself a new man—Warwick represents possibility and promise for black Americans, and a threat to the standing white order.

Part of Warwick’s effort at asserting himself as a new man involves strengthening the horizontal tie of siblinghood and separating himself and his sister even further from the vertical ties of their ancestry. When we first meet Warwick in the narrative, he has returned home to “save” his sister Rena by taking her back to South Carolina with him, where she may also live as white, and have all the
advantages attendant to that existence. Warwick and Rena's mother doesn't want to lose her daughter, but Warwick convinces her that it is her duty to give Rena up, and let her have every opportunity as a white woman that she never will as a black woman. Their mother agrees, Rena goes with Warwick, becomes engaged to a white man, is—inevitably—discovered and rejected, flees back to her mother's house behind the cedars, is taken away by a cruel and deceitful black man, and meets a tragic end just after her white fiancé decides he might be able to overlook her blackness after all.

*The House Behind the Cedars* has been read as a sort of African-Americanization of the white-identified sentimental novel, with an emphasis on Rena Walden's relationship with, and rejection by, the white George Tryon, and on her depiction as a tragic sentimental heroine—and a prototypical tragic mulatta. But the more interesting relationship in the book is really that of Warwick and Rena, brother and sister, who start out (and end up) on opposite sides of the color line. They begin the story with no relationship to speak of—Warwick had left home when Rena was only an infant, and had no contact with his mother and sister during the many years

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of his absence—yet their impact on one another, when they fall back into the same orbit, is tremendous. By passing as white, like her brother, Rena discovers a new world, and a new love; with his sister there beside him, Warwick finally has someone in his life who can share the burden of his family secret. Though they try to recreate themselves as "new people," however, Warwick and Rena are not unlike Twain's Italian twins: the same, and yet different. By situating siblings on opposite sides of the color line—by telling a "passing" story that is only problematically successful—Chesnutt seems to be essaying a critique of American racism. If such people can pass—if a brother can live as white while the sister lives as black—of what use, Chesnutt asks, are racial categorizations?11

When Warwick first sees Rena, he doesn't identify her right away as the sister he left years ago, but as a "strikingly handsome" woman whose physical appearance beguiles him so intensely that he is moved to follow her as she walks through town (5). His first reaction to Rena is physical attraction, not brotherly love; considering that time and distance, as well as age, have separated Rena and Warwick so that they

11 On passing, see Giulia Fabi's Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel (2001): "[T]he trope of passing provided African American novelists with a means to pioneer a counterhegemonic discussion of blackness as a historically and ideologically changing construct. The passer embodies the reality of cultural difference by containing racial dichotomies: Although his or her liminality is also contingent on the existence of recognizably distinct groups, it also turns what was conceived of as a natural opposition into a societal one. In pre-Harlem Renaissance African American fiction the representation of the passer's peculiar status is aimed at drawing attention to the fixity and constrictiveness of the racialized black and white subject positions between which he or she has to choose rather than to the fluidity of personal identity.... The awareness that personal identities are constructed was the starting point of the passer's adventures, not the end result" (5).
have never shared any real sibling relationship, this seems understandable. But even as Rena and Warwick begin to spend time together, Chesnutt depicts Warwick's interest in Rena as, alternately, more that of a father or suitor than of a brother, unsettling their relationship and making it difficult to classify. Warwick wants to provide for Rena, and give her a better life, motivated on the one hand by a sort of parental impulse, but he also seeks a replacement for the wife he has lost—and is physically attracted to Rena in a way more befitting a lover than a brother. Here, as in Pierre, we find again the suggestion of incest, with Chesnutt repeatedly describing how Warwick feels for Rena "something more than brotherly love" (45).

This serves Chesnutt as a broader strategy of setting supposedly known or knowable bonds off kilter, forcing readers' acknowledgment that the bonds of blood and love often take shapes other than those we imagine to be true, or best, or immutable. By suggesting that Rena and Warwick's relationship may be a little less than seemly, a little more lustful—at least on Warwick's part—than the bond between siblings is presumed to be, Chesnutt both undercuts the romance between George and Rena and reminds readers that Rena and Warwick are themselves the products of an "unseemly" relationship—one that society wouldn't condone. Rena and Warwick's "incestuous" bond works in tandem with their trespasses over the color line to make The House Behind the Cedars unavoidably a story of "miscegenation"—they are the result of a union between a white man and a black
woman, and they are themselves, as a pair, straddling the line that supposedly separates the two races.

Chesnutt’s unsettling of the sibling relationship between Warwick and Rena is also a strategy for highlighting the way in which they create a new kind of family together, and present themselves, in Warwick’s South Carolina community, as “new people.” This is Warwick’s explanation to George Tryon, when he is courting Rena—that they (Warwick and Rena, now known as Rowena) must be taken “for ourselves alone—we are new people,” without “an old family, a rich family, or a distinguished family” (59). The newness of their identity is underscored by Chesnutt in the first scene set in South Carolina, which finds Warwick and “Rowena”—both of them having now assumed names reminiscent of the Waverly novels of Sir Walter Scott—at a chivalric pageant, attended by the elite of their acquaintance. The scene couldn’t be more different from the homely world of the house behind the cedars; here, Rena/Rowena is center stage, a cultivated white beauty who wins the affection of the pageant’s hero. Rena is depicted as wholly new, here, and almost unreal: she is a fairy princess, the product and construct of Warwick’s most audacious dreams—indeed, following from his “romantic” discovery and “rescue” of her to this presentation of her as a genteel white beauty, Warwick seems more or less to have dreamed Rena/Rowena into existence. By creating and nurturing his bond with his sister, then, Warwick finds the possibility of the creation of family—one composed of a wife-like
sister, a husband-like brother, and a child—that, of course, in its creation disrupts the
family unit of a mother and daughter that Molly and Rena Walden already shared.
Leaving behind the house behind the cedars, Rena and Warwick effectively shed
their past, and destroy their old family.

In her new sibling family, Rena gains an education both in the scholarly and
social senses, becoming a young woman and, Chesnutt writes, “tast[ing] the sweets of
power” that she holds as mistress of her brother’s home. Warwick too is deeply
satisfied by his new family, and by his sister’s presence:

It was a source of much gratification to Warwick that his sister seemed
to adapt herself so easily to the new conditions. Her graceful
movements, the quiet elegance with which she wore even the simplest
gown, the easy authoritativeness with which she directed the servants,
were to him proofs of superior quality, and he felt correspondingly
proud of her. His feeling for her was something more than brotherly
love,—he was quite conscious that there were degrees in brotherly
love, and that if she had been homely or stupid, he would never have
disturbed her in the stagnant life of the house behind the cedars.... He
had perceived, more clearly than she could have appreciated it at that
time, the undeveloped elements of discord between Rena and her
former life. (45)

To Warwick, Rena’s “grace” and “elegance” mark her as suited for the upper class
white world in which he lives; she seems to him to be more “white” than “black.” Just
as he has cultivated those traits that will secure his success in white society, Warwick
cultivates them in Rena, and moves her out of her black life into a white one. But
Rena does not merely represent, for Warwick, the project of trading one racial
identity and role for another, she is also, in her beauty, unsuited for "the stagnant life of the house behind the cedars"—she is marked for a more glamorous life.

While Warwick's "more than brotherly" love for Rena makes their siblinghood somewhat disturbing, Chesnutt takes pains to describe what, exactly, Warwick gets out of having his long-lost sister once more in his life:

He had imagined her lending grace and charm to his own household. Still another motive, a purely psychological one, had more or less consciously influenced him. He had no fear that the family secret would ever be discovered,—he had taken his precautions too thoroughly, he thought, for that; and yet he could not but feel, at times, that if peradventure—it was a conceivable hypothesis—it should become known, his fine social position would collapse like a house of cards. Because of this knowledge, which the world around him did not possess, he had felt now and then a certain sense of loneliness; and there was a measure of relief in having about him one who knew his past, and yet whose knowledge, because of their common interest, would not interfere with his present or jeopardize his future. For he had always been, in a figurative sense, a naturalized foreigner in the world of wide opportunity, and Rena was one of his old compatriots, whom he was glad to welcome into the populous loneliness of his adopted country. (45)

"Social position" is what Warwick holds dearest in the world, and he is ever cognizant of how hard it was won and to what lengths he has had to go to keep the "family secret" of his racial identity, including severing ties from his natal family. To bring his mother into his home now is out of the question, as her race would reveal his, but his sister, sharing the same mixture of blood that allows them to pass as white, can supply "psychological" support with both her familial presence and her knowledge of their
genealogy. Warwick relies on Rena to help shoulder their hereditary burden, to ease his loneliness, and to gird the new social identity and standing he has acquired.12

By describing Warwick as a “naturalized foreigner” in an “adopted country,” Chesnutt uses the language of immigration in the context of racial passing, underscoring yet again his interest in the uniquely American phenomenon of making oneself anew in a new land.13 Warwick seeks to shed all traces of his past, finding nothing of value in identifying vertically, with his old home or with his parents or ancestors (even though his father’s white identity is what allows Warwick to pass as white himself). He instead seeks to identify horizontally, with his sister, claiming for them both new identities as wealthy, white South Carolinians. His attachment to Rena, which seems at times excessively close, illustrates his need for a like other who, in her similarity, can “prove” his own identity and existence, and provide psychological support by sharing his secret. Though their bond may read as unusual or disturbing, Warwick’s deep need for Rena is, primarily, narcissistic and selfish rather than licentious and incestuous, and based in his desire to prove beyond a

12 As Sundquist writes, “Her presence in his word of passing gives him psychological security, we are told; but the novel’s necessary unfolding of racial sins also implies that, as in Faulkner’s world, only an act of incest could finally protect the family secret” (To Wake the Nations, 399).
13 John Sheehy makes this argument compellingly in his article on the passing novel, writing that “Since Warwick/Walden exemplifies every trait of the spirit Emerson calls for in ‘The American Scholar,’ his very existence can be read as an ironic Signification on Emerson’s theory of American identity. A new man on new soil, Warwick/Walden has made a break with his past, rejected inherited paradigms so that he might seize his opportunities and make the most of them. We might extend Warwick/Walden’s Signification by pointing out that he can also be seen as the ‘new white man’ Morrison argues the American tradition—or at least that tradition descended from an Emersonian ideal—is destined to produce” (409).
doubt, and proclaim to the world, his new identity.

Finally, much like Laurie in *Little Women*, George Tryon orders and reifies the sibling bond in *The House Behind the Cedars*, providing a "suitable" romantic interest for Rena that effectively imposes a limit on Warwick's "unsuitable" interest. He also voices the otherwise unspoken attractions of siblinghood in his repeated professions of brotherly love for Warwick. "Never does one feel so strongly the universal brotherhood of man as when one loves some other fellow's sister," Tryon tells Warwick after Rena accepts his proposal, information he imparts with the words, "Your sister has promised to marry me. I should like to shake my brother's hand" (49). After Warwick cautions Tryon that he and Rena are "new people," without a distinguished lineage, Tryon responds, "All I care to know of Rowena's family is that she is your sister" (57). Like Laurie in *Little Women*, Tryon is interested in becoming part of the Walden/Warwick family through both marriage and siblinghood; he is as enamored of Warwick as a brother as he is of Rena/Rowena as a wife.¹⁴

Tryon's affection for Warwick is specific, but Chesnutt also invests in him the novel's questions of common humanity, and "universal brotherhood," as Tryon—after he discovers the truth of Warwick and Rena/Rowena's racial identity—continues to profess his fraternal affinity for Warwick but can't accept Rena/Rowena as his wife.

¹⁴ Sundquist describes Warwick and Tryon as "held together by a semi-incestuous bond ... made brothers by the psychological union produced 'when one loves some other fellow's sister'" (*To Wake the Nations*, 398).
Rena’s blackness is utterly insupportable to Tryon; while he “would have overlooked the bar sinister” of her illegitimacy if she had been white, her race is “the one objection which he could not overlook” (97). Chesnutt makes Tryon unable, or unwilling, to participate in “miscegenation” in the literal sense, but he maintains no such compunctions in his equally—if not exceedingly—ardent affections for Warwick. After his discovery of Warwick and Rena’s true identities, Tryon writes to Warwick announcing the end of his engagement to Rena, but closes with the promise that “I shall keep your secret as though it were my own. Personally, I shall never be able to think of you as other than a white man, as you may gather from the tone of this letter; and while I cannot marry your sister, I wish her every happiness” (103).

At first, then, Tryon’s acceptance of Warwick and Rena/Rowena as “new people” helps them assert their identity as such, but his acceptance only extends as far as their lack of family—not to the truth of their origins, at least not in Rena/Rowena’s case. Tryon is positioned by Chesnutt as unique among Warwick’s South Carolina community, in that he will not snub his friend when his racial identity is discovered, and will not reveal his “secret,” but his liberal-mindedness cannot embrace marriage to a mixed-race woman. The color line that divides Warwick and Rena at the beginning of The House Behind the Cedars is resurrected, then, and the attempt of the two siblings to create themselves anew on the other side—the white side—ultimately fails, for Rena. After Tryon’s discovery, Chesnutt more or less drops
Warwick out of the narrative, which follows Rena in her renewed existence in the house behind the cedars, effectively making the novel a cautionary tale about the effort to pass, or, perhaps more specifically, about the dangers of one member of a family choosing to pass—choosing his own advancement and satisfaction over the happiness of his mother and sister—when others cannot. Warwick’s identity is a secret only insofar as Tryon chooses to keep it one, and the sibling relationships in the novel—Warwick and Rena’s, and Warwick and Tryon’s—depend on a tenuous recognition or attribution of likeness and affection.15

Published just a year after *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* is set in the same racially divided South—but this time, the conflicts of race and family are life-threatening in more fundamental and violent ways. The characters in *The Marrow of Tradition* are unified by their belief that in the turbulent, unsettled, and unsettling post–Civil War South, one of the only things a person may take as true—and onto which she or he may hold—is family, as it appears in the present and with all the weight of meaning and identity that it carries from the past. Rather than seeking only to shed all traces or thoughts of the past, as Warwick does in *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt’s characters in *The Marrow of Tradition* obsess over their bloodlines and their legacies, and the legal and moral consequences of acknowledging—or not—others as their kin. Though the central

15 Ramsey: “The problem is how to effect the brotherhood of man without denying or culturally erasing the constituent part that is black.” (38)
family drama of the narrative hinges upon whether or not Olivia Carteret can and will acknowledge Janet Miller as her half-sister, tensions of genealogy inform the motives and actions of almost every other character in the novel, and the two children in the tale, Olivia's son and Janet's son, are invested with all the hopes and possibilities for the future of their families, their communities, and, by extension, their nation. The very title of the novel speaks to the problem of siblinghood with which it is concerned: Does one know one's sister or brother in one's "marrow," according to common biology and heartfelt sympathy, or recognize him or her according to the dictates of "tradition," custom, or law?¹⁶

Chesnutt gives the telling of Olivia and Janet's family history to the slave woman Jane, who has been with Olivia's family for generations. Speaking in a dialect that marks her as "authentically" black and, as such, a living and authoritative link to the past (her speech is unlike Olivia's or Janet's; the half-sisters speak in the same way), she explains to the Carteret family physician, Dr. Price, that after Olivia's mother had died, her father had had a child with his former slave, Julia:

"Dis yer Janet, w'at's Mis' 'Livy's half-sister, is ez much like her ez ef dey wuz twins. Folks sometimes takes 'em fer one ernudder,—I s'pose it tickles Janet mos' ter death, but it do make Mis' 'Livy rippin'. An' den 'way back yander jes' after de wah, w'en de ole Carteret mansion had ter be sol', Adam Miller bought it, an' dis yer Janet an' her husban' is

¹⁶ As Gregg D. Crane writes, "The title's reference to the 'marrow of tradition' summons the ethical, philosophical, and emotional core of a shifting moral consensus styled as tradition that forms the basis for judging the legitimacy of the legal system's claims to justice" (197).
be'n livin' in it ever sence ole Adam died.... An' mo'over, an' dat's de wust of all, w'iles Mis' Livy ain' had no child'en befor', dis yer sister er her'n is got a fine-lookin' little yaller boy, w'at favors de fam'ly so dat ef Mis' Livy'd see de chile anywhere, it'd mos' break her heart fer ter think 'bout her not havin' no child'en herse'f." (8)

Jane is the bearer of knowledge in *The Marrow of Tradition*; she has the anecdotal evidence, if not the legal proof, of Janet and Olivia's siblinghood. She assumes that Janet, who is recognized by the world as black, would want to be affiliated with the white woman with whom she shares a parent, while Olivia is horrified by any suggestion of their relation—even though, or, rather, because, Janet occupies her own sort of position of superiority over Olivia: she may be black, but she owns the family home, and she has a child, where Olivia does not. Janet and Jane are connected by Chesnutt here not just through their names, but through their common possession of family history: Jane has the story, and Janet has the structure that housed her and Olivia's ancestors. Because she and not Olivia also has a son, Janet is similarly the possessor of her family's future.

Olivia and Janet, who speak the same way and who look so much alike they would be taken as twins if seen together, haunt each other throughout the narrative, but inhabit their supposed sisterly relation in vastly different ways; Jane seems to have been right in her assessment that Janet would want to be acknowledged by Olivia while Olivia wishes Janet didn't exist. At first, Olivia simply ignores Janet, and tries to banish the rumor—and her own suspicion—that she and Janet share the same
father. Olivia suspects Janet will assert her (rightful) claim on their father’s estate, and avoids all contact with her, while Janet, Chesnutt writes, “had a tender heart, and could have loved this white sister, her sole living relative of whom she knew” (65). Olivia is prepared to despise Janet for all that she represents, while Janet, knowing equally little of Olivia, is prepared to love her. To Olivia, their shared parentage gives Janet legal rights that Olivia would deny; to Janet, the father she shares with Olivia represents only a reason they might develop a relationship of affection.

Janet and Olivia’s divergent approaches to their sibling connection raise the question of what it means to call people brothers and sisters—whether or not the tie of blood, by whole or by half, is a sufficient link, or whether or not some sympathetic human relationship is required in addition to biology. That is, we should ask if, in an analysis of siblinghood in literature, it makes sense to include a text such as Marrow, in which the two main siblings, Olivia Carteret and Janet Miller, are mainly specters in each other’s lives, rather than individuals who interact and have feelings for and about one another. Dr. Miller ponders this himself when Mrs. Carteret pleads for his aid for her sick child: “This was his wife’s sister,—ah, yes! But a sister who had scorned and slighted and ignored the existence of his wife for all her life…. This woman could have no claim upon him because of this unacknowledged relationship. Yet, after all, she was his wife’s sister, his child’s kinswoman. She was a fellow creature, too, and in distress” (325). Like his wife, Dr. Miller relies upon relation—
even if only that of common humanity—as the basis for sympathy and the proffering of succor, even though he knows that Olivia would show no such generosity in return.17

Biology—the "marrow" of Chesnutt's title—is one part of the problem of Janet and Olivia's siblinghood, then, but so too is tradition. After all, Olivia is not alarmed only by the fact that Janet is the product of a sexual relationship between Olivia's white father and Janet's black mother, but by her discovery that, in fact, her father and Janet's mother were legally married, as well—making Janet biologically, legally, irrevocably Olivia's sister. By making the fact of Olivia and Janet's siblinghood so irrefutable, Chesnutt yokes together the history and future of black and white in a way that underscores, and illuminates, the problems of the passing, murder, and riot plots with which he is also concerned in The Marrow of Tradition. That is, the Olivia and Janet story makes the color line seem arbitrary, and racial violence mutually destructive, when family—the intimate family, or common humanity—should be the stronger tie. When, in the final chapter of the novel (titled "The Sisters") Chesnutt describes Olivia—her son in need of a doctor, as a race riot (which has resulted in the

17 Anthropologist David Schneider's work is influential in considerations of what, exactly, constitutes relationship; Schneider argued in American Kinship (1968) that the fact of relationship is immutable: "The relationship between parent and child, or between siblings, may be such that the two never see each other, never mention each other's name, never communicate in any way, each acting as if unaware of the other's existence. But ... the two remain parent and child or sibling to each other" (24). Schneider's argument seems to operate on the same basis of biology as Chesnutt's; see Conclusion for a more recent argument social scientists have made about how one identifies siblings (or identifies as a sibling).
death of Janet’s own son) rages in the town—begging for the aid of Dr. Miller, her last
resort, Janet is unmoved by Olivia’s promises of sisterly relation and her rightful
portion of their father’s estate, and instead accedes to Olivia’s demands on the basis of
their shared humanity: “that you may know that a woman may be fouly wronged,
and yet may have a heart to feel, even for one who has injured her, you may have
your child’s life, if my husband can save it!” (329). Their first and only confrontation
with one another therefore becomes less about Janet and Olivia’s relatedness as sisters
than about their common (as perceived by Janet, at least) membership in the greater
human family.18

*The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Marrow of Tradition* both seem to
promise the smallest of steps toward progress, with Rena Walden almost finding true
love and acceptance and Olivia Carteret and Janet Miller acknowledging, if only
barely, their relationship as sisters. Neither of these ends comes without a cost,
though, and Chesnutt seems finally to possess a grim outlook on the status of race
relations in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The families that
are created and recreated in these novels likewise either fail, in the case of *Cedars*, or
falter on shaky ground, as in *Marrow*. The African American impulse to establish and
assert family ties in the wake of emancipation and Reconstruction is alive and well in

18 As Stephen P. Knadler writes, “White finally stands face to face with its black counterpart in a
culminating moment of the novel’s pattern of doubling, but not merely so that Olivia can confess her
blood ties with her estranged sister. Rather, to assure her son’s life, Olivia Carteret must recognize the
ideal type of womanhood, a type she in her ongoing enmity against her sister has failed to live out, is
embodied in her ‘dark’ Other” (437).

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both novels, but where it best succeeds—in the case of Marrow's Miller family—it
must be sacrificed in the name of a larger racial conflict.

Pauline Hopkins' Contending Forces demands a similar sacrifice of its African
American characters, but the toll is taken early in the novel, with the remainder of
the narrative tracing its fallout and the efforts of its characters to secure their family
and community ties in the North. As Kate McCullough writes, "Much of the plot thus
concerns the working out of historical legacies and blood lines as affected by slavery,"
and the novel should be read as "a reminder that the liberatory force of claiming the
white bourgeois family structure grows out of a embodied, historically specific
position: in post-Civil War America, the family, for African Americans, offers radical
possibilities" (28, 42). The branches of the family tree Hopkins describes in
Contending Forces are no less twisted or tangled than those in Chesnutt's novels, but
Hopkins is as concerned with broader social networks—and idealizations of the
same—as she is with the intimate family. Perhaps more so than any other author
under consideration in this study, Hopkins employs characters who are brothers and
sisters by both blood and social affiliation—by both descent and consent, to borrow
Werner Sollors' terms—to investigate and expose the ideal of "universal
brotherhood," or "the brotherhood of man," and the problems of asserting such an
ideal in a society where race continues to divide citizens from one another. From the preface of *Contending Forces*, where she declares that “it is the simple, homely tale, unassumingly told, which cements the bond of brotherhood among all classes and all complexions,” Hopkins makes a point of highlighting universal brotherhood—and creating a sibling unity among her readership (13). Even as she does so, however, Hopkins details the often hollow center of that bond—the ways in which it may be claimed or professed, but not performed with any degree of depth and truth. Hopkins tells a story not only of the rupture of an American family across the color line, but of the struggle of African Americans to put that family back together and claim their rightful place in the greater national family.

Siblinghood propels the narrative of *Contending Forces*: The separation of two brothers starts the story off, the loving relationship between siblings Will and Dora Smith supplies a bond of warmth and support throughout the narrative that follows, the members of the Smiths’ community relate to one another as “Brother” and “Sister,” and the tale of the novel’s “tragic mulatto” heroine, Sappho Clark, turns out to originate in the corruption and violence of a white brother toward his black brother’s daughter. These relationships function like those in *The House Behind the Cedars* or *The Marrow of Tradition* in that they ask readers to consider what

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19 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (1986): “To say it plainly, American identity is often imagined as volitional consent, as love and marriage, ethnicity as seemingly immutable ancestry and descent” (151).
constitutes a sibling bond, and whether race or family should be the stronger
determining factor in how (or if) people connect or affiliate with one another. Where
Hopkins differs from Chesnutt is in the way she uses her sibling characters: It is
impossible to point to one sibling pair or group as the main characters, or the fulcrum
of the drama, in Contending Forces. Instead, Hopkins introduces an abundance of
siblings throughout the course of her novel, as if to underscore the truth that all
people are related—that the “bonds of brotherhood” already exist, across lines of
“class and complexion,” and that what is now required—at the turn of the twentieth
century, in the lingering shadow of slavery and Reconstruction—is a sincere and
genuine, if not uncomplicated, acknowledgement of that fact.

Contending Forces begins with the rending of a sibling bond, in a scene that,
in its violence, makes the familial and voluntary bonds the characters develop later in
the novel seem like a strategy for assuaging earlier pain. Rumored to be part black, the
wealthy Grace Montfort is whipped to near death (like a slave) by her husband’s
jealous enemy. Her young sons, Charles and Jesse, bear witness to this horror, and
after their mother’s desperate suicide are raised as slaves by Anson Pollock, the man
who perpetrated it. Charles is ultimately purchased by a kindly Englishman, and goes
abroad with him, vowing to rescue Jesse as soon as he is able. But Jesse never hears
from Charles again, and finally runs away to New Hampshire from South Carolina.
There he weds a free black woman and, as Hopkins writes, is thus “absorbed into that
unfortunate race” (79). Hopkins frames her narrative by sending two brothers (who may or may not be part black) down two very different paths in life: Charles goes to England and lives as white; Jesse goes to New England and lives as black.

This early scene sets the tone for Hopkins’ critique of violence and racism in the nineteenth-century United States, and demonstrates the way in which she subverts the form of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel for her own purposes. Much like Herman Melville in Pierre, Hopkins takes recognizable sentimental characters—the parentless female, the heroic young male, the surrogate mother—and alters them (in Hopkins’ case, by making them black rather than white) to suit her own purposes. She also takes the sentimental good mother, in the form of Grace Montfort, and subjects her to abuses and inhumanity normally reserved, in the nineteenth-century narrative (and reality), for black slaves. As both McCullough and Lois Lamphere Brown have observed, Hopkins is attempting, in Contending Forces, to “refashion” the sentimental form to make it something that “does not impinge upon her configurations of race, subjectivity, and female agency,” making race and gender “extremely malleable, metamorphic entities” (Brown 51). The same malleability applies to Hopkins’s configuration of family, in terms of both blood relationships and the greater human family.

This strategy plays out throughout the novel, but is set spectacularly in motion by the brutal attack on and eventual death of Grace Montfort—a scene that not only
situates an apparently white woman in the place of a black American, but draws black
and white together as members of the same family. Hopkins minces no words in her
description of Grace’s beating—she is “knocked senseless” and “lashed with rawhides”
until “blood stood in a pool about her feet” (68)—detailing it in the same terms used
in reports of the lynching of African Americans. She also emphasizes that the tragedy
is Jesse and Charles’ “loss of their mother”—a phrase she uses twice in the space of a
single paragraph. Hopkins is putting the white sentimental family in the place of
black slaves here, as part of her larger project of communicating to readers that whites
and blacks are two parts of the same human family.\(^2\)\(^0\) She is also exercising a topsy-
turviness of the sort used by Twain in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*—the white Grace is put in
the place of the black slave, and, later, Grace’s black slave, Lucy, becomes the mistress
of Anson Pollock—who “elected to take Lucy in the place he had designed for Mrs.
Montfort” (71).

Indeed, Hopkins has already established a link of siblinghood and similarity
between the mistress Grace and the slave Lucy. “Lucy was Mrs. Montfort’s foster
sister,” she writes, “both were born on the same day. Their relations had always been
those of inseparable friends rather than of mistress and slave” (46). The term “foster
sister” here suggests not only “born on the same day” but also that Grace and Lucy

\(^{20}\) Jerry H. Bryant argues that frequently in African-American fiction, “The victim’s suffering takes
place within that Victorian redoubt of virtue and goodness, the family, for most of the sufferers of
whipping are identified by their place in a family—a father or mother, son or daughter, aunt or uncle,
brother or sister. These relationships are smashed by the brutally strong with the lash” (13).
were nursed by the same woman—a practice of the slave-owning household that Harriet Jacobs describes as well in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave. My mother’s mistress was the daughter of my grandmother’s mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food. They played together as children; and, when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter foster sister. On her death-bed her mistress promised that her children should never suffer for any thing; and during her lifetime she kept her word. (6)

Both Hopkins and Jacobs make a point of establishing intimacy and relationship between white and black, master and slave, children, illustrating that they have biological, affectionate, and practical bonds that make them, irrevocably, brothers and sisters. Though historian Sally McMillen has suggested that the practice of slave wet-nursing may well have been overstated, it was at least common enough a practice—or a widely enough accepted myth—that Jacobs and Hopkins were able to leverage the closeness of “foster-sisterhood” to depict whites and blacks, yet again, as members of the same family.21

21 See McMillen, “Mothers’ Sacred Duty: Breast-feeding Patterns among Middle- and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South” (1985); Hanna Wallinger notes that “Grace’s doom is lived out by Lucy.... The fates of both white and black women are intricately interwoven. It is one of the main messages of this first part of the novel: wrongs committed by one member of the human family are crimes committed against all” (157).
The rupture of the Montfort brotherhood sets up the main narrative of *Contending Forces*, which follows the Smith family, descendants of Jesse Montfort, among their thriving African-American community in Boston at the end of the nineteenth century. Slavery’s legacy remains strong in the North, even among those several generations removed from the Civil War. Older characters tell stories of days past while the community as a whole responds to news of lynchings in the South. Almost every time she introduces a new character, Hopkins makes a point of detailing how he or she, or his or her family, got to Boston from the South, reminding readers of the fundamental change in American demographics between the end of the Civil War and the first decades of the twentieth century. African Americans are no longer relegated to, primarily, enslavement in the South, but have moved north to cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, and Cincinnati to (re)assemble families and communities of the sort they were denied under slavery.

Jesse Montfort’s descendants, Dora and Will Smith, share a comfortable, teasing siblinghood through the young adulthood in which Hopkins introduces them. They both still live under their mother’s roof, and only fight when Dora dares to try to clean up Will’s room (84). Dora and Will’s loving siblinghood offers a relief from the horror and upset that has heretofore plagued their ancestors in the novel; their cozy home life with their mother and her boarders communicates a change—for the better—in the lives of African Americans. Dora and Will are the new generation—
the new people. The Smith home also provides a space for neighbors to gather and discuss the past, present, and future of African-American life, one that, Hopkins explains, continues to be haunted by racial violence, and that demands blacks unite according to a framework of supportive "siblinghood," as well as that whites and blacks unite, likewise, as members of one human family.

The Smiths are part of a thriving African-American community in Boston, one in which, as Hopkins repeatedly explains, the bonds of brother- and sisterhood are cultivated in churches and clubs for the nurture and advancement of the race. One Boston church she describes as "helping this race to help itself, along the lines of brotherly interest" (142); other characters gather as a chapter of the American Colored League to address the problem of lynching in the South. Hopkins is very specific in her descriptions of just how brotherly or sisterly white and black characters are to one another. She is also judicious about the way her black characters call, or think of one another as, "brother" or "sister." Even within the black Boston community that she describes, social siblinghood is a conditional, and changeable, relationship. The older females of the community refer to one another as "sister," and Hopkins shows how their unity, caring, and ambition advance and hold the community together. But the author is also careful not to idealize their form of social
sisterhood, and includes a long sub-plot about a rivalry between two of the women.22 Dora Smith also underscores the potential weaknesses in sisterhood when she muses that she “did not, as a rule, care much for girl friendships, holding that a close intimacy between two of the same sex was more likely to end disastrously for one or the other” (97). Hopkins isn’t interested in sanctifying her characters, or showing off their relationships as something above the fray of humankind—she wants to write them into white readers’ understanding of humankind, revealing them as actual, complex people with actual, complex relationships, and she leverages the often excessively vaunted brotherly and sisterly bond to do this. Even as she argues for the brotherhood of man—indeed, in order to argue for it—Hopkins makes her readers acknowledge that humanity is imperfect, and relationships across and within races can be fraught with tension or conflict.

The folly, Hopkins seems to argue, lies in asserting claims of “universal brotherhood” when either a racist ideology still dominates or substantive support does not buttress the superficial use of the term “brother” or “sister.” She is responding, in part, to the Boston-centered abolitionist movement’s frequent call for sympathy with the plight of “our black brethren” and “our colored sisters” in the decades before the Civil War. On the one hand, this type of language functioned in much the same way

22 Houston Baker refers to these women as the “black and comedic (virtually minstrel) laundresses”; they also speak in dialect, a strategy Hopkins employs to link them even more closely to their Southern past (24).
Hopkins' novel does, by demanding whites put themselves in the shoes of blacks. However, it could also be, as Hopkins seems to want to point out, an easy and empty rhetoric, behind which lay no real embrace of common humanity. For instance, in one key scene in *Contending Forces*, Hopkins describes how the members of the American Colored League gather to discuss a recent lynching. A white man, Senator Herbert Clapp, is also in the company, and refers to himself as "a white man looking upon the South as my brother, and desiring to see the welfare of that section secured along with the rights of the brother in black" (245). Clapp invokes the language of earlier abolitionists and uses the vocabulary of brotherhood throughout his remarks to the assembled black audience, but Hopkins pointedly demonstrates the one-sidedness—or emptiness—of this professed bond. When John Langley, the black lawyer whocourts Dora Smith, takes the podium, he does not reciprocate the senator's sibling language. Instead, he thanks the crowd for turning out to hear "our friend, the Hon. Herbert Clapp, and our brother, Dr. Arthur Lewis" (252). Dr. Lewis, who ultimately wins Dora's hand in marriage, is black; Langley, by politely accepting the senator as a "friend" but refusing to grant him the more intimate status of "brother," gently but significantly draws the lines of brotherhood according to race.

And no wonder, Hopkins seems to say, when lynchings, and other forms of racial violence, occur with such regularity. It is at this same meeting that Luke Sawyer relates the story of Sappho Clark, who—then known as Mabelle Baubean—
was raped by her father's half brother, a white man, as a young girl. Hopkins has Sawyer refer to Sappho's attacker repeatedly as her father's "half-brother," taking pains to establish their relatedness and suggest that Sappho's father himself was likely the product of a white man raping a black woman. The horror here is not only the violence of a white man against a black girl, but of incest, and white disregard—violent, willful disregard—of the ties of blood. Sappho's uncle commits a crime against the family, and in so doing, serves as the symbol in *Contending Forces* of a white power structure that denied/continues to deny blacks the fundamental human right to family ties.  

There can be little question of a black man calling a white man his brother, as John Langley refuses to do to Senator Clapp, when crimes such as the one they are gathered to discuss, and the one perpetrated against Sappho, remain so prevalent, and when the question is not, as Bon puts it to Henry in William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*, whether the incest or the "miscegenation" is more troubling—but whether or not incest and miscegenation are ever even acknowledged. How, finally, can black and white Americans recognize each other as social "brothers" or "sisters"—fellow citizens—when whites do not acknowledge the black members of their intimate families?

Mark Twain tells this story as well in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, though he is rather

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23 As Ann duCille explains, Luke tells how Sappho was "kidnapped, raped, and impregnated by her uncle, her father's white half brother ... whose code of honor does not apply to black women, even (or perhaps especially) those who share his own white blood" (37).
less interested in the unity of the brotherhood of man than in the things that identify
and differentiate human beings as individuals. His project forms early in the novel,
when David Wilson arrives in Dawson’s Landing and meets a group of locals whose
converse is interrupted by the yelping and snarling of an unseen dog. Wilson muses
that he wished he owned half of that dog—and, when asked why, says “Because, I
would kill my half.” The locals stare at him in confusion, then decide he’s an idiot—

naming him, then and forever, Pudd’nhead Wilson. This odd episode, interpreted
variously as a means of separating Wilson from his fellow townspeople and as an
opening sally at the issues of race, slavery, and poverty that Twain tackles in the
novel, also serves to raise the questions of identification and differentiation that run
throughout Twain’s strange “caesarean section” of a tale. From Pudd’nhead Wilson’s
wish that he could own half the dog to the Italian conjoined twins to the swapped-at-
birth Tom Driscoll and Valet de Chambre, the novel is utterly dyadic, closely
watching pairs and halves of people and things, exploring what unites and divides
them.24

Twain’s Pudd’nhead Wilson actually predates the Chesnutt and Hopkins
novels by six years, but I have saved it for last because its concern with racial duality
and identity, and the critical debates it has inspired over the years, supply, I think, a

24 See for instance Forrest G. Robinson, who writes, “doubleness is ... in Pudd’nhead from the
beginning, and it persists, through various transformations, to the end of the published novel. It takes
its most subtle, elusive form in Pudd’nhead’s famous remark about the barking dog—a remark that
quite accurately mimics, in a knowing, obliquely satirical way, the mechanism of having it both ways”
(44).
compelling coda to the more directly sibling-oriented fictions of Chesnutt and Hopkins. The most important “siblings” in the novel, I would argue, are not the Italian twins, and are not actually siblings at all. I am speaking here of the white Thomas a Becket Driscoll, or Tom, and the black Valet de Chambre, or Chambers, who are presented by Twain as “twins” of a different sort: they are born on the same day, in the same house, and look so similar that Tom’s own father cannot tell them apart—a fact of which the mother of the other, a slave named Roxy, takes full advantage. Roxy switches the baby boys to give her own son all the privileges of whiteness and freedom, but her son—henceforth known as Tom Driscoll—becomes spoiled and rotten and finally sells Roxy, his own mother, quite literally down the river.

The two swapped boys are not generally read as brothers, but much might be gained from doing so—and Twain seems to want readers to consider them as as closely linked as the Italian twins, in order to fully understand the story he is telling.25 First, the fact that the “black” Roxy’s “black” son has light blond curls, just like her “white” owner’s “white” son, demonstrates the folly of racial division, and forces to the fore the issue of sexual relations between white and black—both Roxy and her son are obviously products of so-called “miscegenation.” Second, the swapped boys grow up according to their socially dictated roles—the boy who grows up as Tom

25 For a good reading of Tom and Chambers as “brothers,” see Derek Parker Royal, “The Clinician as Enslaver: Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Rationalization of Identity” (2002).
Driscoll, but is really Chambers, becomes a spoiled and entitled young master, while
the boy who grows up as Chambers, but is really Tom Driscoll, is the submissive slave
that he is raised to be. Born at the same time, in the same house, and possessing
appearances so similar that the one may be taken for the other, Tom and Chambers
are, essentially, brothers. They are not biological siblings, but they seem like they
should be, while Luigi and Angelo’s siblinghood seems proven by biology, but they
don’t seem like they are brothers. Here, as Gregg Camfield argues, “Twain’s image
plays with the ideas of filial connection between the races, a central component of the
culture’s debate over race” (191).

What is important for this discussion is that Twain uses siblings and siblings-
of-sorts to show how utterly random and absurd identification by race can be—and
how easily the color line can be crossed. In the end, this seems to be the main
function of the Italian twins—who, Twain insists, are identical, even though he also
tells us one is blond and the other brunet. Twain plays with the idea of sameness and
difference through the twins, declaring their indistinguishability in the same breath
as he describes their different hair color. The babies who are swapped at birth, who
supposedly belong to separate races but have the same hair color and are
indistinguishable to one’s own father, are more alike than the twins who share a
body. In Twain’s hands, supposed biological absolutes are rendered almost as
ridiculous as socially imposed identities; as Christopher Peterson writes, the

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conjoined or not, separated at birth or not, born at the same time or not "twins" in *Pudd' nhead Wilson* suggest that "we are all conglomerate, miscegenated bodies, spectral beings that haunt one another from within" (231).

There seems little objection to be raised against reading Tom and Chambers as brothers of a sort, since Twain obviously wants readers to lose track of who is who, and who is related, and how, in the novel. Though Myra Jehlen has argued that this is one piece of evidence that Twain lacks control over the narrative of *Pudd' nhead Wilson*, it seems equally likely that, in a story concerned with exposing the problem of dividing people according to a fallible understanding of race, Twain intentionally makes it difficult for readers to remember what people look like, and to whom they are related. Like Chesnutt and Hopkins, with their sometimes white and sometimes black, sometimes separated and sometimes united, brothers and sisters, Twain is interested in illustrating the permeability and arbitrariness of the color line, and makes any identification based on race a specious one at best. The protagonist of his tale, after all, is the slave Roxy—who, in spite of her fair complexion, is recognized as "black," and speaks in an exaggerated dialect matched only by other enslaved

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26 At the same time, as George E. Marcus has pointed out, "One is constantly prodded to remember who is who at any moment in the novel, to keep identities straight" (194).
27 Jehlen writes, "The ideologies of race and sex that Mark Twain contended with in this novel were finally not controllable through literary form. They tripped the characters and tangled the plot. *Pudd' nhead Wilson* exemplifies the tragedy of the imagination, a literary kind that, ironically, only a historical criticism can fully appreciate" (107). Jehlen's complex and considered argument is not to be discounted; I'm suggesting only that one of the ways she labels *Pudd' nhead Wilson* a failure may, in fact, be its very success.
characters in the text. And when Pudd’nhead Wilson explains that “The patterns of a
twin’s right hand are not the same as those on his left,” and that “[o]ne twin’s patterns
are never the same as their fellow-twin’s patterns,” Twain is explaining that even the
most seemingly irrefutable biology—a shared body—contains degrees of difference,
and that even conjoined twins, like the black and white citizens of the United States,
share similarities as well as differences that are infinitely complex—and perhaps,
finally, not worth the trouble of defining and reifying (108).

The sibling stories that Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Twain tell therefore call into
question the meaning of American citizenship at the end of the nineteenth century.
For a nation still recovering from a civil war, and dealing with the repercussions of
the now-abolished system of slavery—as well as with increasing immigration from
around the world—the problem of knowing who, or what, constituted an American,
and what each American’s place was in the greater national family, was one that
occupied the minds of writers and readers alike. The past was a problem, and the
future was uncertain, so these authors used the lateral sibling relationship—a relation
of shared generation and experience, of the present—to explore how Americans
could, or should, relate, both within their intimate families and with their fellow
citizens. Siblinghood offered the possibility for righting the wrongs of the past, as well
as for securing a better future—the possibility of creating or recreating families on
new terms.
In February 2007, evolutionary psychologists John Tooby and Leda Cosmides published the results of their research into how siblings recognize and feel about one another. Their study—one aspect of which was determining where feelings about incest originate—found that humans have kin detection mechanisms that calculate relatedness based on their knowledge and observation of a common biological mother and on the duration of time in which individuals shared a residence. The intensity of these “cues of relatedness,” Tooby and Cosmides found, also accounts for the degree of sibling “altruism” and feelings about incest. Regardless of whom one is told one’s siblings are, their report suggests, if one is raised alongside these others and observes one’s own mother in maternal relation to them, one is likely to feel protective, generous, and loving toward them, and express a high level of disgust at the thought of incest.

This report—which challenges earlier biological, psychological, and anthropological classifications that took consanguinity as the sole determinant of relation, as well as the Freudian notion that one is born attracted to one’s relatives and must be socially conditioned away from the incest urge—was originally published in the journal *Nature* under the title “The Architecture of Human Kin Detection.” Tellingly (but perhaps unsurprisingly), in the wire stories picked up by
the popular press, the headline became “Study Finds Out Why It’s Gross to Kiss Your Sister.” Not only is the later title less elegant, it also fails to describe what is, I would argue, the great meaning and promise for a study of the sort I’ve undertaken here in the articulation of “cues of relatedness.” Tooby and Cosmides’ work suggests that there are multiple ways in which one identifies a sibling—and identifies as a sibling—by acknowledging, or responding to, these cues. A brother or sister need not be biologically related—indeed, as Marc Shell has discussed at length, biological relationships are, finally, almost always unknowable, and we may all be as much siblings as we are not.1 The more important question, this study suggests, is who one recognizes to be one’s brothers or sisters, and how one chooses to perform one’s own sibingly role.2

“Cues of relatedness” and the “architecture of kin detection” are, of course, of deep importance to the sibling stories I’ve considered here, influencing not only how characters identify and interact with their brothers and sisters but how they identify themselves. Pierre Glendinning is so anxious to find such cues that he is more than ready to accept the ones Isabel offers; he may even imagine them into existence, so

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2 Tooby and Cosmides’ study is also intriguing because it interrogates siblinghood for something other than the significance of birth order or sibling rivalry (the recurring themes in, especially, popular psychology–style sibling studies). Interestingly, in the same week, The New York Times also published an extended feature on children who have autistic siblings, looking at the impact of handicapped siblings on their non-handicapped brothers and sisters and highlighting the dawning recognition that these children have unique experiences—and might require unique support—of their own.

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desperate is his wish for a sister and his desire to perform the role of “brother.” Jo March cherishes her sisters and her sisterly identity and seeks to preserve the same degree of relatedness with Meg, Beth, and Amy throughout their lives. The sister pairs in the local color fictions contest the meanings and boundaries of cues of relatedness, while the late-nineteenth-century stories of black and white in the United States show characters leveraging, or prioritizing, cues of relatedness over what are shown to be the more useless or arbitrary cues of race. Again and again, nineteenth-century American authors used sibling characters and the bond of siblinghood to demonstrate how individuals defined themselves, recognized themselves in others, and negotiated the balance and potential conflicts of personal and collective identities.

As such, siblinghood sits at the very heart of, and has tremendous ramifications for, the qualities we recognize as signal in American life and literature in the nineteenth century. Not only does it give us a broader view of the value and meaning attached to the nuclear family in this era, it also suggests new ways of considering the vaunted ideal of sympathetic attachment that has long been a central focus of literary scholarship. Sympathy, the recognition and attachment of kindred spirits, operates on an economy of likeness—of spiritual or emotional kinship—and demands, in its union of like but separate hearts and minds, the same kind of balance of individual and shared identity that we find in fictional sibling characters. It is no
accident that so many earlier nineteenth-century fictions find “sibling-like”
characters discovering sympathetic union with one another: the “architecture of kin
detection,” as Tooby and Cosmides would have it, is ideally constructed for the
creation of flexible, lateral, sibling-like bonds of sympathy.

Tracing the meanings and uses of siblinghood in these stories and novels gives
us new ways of thinking about other concerns we identify with nineteenth-century
American life as well. In Pierre, Herman Melville makes siblinghood both the site of
anxiety about characteristically American virtue and heroic performance and the
venue through which virtuous and heroic behavior may (if only temporarily) be
performed. Because Melville also gives Isabel a racially suspect identity, seeming to
cast her in the role of mixed-race American, Pierre's wish for and acknowledgement
of their sibling relationship allows him to redress the evil (slavery and its results)
done by previous generations of Americans: he is acknowledging Isabel, who may be
part black, as a member of the family. When Isabel appears to claim her sisterly
relation to Pierre, therefore, she is not only answering his dearest wish—to be a
brother—but offering him the paradoxical opportunity to live up to the perceived
heroic stature of his forefathers by righting their undeniable wrongs. Melville's story
of siblinghood thus asks not only what makes the role of “brother” attractive to a
person like Pierre, but who counts, more broadly, as a member of the American
family.

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In *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott weaves a warm tale of the home front during the Civil War, reassuring young readers that family life as they know it—or as they dream of it—can withstand the violence of a nation at war with itself. As Jo struggles to reconcile her understanding of what is expected of her with her personal strivings and aspirations, though, Alcott is also telling a story about the changing experiences open to nineteenth-century women. Jo's deep love for and identification with her sisters is portrayed by Alcott as of a piece with her reluctance to marry; her greatest satisfaction in the novel comes when one of her stories is published and her sisters and parents praise her talent. Sisterhood, for Jo, is a relation that represents both the familiar comfort of home and a foundation from which she might go out and make her own way in the world as an independent, professional woman. By contrast, marriage is perceived by Jo throughout most of *Little Women* as requiring the unhappy loss of the beloved natal family and as a state that demands a renunciation of personal dreams.

The sister fictions of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett were part of the local color tradition that sought a postbellum return to the particular, to the unique, small worlds that comprised the reconstituted national whole; along with Wharton, these authors took as their subject time and again the incredibly small worlds of sisters living alone together and finding themselves in conflict with each other or with their communities over the meaning of family. And, finally, Charles
Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, and Mark Twain used their sibling stories to show how Americans interpreted, asserted, and denied family—and/or humanity—across the color line. For these nineteenth-century authors, the sibling bond supplied rich ground for exploring how Americans related to one another, on both intimate and broader, national levels.

Siblinghood, then, proves to be an eminently useful avenue through which authors may ask and readers may explore the very essential questions of how one identifies oneself, how one relates to others, and how one negotiates the balance of personal and collective identity. You can look at a sibling and see yourself. You can also look at a sibling and wonder how you possibly came from the same parents. Siblings may, as Nancy Mitford—one of a famous family of sisters—once said, serve as protection from “life’s cruel adversity,” but they may also, as her own sister Jessica retorted, be life’s cruel adversity. This contradiction is the keynote of the sibling identity, it is what makes it a problem and also what makes it attractive—it can be everything (or nothing) that you want. The complex webs of relation, with their ever-shifting networks of power and influence, in the literature of siblinghood demonstrate a singular kineticism of identification, as brothers and sisters negotiate the degree to which they affiliate with and see themselves in one another. In the interstices of both rhetorical and consanguineous sibling relationships, in the concomitant and seemingly contradictory sibling functions of affiliation and
differentiation, the authors explored here—and others besides—use brothers and sisters to illuminate shifting and negotiable relations of identification, affection, and power both within and outside of the intimate home.

Siblinghood also represents, as I've said, the possibility for creating or recreating family on one's own terms. Rather than identifying vertically, as children or parents, the characters in the texts under discussion here primarily orient themselves horizontally, as brothers and sisters. They perceive in siblinghood a more flexible and rewarding relation in which they can opt to be as close to their siblings—or as distant—as they wish. Because the rules of the sibling bond are less defined than those in vertical relationships, brothers and sisters are able to live according to new, self-selected modes, finding a new power for self-definition as well as affiliation in the siblinghoods that they create and cultivate—or that they choose to deny. They may be, to borrow Chesnutt's phrase, "new people," free of the oppression of the past and living on their own terms.

In my introduction, I mentioned that what sibling studies have been done have tended to emphasize issues like gender over that of family as a category of analysis, and that I would do the opposite—though of course gender played a tremendous role in my discussions. My goal has been to extend the field of inquiry, to focus the conversation on the mechanics of siblinghood themselves; each of my chapters could certainly be rewritten with gender as the central question: What does
it mean for a brother to so love a sister? What does it mean for sisters to love each
other more than their husbands? What does it mean for sisters to create "marriages"
for themselves? Do siblings separated by gender as well as the color line relate
differently than same-sex, different-race siblings? Gender is part of the question, as
we look at siblinghood, and my hope is that the present study provides some usable
groundwork, and suggests some useful questions, for the intersections of gender and
siblinghood.

The same holds, of course, for race and class, the former of which was an
obvious concern in this study; the latter, less so. There is surely analysis to be done on
how siblinghood is performed by members of different economic classes (a
comparison of, say, the upper-class siblinghoods in the novels of Henry James and
those of lower-class Maggie and Jimmie in Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the
Streets* [1893]), and, perhaps, still more fertile ground in an examination of how social
siblinghood is created, structured, and enacted in groups that cross class lines. As
Pauline Hopkins demonstrates in *Contending Forces*, the rules governing
membership in a siblinghood of choice can be even more restrictive or inclusive than
a siblinghood of blood, and the ability to impose or define these rules may be
constantly in negotiation.

My aim, as I stated at the outset, has been to suggest a basic vocabulary for the
study of siblinghood in American literature, offering some ways of looking at an
understudied relationship that might allow new ways of understanding what we mean when we talk about family and new means of accessing familiar texts. While I take the title of my study, "More or Less than Kind," as a play on the line from Shakespeare's Hamlet ("a little more than kin, but less than kind"), many other nineteenth-century American authors than those explored at length in this study also demonstrate a recognition of siblinghood as an appealing and flexible relationship, and one that held particular resonance for addressing the concerns of their time. Walt Whitman, whose "Carol of Words" I also cited in my chapter on Little Women, mentions sisters and brothers in many of his poems, often as parts of lists of people, as in "Song of Myself" (1855), where he writes, "And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own; / And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers." Emily Dickinson, in a characteristic example of being both similar to (in the adventurousness of her style) and different from (in the intimate scope of her subject) Whitman, writes, in the poem that serves as the epigram to The Single Hound (1914):

One sister have I in our house,
And one a hedge away,
There's only one recorded
But both belong to me.

Where Whitman recognizes himself as being the brother of God as well as of the men and women around him, Dickinson claims sisterhood with both her biological sister,
Lavinia, and her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, who lived with Emily's brother Austin in a house next door to Emily's own. Whitman asserts, declares, sings his siblinghood, as does Dickinson; that their styles differ in tone and scale does nothing to detract from their shared recognition of siblinghood as an appealing relationship that transcends biology.

The list of mid-to-late-nineteenth-century authors who took siblinghood as their subject includes countless others as well: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edward Bellamy, John Greenleaf Whittier, George Washington Cable, Rose Terry Cooke, Harold Frederic. Their unique (and, sometimes, shared) approaches to the bonds of brothers and sisters lights a path through the postbellum decades, following concerns about a war of brother fighting brother through questions of race and membership in the national family through reform movements through the rapid industrialization of American life. And, though I've argued that the sibling bond carried particular resonance in the nineteenth-century United States, the issues we see in Melville, Alcott, Freeman, Chesnutt, and the rest—and the literary possibilities they found in siblinghood—are by no means ignored by the authors who followed them. As we move into the twentieth century, we see later American authors picking up similar threads. It is impossible to read William Faulkner's tales of the Compson family without thinking about Melville's Glendinning family saga; the issues of race and incest are transported forward a few decades and few hundred miles south, but the
tangled threads of familial relationship and the confusing responsibilities of each
brother or sister's role are eminently recognizable to readers of Pierre. Little Women,
as I've noted already, has been updated countless times in the last century and a half,
but its exploration of the delicate balance of individual and collective identities
within a siblinghood can be seen in works as diverse as Jeffrey Eugenides's The Virgin
Suicides, and Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres. The local color stories of elderly
siblings living alone together in a kind of "marriage" have been taken up in best-
selling memoirs like Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters' First 100 Years and popular
films such as "The Whales of August." And the same questions about family crossing
color lines addressed by Chesnutt, Hopkins, and Twain have been asked again, and
considered in new ways, by such authors as Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Dorothy West,
and Richard Powers. And, as I write, 12–14 million Americans tune in each Sunday
night to watch a television drama called "Brothers and Sisters."

I began this dissertation with a story about two famous and literary
nineteenth-century American siblings, Nathaniel Parker Willis and Sara Willis
Eldredge Farrington (also known as Fanny Fern), describing how Sara included a
vicious caricature of her brother in her novel Ruth Hall. It seems only fair to note, in
closing, that Nathaniel also used his pen to address his feelings about siblinghood,
writing "To My Wild Sis" in 1871. It reads, in part:

But be thou still, my wayward girl,
A treasure like the ocean pearl,
Whose worth, though much and pure it be,
Keeps holy shrine beneath the sea.

In cautioning Sara to be as still, silent, and pure as an unharvested pearl, Nathaniel inscribes what may be the most ornate and flowery “shut-ups” ever communicated between a brother and sister. The weak (and unconvinced) concession of his sister’s worth can barely stand up against the brother’s more deeply felt exhortation to pipe down and buzz off. Nathaniel claims ownership of his sister with the phrase “my wayward girl,” but he also seems to be asking her to leave him alone. Written a good fifteen years after Sara mocked him in Ruth Hall, “To My Wild Sis” reads as a somewhat feeble, very belated retort. As such, however, the poem—and the prolonged argument conducted through the medium of print—continues to show, as did the fan’s letter I quoted in my introduction, the space siblinghood allows for both affection and affliction, support and strife, identification and differentiation.

Nathaniel and Sara may have fought, in person and in print, for most of their lives, but they did so because they disagreed over the meaning of their sibling bond—not because either sought to ignore or deny it. Though it may be the word most often paired with “sibling,” “rivalry” is, as the Willis family drama and the novels and stories considered here reveal, just one part of the endlessly complex and fascinating story of siblinghood.
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She began doctoral studies in the American Studies Program at the College of William and Mary in 2000. Her area of specialization is nineteenth-century American literature, and she read in this field as well as history and regional studies for her comprehensive exams (which she passed in 2002). She has taught in William and Mary's American Studies Program and Department of English. She was the assistant to the book review editor at the William and Mary Quarterly in 2000-2001.

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