Generational Revolt and the Spirit of Capitalism: Fanny Fern's Confrontation with Calvinism, Class, and Gender Ideology in Ruth Hall

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-qprw-m209

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GENERATIONAL REVOLT AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM:
FANNY FERN’S CONFRONTATION WITH CALVINISM, CLASS, AND
GENDER IDEOLOGY IN RUTH HALL

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Catherine Lunt
1994
Approval Sheet

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Approved, September 1994

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Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank for helping me work out my ideas for this project. My thesis advisor, Professor Robert Gross, has been an invaluable sounding board and has also demonstrated a profound ability to wait while I worked thorough ideas and tracked down research materials. Without Bob’s insights and encouragement this thesis would be a mere shadow of its present form. I also would like to thank Professor Richard Lowry and Professor Chandos Brown for their thoughtful comments and provocative questions, and particularly for their accommodating me with eleventh-hour readings.

The original nugget of inspiration for this thesis emerged, somehow, from a class discussion in Bob Gross’s Introduction to American Studies seminar in 1992, and I would like to thank the members of that class for their ideas. I would also like to acknowledge all my fellow students in American Studies at William and Mary, whose friendship, encouragement, and humor have made it possible to accomplish anything at all.

Lastly and perhaps most significantly, I would like to thank Professor Joyce W. Warren of Rutgers University, whom I have never met, because without her work on Fanny Fern and her republication of Ruth Hall this thesis would have been impossible. Warren introduced me to Fanny Fern and provided an invaluable resource in her biography of Fern. The many footnotes and citations in this paper do not, I fear, reflect the degree to which I am indebted to her work.
Abstract

In 1854, Fanny Fern published *Ruth Hall; A Tale of the Present Time*. The novel was widely recognized as an autobiographical roman à clef and incited a tremendous eruption of critical outrage due to the apparent breach of femininity inherent in Fern’s self-assertion and the negative portrayal of her male relatives. Critics condemned the book and its author because Ruth’s brother, father, and father- and mother-in-law are portrayed as affected, hypocritical villains in contrast to the heroine’s sincerity and virtue. The highly proscriptive gender ideology of the time dictated that a woman should never criticize—certainly not publicly—either her male benefactors or her prescribed role. Contemporary critics failed to recognize, however, that the novel was far more radical than they feared. *Ruth Hall* was actually part of a generational revolt that helped to reject the obsolete social structures of an old agrarian world and to embrace the rapidly developing free market economy of American consumer society. Not only does the novel endorse capitalism, it demands an active place for women in the new, modern economy. The happy ending of *Ruth Hall* culminates not in a marriage but in Ruth’s purchase of bank stock, which represents her financial success and assured economic independence. This thesis explores the different tactics Fern employs to arrive at and justify her revolutionary conclusion.

Fanny Fern was born Sara Payson Willis in 1811, and grew up in Boston amid the expansion of industrialization, the proliferation of print culture, and tremendous upheaval in the established churches of New England. *Ruth Hall* contains a specific rejection of Calvinism, a legacy of the Puritan past, that represents a break with previous generations and a seizure of the positions of social authority inhabited by the patriarchal religious leaders of the old order. Fern was not alone in her critique of Calvinism, but joined the ranks of both male and female writers who produced vast quantities of sentimental and romantic fiction that proposed a softened, feminized version of Christianity. The revolt against Calvinism became the ideological core of a generational revolt that was intended to do the work of “modernizing” American society.

The critique of Calvinism contained in *Ruth Hall*, however, is deeply flawed. What Fern is actually attacking in the novel is the class-conscious hypocrisy of her own relatives, which goes entirely against the teachings of historical orthodox Calvinism. Thus, Fern’s assault is not really against a theology; it is against a mode of social behavior that includes religious practice, child-rearing techniques, conceptions of death, views of nature, and gender ideology. Fern rejects the role her parents’ generation has assigned her, because there is no place in it for a middle-class woman to be anything but wholly dependent on men. Fern does not dismiss conventional gender roles, but redefines them. *Ruth Hall* demonstrates that economic independence—participation in the competitive business-world of men—is not only possible but suitable for women; it is also admirable and spiritually fulfilling.

Thus, Fern reconfigures religion, capitalism, and gender ideology by writing what is ostensibly a sentimental novel. By focusing her attack on Calvinism, Fern is able to shift the spiritual core of society and infuse capitalism with a redeeming and feminizing spirituality that both justifies her own career and encourages other women to pursue economic independence.
GENERATIONAL REVOLT AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM:

Fanny Fern’s Confrontation with Calvinism, Class, and Gender Ideology in *Ruth Hall*
Introduction

When Miss Asphyxia Smith, an aging spinster in Needmore, Massachusetts, takes it upon herself to raise a young orphan, her first course of action is to cut off the child's hair. Miss Asphyxia's immediate reaction upon meeting the child is to grab a handful of "clustering curls" and declare, "These'll have to come right off to begin with; gracious me, what a tangle!" The child, Tina, explains that her mother had "always brushed them out every day," to which Miss Asphyxia responds: "And who do you suppose is going to spend an hour every day brushing your hair, Miss Pert?... That ain't what I take ye for, I tell you. You've got to learn to work for your living; and you ought to be thankful if I'm willing to show you how." True to her word, when Miss Asphyxia gets Tina home, she gives her a "good scrubbin" and cuts off her hair: "snip, snip, went the fatal shears, and down into the towel fell bright curls, once the pride of a mother's heart, till finally the small head was despoiled completely."1

Asphyxia Smith is a creation of Harriet Beecher Stowe, from her 1869 novel *Oldtown Folks*. This haircutting scene, however, is not exactly original or unique. It bears a striking resemblance to a scene in an earlier novel written by a friend and former schoolmate of Stowe, Sara Payson Willis, better known as Fanny Fern. Fern's largely autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall; A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* (1854) is similar in many ways to *Oldtown Folks*, although it is set in a later period and in urban rather than rural locations. Both novels represent the struggle of a younger generation to come to terms with a heritage of New England Puritanism, the Calvinism of their fathers. Fern and Stowe ultimately reject Calvinism, as do the protagonists in their

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respective novels, but where Stowe, writing well after the fact in the form of historical fiction, is wistful and even nostalgic, Fern's "tale of the present time" is a furious assault in a contemporary battle of a "modern" generation against the old ways and restrictions of its predecessors.

*Ruth Hall* includes a scene in which Ruth's daughter Katy suffers the same indignity as Tina, but at the hands of her own grandmother. Old Mrs. Hall abruptly commands, "go get that stool, now sit down on it, at my feet, and let me cut off those foolish dangling curls." Katy says "Mama likes them," which only brings a "malicious smile" to the old woman's face as she cuts them off. Katy tries "Papa liked them," but her grandmother only replies that "if he did, 'twas only to please your foolish mother." Mrs. Hall then continues with a speech similar to Miss Asphyxia's:

If I don't like them, that's enough; you are always to live with me now, Katy; it makes no difference what your mother thinks or says about anything, so you needn't quote her; I'm going to try to make a good girl of you, *i.e.* if she will let you alone; you are full of faults, just as she is, and I shall have to take a great deal of pains with you. You ought to love me very much for it, better than anybody else in the world--don't you?²

Neither Katy nor Tina are properly appreciative of the "pains" being taken to care for them. Both children eventually escape from their elderly tormentors to the homes of loving and gentle women whose motherly nurturing is in marked contrast to the curl-hating crones.

Due to her hatred of her daughter-in-law, Mrs. Hall takes rather more pleasure in her actions than does Miss Asphyxia, but both women adhere to the same principle in shearing their young charges: long curly hair is time-consuming and ornamental; it is

frivolous. The old women represent a mid-nineteenth-century view of the Calvinist
tenets of the New England Puritans; life to them is a joyless season of toil. Natural
beauty, particularly the feminine beauty represented by long shining curls, is not only
useless but impious; it occasions idleness and vanity. In both cases, the author (and
presumably the reader) is clearly in sympathy with the children--the loss of their curls is
an outrage. The removal of long curly hair becomes a symbolic gesture of an older
generation stifling and oppressing a younger one, with the stated intention of doing
them good. The children's vanity is denied; they are cut down to size.3 But there is
more at work in these scenes than a simplistic villain afflicting a young heroine. Both
Oldtown Folks and Ruth Hall are novels that contain a particular critique of Calvinism--
one that combines theology with domesticity and criticizes not only religion but
traditional gender roles and ultimately the patriarchal structure of American society.

In the discourse of the era's sentimental fiction the blonde, curly-headed girl-
child was the quintessential symbol of Christian purity, innocence, and spirituality.
Tina and Katy recall Stowe's most popular creation, Little Eva of Uncle Tom's Cabin,
the evangelical spirit/child who cuts off her own curls to distribute as keepsakes to her
loved ones as she lies on her deathbed. Little Eva became a cultural icon representing
not only the Christian ideal but the ideal of true womanhood--a pure and beautiful soul
whose only concern is the spiritual well-being of others.4 Spiritual and feminine
perfection are conflated in this image to such a degree that they become synonymous: a
true woman is Christian, a true Christian is both feminine and childlike. An attack on

3 Fern's second novel Rose Clark opens with a scene in which the matron of an orphanage cuts off the
"clustering curls" of the young heroine, Rose. "Let us lop off this mop of a wig," says Mrs.
Markham, who wears "wirey artificial curls" herself and makes no secret of her intention to humiliate
Rose and to sell the child's beautiful hair for profit. See Fanny Fern, Rose Clark (New York: Mason
Brothers, 1856) 16-17.

4 "It is mainly from [Stowe] . . . that we have derived our present day idea of what Stowe's age thought
women should be. And we have based our idea on a portrait not of a woman, but of a child--Little
Eva." Nina Baym, Woman's Fiction 1978 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 15; See also
Tompkins, Sensational Designs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 127-146; David S.
the natural curls of such a cherub—one whose God-given beauty and innocence signals moral and spiritual superiority—by older, uglier, and more practical women, then, is a gendered assault as well as a doctrinal one.

The haircutting ritual is performed by women upon little girls, not by men and not on boys. Tina's brother Harry falls into the hands of Asphyxia's brother Caleb "Old Crab" Smith, who is every bit as joyless and utilitarian as his sister, but although Harry also has "clustering curls of yellow hair," 5 Old Crab does not cut them off. He does not even appear to notice them. If it were Old Crab rather than his sister cutting off Tina's hair, the scene would lose its power; in the nineteenth-century view there is nothing unusual about a man subjugating a woman (or girl), suppressing the energy and mirth of a child, or denying nature's effusive if impractical beauty. The outrage of this scene and its predecessor in Ruth Hall is that it is a woman who chops off the beautiful hair and throws it into the fire—a woman void of the nurturing instinct, the love of beauty, and the appreciation of nature that both novels indicate should come naturally to the fair sex. Something has crushed the feminine virtues out of the aptly named Asphyxia and Mrs. Hall, and according to Fanny Fern that something is the Calvinism-inspired social legacy of the Puritans.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern take the harsh, heavily doctrinal theology of their latter-day Puritan fathers and demonstrate that it is nothing but a gratuitous affliction that adds needless perplexity to everyday life. Not only is the theology artificial and superfluous in the sense that it is largely abstract and academic—difficult to relate directly to one's life—it is ineffectual as a path to salvation. Katy and Tina rebel against their harsh treatment and defy their would-be benefactors and God. At her grandmother's house, Katy learns to dread Sunday and begins to wonder "if God was good—why he let her Papa die, and why he did not help her Mama" (139). Tina is much more defiant: "The image of a dreadful judge—a great God, with ever-

5 Stowe, Oldtown Folks, 972.
watchful eyes, that Miss Asphyxia told her about--roused that combative element in the child's heart which says . . . 'There is no God.'

Both girls, however, become good and devout Christians when freed from the confines of a traditional Calvinist household. They behave themselves, act charitably, and say their prayers because they have been coaxed rather than ordered to believe. Not only a different angle on religion is being represented, then, but an altered view of child-rearing and family life as well. The adoring mother Ruth and the kind Miss Mehitable, who takes in Tina, are living examples of God's love and concern for the children. The girls respond with faith.

Fern and Stowe were the same age, growing up in New England with strictly Calvinist fathers during an era of intellectual and social upheaval. Increasing industrialization was displacing the agrarian society, along with the orthodox Calvinism inherited from the Puritans. The Congregationalism established by the founding fathers was splintering, and Boston was rife with liberal Congregationalists and Unitarians competing with the orthodox churches. Official disestablishment of the Congregational Church in Massachusetts (the last state to relinquish its state-supported religion) signaled a major transition in American Protestantism from officially sanctioned monolithic churches to a sort of free market economy in which denominations had to compete for adherents. As America became a consumer society, religion became a commodity.

Industrialization and the resulting economic changes also were redefining the prescribed role of women. Where in an agrarian society the center of production was the household, presided over by the industrious housewife, textile mills and increasing specialization soon took over many of the tasks traditionally assigned to women. As Ann Douglas observes: "Middle-class women in the Northeast after 1830 were far more

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6 Ibid, 1009.
7 See Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture, Ch. 1; also see Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) especially Ch. 5.
interested in the purchase of clothing than the making of cloth. Thus, as men increasingly went to work outside the home as producers, women stayed in and became America's primary consumers. As such, the tastes and judgment of women took on a new importance for the producers of commodities, including the purveyors of religion.

Influential feminist scholarship, spurred by Barbara Welter's 1966 article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," asserts that the removal of productive work from the home left women without any meaningful role except that of wife and mother. Consequently, motherhood and the nebulous office of moral exemplar attained an exaggerated significance. Welter located evidence in nineteenth-century prescriptive literature that the ideal woman was expected to be a "lady:" timid, modest, frail, pious, decorative, and child-like—in short, wholly dependent. "Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women's magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home." As Mary Ryan interprets it, "The cult of true womanhood was first of all a gilded pedestal for a sexual division of labor and social roles." Ann Douglas expands this idea into the realm of conspiracy theory by asserting that it was an ideological movement intent on assigning some new meaning to the lives of women who were no longer economically productive: "The middle-class woman in the Northeast was in some sense superfluous." The role assigned ideologically was a purely symbolic one: the keeper of values, the saint. The role that fell to women in practical, economic terms, however, was that of the money-spender, the consumer:

8 Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture, 51. This does not hold true for women in rural areas: "The passing of the domestic textile industry had merely shifted the character of women's household work. In addition to cooking, cleaning, and looking after children, women undertook the myriad tasks associated with preserving food, making and mending clothing, and keeping up their houses." Christopher Clark, The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 274.
In actual fact, however, the two roles, saint and consumer, were interlocked and mutually dependent; the lady's function in a capitalist society was to appropriate and preserve both the values and the commodities which her competitive husband, father, and son had little time to honor or enjoy; she was to provide an antidote and a purpose for their labor.12

In stark opposition (and also clearly in response) to this parasitic image and highly restrictive ideology of domesticity, the mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of the first organized national movement for women's rights. "If women, because of their alleged identity of interest, were supposed to give stability to societies in flux, the denial of female individuality irked many spirited women and seemed particularly at odds with traditional American veneration for natural rights."13 The open discussion of women's proper role in the expanded popular press--the same forum which promulgated the Cult of True Womanhood--provided a venue of dissent, and dissent there was. Prominent reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone demanded legal and voting rights for women, arousing heated opposition from both conservative men and female advocates of some version of true womanhood.

Opinion on the "woman question" was not simplistically positive or negative, however, but ranged over a broad spectrum of degree and strategy. Some women demanded the right to preach, vote, and wear trousers. Others wanted the opportunity to attend college but considered the chaos of commerce and politics beneath their feminine dignity. In any case, it seems that while there certainly was a popular ideal or

12 Ibid., 60.
"cult" of true womanhood, and there was also an overtly feminist movement afoot, the reality of most women's lives and their opinions on the matter probably fell somewhere in between.¹⁴

Fanny Fern, who wrote a popular newspaper column in addition to Ruth Hall and the more conventional novel Rose Clark, was one of many public women whose voices created and complicated the debate on the role of women in "modern" America. While many women wrote letters, stories, and poems for magazines, increasing numbers of female writers began to put their ideas on the "woman question" and their advice to young women in the seemingly innocuous form of a novel. By the 1850s, the literary marketplace was inundated with what could be classified as sentimental novels, or, as Nina Baym labels them, woman's fiction--defined as the moral fable, novel, or romance written "by, about, and for women."¹⁵ This type of designation prompted many early critics to dismiss the whole decade as "the feminine fifties,"¹⁶ an era of Victorian popular entertainment against which Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman heroically rebelled. More recent critics agree that this assessment is simplistic and lacking in historical perspective. The novels certainly had impact and significance; the task is now to try to discover what messages a nineteenth-century reader could have gleaned from this body of texts.

Feminist scholars beginning in the 1970s, notably Baym and Douglas, reintroduced the work of mid-nineteenth century female writers and proposed new ways of reading them, or at least new reasons to read them. Douglas asserts that sentimental fiction ultimately reinforced the subordinate role of women by failing to counter the conception of true womanhood. Baym suggests that while the novels did

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¹⁴ For an alternative to the Cult of True Womanhood, see Frances B. Cogan, All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

¹⁵ Baym, Woman's Fiction, xxii, 33.

¹⁶ In 1940 Fred Lewis Pattee codified this opinion in The Feminine Fifties (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1940), thus discouraging another generation of scholars from serious consideration of sentimental fiction.
present a certain domestic feminine ideal, the intent was to shift the structure of power so that the home, rather than the outside business "world," was the center of life. Female influence, then, would be preeminent. Jane Tompkins agrees that sentimental fiction had subversive, even revolutionary implications cleverly couched in apparently frivolous prose.17

*Ruth Hall* has been classified as a sentimental novel although it does not exactly follow the paradigm identified by Baym as the essential plot of women's fiction. This pattern, generally speaking, is "the story of a young girl who is deprived of the supports she had rightly or wrongly depended on to sustain her through life and is faced with the necessity of winning her own way in the world."18 Ruth is not a young girl but a mature woman and mother when forced to support herself. The novel does contain flowery language and tear-jerking death scenes, but it also employs straightforward dialogue, and it does not end with a marriage. In *Ruth Hall*, conventions of true womanhood are manipulated for satirical, perhaps subversive, and distinctly personal purposes.

Sentimental novels were an important force in speeding the demise of Calvinism. Douglas says that while many historians have examined the decline of the Puritan faith in terms of the new democracy and rapid industrialization, "yet they have neglected what might be called the social history of Calvinist theology."19 This social history includes the "changing nature of the ministry" during the mid-1800s, and "the drive of nineteenth-century American women to gain power through the exploitation of their feminine identity as their society defined it."20 These women wrote sentimental novels, which traded upon (and fueled) the cult of true womanhood and therefore, while the novels attempted to undermine the patriarchal structure of society, they did so

20 Ibid.
by manipulating notions of feminine dependence and helplessness and ultimately "exercised an enormously conservative influence on their society."21

Fanny Fern, however, was no conservative. Both Fern and Stowe joined their generation in rejecting the conservative tenets, particularly the theology, of their parents. The alternatives they recommended, however, were different. Stowe in some ways embraced the ideology of true womanhood and attempted to grant enough importance to the domestic sphere that the balance of power would tip in favor of the home: the ideal woman in her proper sphere would become the center of society. But while Stowe looked back to a time when religion, work, and domesticity were well integrated, Fern attempted to show that these elements could be integrated again only if women took it upon themselves to defect from the cult of true womanhood and get a job.

Fern went farther than rejecting selected elements of theology. Where in Stowe's New England novels the portrayal of "Puritan" characters is gentle and somewhat affectionate, Fern's treatment of Calvinists is bitingly satirical. Stowe clearly rejects orthodox Calvinism, but with respect for the noble qualities of her ancestors, even with a touch of nostalgia. She admires the intellectual rigor required of Calvinist theologians and the stark clarity of their world view. Fern's rejection of her forefathers' dogma is so virulent as to suggest disgust. Calvinism in *Ruth Hall*, as represented by Ruth's in-laws Dr. and Mrs. Hall, has no redeeming features whatsoever—it is life-stifling, hypocritical, death-obsessed, and significantly unchristian. While Stowe actually addresses the theology in lengthy digressions from her narrative in *Oldtown Folks*, Fern, in her much shorter novel, simply demonstrates that Calvinism and natural, everyday existence are completely incompatible.

Fern's assault on the society bequeathed to her generation is informed by but not limited to a critique of Calvinism. Implicit in Fern's rejection of orthodox theology

21 Ibid., 9.
is her rejection of the male-dominated social hierarchy in which men hold a position of physical, intellectual, and spiritual superiority over women. Fern's primary objection to the patriarchy is the utter economic dependence of women on men, and the emerging ideology that all but eliminated, in the name of genteel femininity, the possibility of a woman earning her own support. The story of *Ruth Hall* seems carefully calculated to illustrate the iniquity and even absurdity of a society in which women must depend entirely on men who may or may not be dependable. As the plot suggests, the best of men could drop dead suddenly, and a young woman, through no fault of her own, could be reduced to poverty and have little or no chance of supporting herself and her children. Fern did not invent this story to evoke tears from her readers; she lived it herself. The result is the evident anger that gives *Ruth Hall* its power. Where Stowe's novels are gentler and in some ways more reasonable, *Ruth Hall* is bitter and sometimes savage in its satire, written with a fury that prompted Nathaniel Hawthorne to remark that Fanny Fern "writes as if the Devil was in her."22

*Ruth Hall* gets off to an unconventional start by beginning with a happy ending: Ruth makes a happy marriage, moves from the house of her hostile in-laws to a home of her own, and lives in domestic bliss with her charming husband and cherubic daughter. Then disaster strikes. First, the death of her child prompts Ruth and her husband to leave their country cottage. Several years and two children later, Ruth is abruptly widowed. In spite of their outward piety and respectability, neither Ruth's family nor her in-laws prove charitable enough to support poor Ruth and her children. While a devoted mother and a seemingly perfect housekeeper, Ruth is driven by economic necessity to become a newspaper columnist—a distinctly public occupation. Not only does she engage in this unfeminine activity but she succeeds, becomes financially independent, and triumphs over all the people who disapproved of her

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behavior. *Ruth Hall* not only rejects what it defines as Calvinism, it rejects the submissive role of women prescribed by nineteenth-century America and wrests the control of religion and social authority out of the hands of the patriarchs and into the domain of women.

Nineteenth-century critics were appalled that a book so aggressively scathing could have been written by a woman. According to the prescriptive literature of the time, a true woman was to be modest and deferential: yet here was a heroine avenging herself by earning a fortune while her male relatives prove themselves to be unchristian weasels. Not only that, but this heroine's creator, in writing the book, was doing the same thing. The servant woman Gatty suggests that Ruth should take the washing that her cousin condescends to allow her to do in the Millet's kitchen "and hang 'em right out straight before all de grand neighbors, and shame Missis Millet" for not offering more help to her impoverished relative, but another servant observes that Ruth "knows too much for that" (83). Whether or not she knew better, Fanny Fern effectively aired her dirty laundry for all the reading public to see, and this above all things inspired the critical response to *Ruth Hall*.

In reviling the book, the enraged critics vaulted right over *Ruth Hall* to attack the author herself. Not only Ruth, but Fanny Fern was "ferocious," "unwomanly," and "abominable." 23 Because the events in *Ruth Hall* so closely parallel the life of the author, Fern was also indicted for immodesty and self-aggrandizement. As Joyce Warren remarks in her introduction to the 1986 reprinting of the novel, "when conservative critics reacted violently to *Ruth Hall*, they did so with reason: it was a revolutionary book." 24 The nature of this revolution is multifaceted. The novel does not reject modern society and look back fondly to a simpler time, as Stowe's novels

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24 Warren, introduction to Fanny Fern, *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, xx
tend to do, noting "the hurry of railroads, and the rush and roar of business" that has disrupted a pastoral idyll. Rather than trying to shift the focus of power to the domestic realm, *Ruth Hall* suggests that a woman, without compromising her femininity, can avail herself of the existing paths to power available to men. Fern embraces capitalism, encouraging women to do what men at the time were being exhorted to do--join in the pursuit of the American Dream, become the rugged individualist, and attain financial independence.

As the novel does not reject the economic structure of society, neither does it entirely overturn the cultural ideal of the true woman: a woman should still be a nurturing mother, a tidy dresser, and a conscientious housekeeper. She must not, however, be frail, dependent, or deferential. Of the four primary characteristics Welter attributes to true womanhood--piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity--only submissiveness is rejected, but purity, domesticity, and especially piety must be redefined. Fern and her generation located the source of an ideology that subjugated women in the Calvinism of their fathers, and they set out to adapt their religion to meet their own needs. Thus, it is in the nature of Ruth's piety that Fern's generational revolt and her feminism come together.

*Ruth Hall* is a religious woman. She prays often, takes tremendous comfort in hearing a sermon on Sunday, and maintains great faith in the joy of her departed husband and daughter in heaven and her own ultimate and eternal reward. Ruth is not, however, a Calvinist. She recognizes no depravity in herself, entertains no fear of hellfire and eternal damnation, and does not concern herself with the elect or reprobate status of those around her. Nor does she bother with abstract theology. Ruth's religion is focused on everyday life; prayers for her children, the need for food and shelter, strength and faith. It is domestic in scope. In *Ruth Hall*, Calvinism is harsh, judgmental, exclusionary, and law-oriented. It is abstract: a form to be followed rather

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than a spiritual experience. It is also a marker of class. The Halls and Ruth's father Mr. Ellet decide to offer a small allowance to the widowed Ruth for her support only because they "have a Christian reputation to sustain" (72), not because they feel any charitable concern for her or her children.

Ruth's God, on the other hand, is loving, supportive and merciful. At the church Ruth attends, the minister preaches on the joy and relief of heaven, and she finds comfort. There is no threat of hell to make her difficult life more unbearable. Ruth's piety is deeply spiritual, and it is also practical in that it serves to sustain her and to assist in everyday life. She is not concerned with converting natives in the Sandwich Islands (as her father claims to be) or in arguing points of theology, but she does pray directly to God for help whenever she is nearing despair, and Fern assures the reader that God takes note: "a pitying Ear bent low to list to the widow's voiceless Prayer" (69). It is clear whose side God and the author are on.

*Ruth Hall* is a social critique. When the novel attacks Calvinism, it ignores the theology and instead exposes the adherents as cranky, mean-spirited people who plow through life oblivious to God's glories and also to His commandments. They use their position as pious church members for social status. Fern does not delve into the theology of these people because the Calvinists in the novel are vivid examples of the crushing influence these beliefs have had on people: predestination has become judgmental and selfish class consciousness, and the doctrine of depravity has bred contempt for life. Religion has become simply an instrument used for self-justification and for judging others. The Calvinists in *Ruth Hall* are not concerned with God, but with fashion and with money. These villains are mostly male, and all in a position of economic power which they use to try to control Ruth's behavior rather than to support her.

The villainy of Ruth's orthodox father and in-laws is emphasized through Fern's focus on their religion, although it becomes clear that theology is not its source.
The true purpose of these nasty character portrayals is hinted at by the equally unflattering portrait of Ruth's brother. Hyacinth Ellet is every bit as snotty, soulless, and petty as his father and the Halls, but he is never identified as in any way religious. Thus, while Fern appears to blame Calvinism for the utter corruption of the previous generation, the negative characterizations in *Ruth Hall* are in fact much less abstract and general: they are highly specific, personal attacks masked by a discourse of generational revolt. Fern felt betrayed by her family because they did not offer support when her husband died and did not help her find a way to earn her own living. The scathing, one-dimensional view of Calvinism that appears in the novel offers a contrast with Stowe's critique because the actual business of *Ruth Hall* is not only social criticism but personal vengeance.

Nevertheless, *Ruth Hall* serves as very sharp social commentary. Fern, focusing on the violation of Christian teaching committed by the Calvinist characters—especially Ruth's father—illuminates the connection between an oppressive patriarchal religion and the economic dependence of women. However, according to Douglas:

> The tragedy of nineteenth-century northeastern society is not the demise of Calvinist patriarchal structures, but rather the failure of a viable, sexually diversified culture to replace them. "Feminization" inevitably guaranteed not simply the loss of the finest values contained in Calvinism, but the continuation of male hegemony in different guises. The triumph of the "feminizing" sentimental forces that would generate mass culture redefined and perhaps limited the possibilities for change in American society.26

*Ruth Hall* may have been a drop in the tidal wave of sentimental fiction washing over America, but it did offer a basis for the "sexually diversified culture" that failed to

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emerge in the nineteenth century. Women should not only strive to control some
element of patriarchal social authority, they should throw off all the legal and social
restraints embodied in the cult of true womanhood: women should seek economic
independence. The patriarchal Calvinism imposed by the older generations must give
way to a religion in which all souls are equal, and independence and drive in a woman
are rewarded instead of punished. Ruth's financial success as a writer comes off as
both an economic and a spiritual triumph, leading the reader to recognize that society
should be structured so that the rights and privileges of women are not doled out by
men, but are acknowledged as natural.
Chapter One: Sara Willis and the Education of Fanny Fern

Fanny Fern was a strong-willed, opinionated writer. From her many newspaper articles and her two novels, *Ruth Hall* and *Rose Clark*, it is apparent that while many of her ideas arise from keen observation, some of them stem from bitter personal experience. Fern spoke out on such topics as prison reform, prostitution, conditions for factory workers, and venereal disease; her ideas and attitudes on these subjects are notably modern. But Fern's precipitous rise to fame--her national popularity which earned her the highest salary of any newspaper columnist at the time--must be attributed to her ability to write about personal experience. Fanny Fern began life as Sara Willis, the middle-class daughter of a moderately successful professional man; only after bitter contention with a series of misfortunes did she take the unconventional step of exposing herself, through writing, to the public. Sometimes humorous, but more often employing the flowery sentimental prose of the day, many of Fern's early pieces dealt with her own trials and tragedies: the hard treatment from her mother-in-law, the death of her husband, her poverty-stricken widowhood, the neglect and hypocrisy of her relatives and, most frequently, the death of her first child.

Sara Willis's long and painful transformation to Fanny Fern began abruptly with the death of her husband when she was thirty-five. Only a year after she had lost her first child, Sara was left a poor widow with two young daughters. Neither her family nor her husband's parents offered much support, prompting her into a disastrous second marriage for purely financial reasons. When this marriage ended in divorce, the scandalized family refused to help her, and Sara desperately sought employment to support her children. Always noted for her literary talent as a
schoolgirl, Sara turned to writing when she found that a woman had little chance legally to earn enough to live on by doing anything else. All of this, minus the second marriage, appears in *Ruth Hall.*

Fern's willingness to expose her most intimate sorrows gained her a large sympathetic audience immediately. Many women had lost a child or been stifled and undervalued by fathers and husbands, and they became dedicated readers of Fanny Fern. Many of Fern's generation, too, had struggled with the restrictions and terrors of their parents' Calvinism, and were appreciative of Fern's humor, satire, and reassurance on that subject. Because of the autobiographical nature of Fern's writing, it is instructive to examine the events and influences in Fanny Fern's life that helped to shape her opinions in order fully to appreciate *Ruth Hall.*

Fanny Fern was born Sara Payson Willis on July 9, 1811. One of the formative events in her life, however, occurred four years before her birth. Sara's father, Nathaniel Willis, began to attend prayer meetings and converted to evangelical Calvinism. Willis had excellent Puritan credentials: his family had established itself in John Winthrop's high-minded Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 with the arrival of the "distinguished Puritan" George. Willis could also claim kinship with the Rev. John Bailey, who is lauded by Cotton Mather in his chronicle of Puritan all-stars, *Magnalia Christi Americana.* The declension so lamented by Mather and others, however, seems to have infected the Willis family to such a degree that, by the time of the Revolution, politics had entirely superseded religion as a primary concern.

Although his Patrician grandmother refused to boycott British tea as a tax protest, Willis's father, also Nathaniel, participated in the Boston Tea Party. With the help of partner and experienced printer Edward E. Powars, Nathaniel Sr. purchased a

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27 Fern's nightmarish second marriage appears in her second novel, *Rose Clark,* experienced not by the heroine but by a remarkable secondary character named Gertrude Dean. See Adams, 5; Kelley, 152-158; Walker, 12-14; Warren, 117-118, 201-203.
29 Ibid.
newspaper called the *New-England Chronicle* in July of 1776. Powars & Willis changed the name to the *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, and dedicated their paper to "rendering praise and honor to the manly and virtuous supporters of the Glorious Cause of America."\(^{30}\) The *Independent Chronicle* remained a staunchly Whig, "ardently patriotic"\(^{31}\) paper throughout the War for Independence, and Willis also joined the war effort by serving under General John Sullivan.\(^{32}\)

The younger Nathaniel Willis—Sara's father—was four years old when his mother died and his father sold the *Independent Chronicle* and moved to Virginia. The elder Willis apparently left his son behind in Boston for several years, until he had remarried and established a new paper; he then sent for the boy to do apprentice work in his printing office. Due to conflict with his stepmother, fifteen-year old Nathaniel went back to Boston and worked as a printer on the *Independent Chronicle*, which had since become the "official paper of the government."\(^{33}\) His strong background in printing and party politics attracted the attention of the Republican party in Portland, Maine, who wished to establish a paper to oppose the Federalist organ *The Portland Gazette*.\(^{34}\) As a result, Willis, with his new wife Hannah Parker Willis, moved to Portland and began publication of the *Eastern Argus* in 1803.

The avidly political nature of the *Eastern Argus* incited enough name-calling to involve Willis in a number of libel suits. One case, occasioned by something Willis had not written but merely published, landed him in jail for ninety days for inability to pay $2,000 in damages, during which time his Republican cohorts failed to support him. The disenchantment with politics engendered by this experience perhaps prompted Willis to seek fulfillment elsewhere, leading him to prayer meetings and conversion.

\(^{33}\) Buckingham, *Specimens of Newspaper Literature*, 254.
Once its editor was an avowed Calvinist, the *Eastern Argus* became increasingly religious and less political, to the great displeasure of the Portland Republicans. The "needless degree of religious fervor"\(^35\) undermined the popularity of the paper, and in 1809 Willis sold it and opened a grocery story. This endeavor, too, was sabotaged by Willis's new-found "seriousness;" he refused on religious grounds to sell liquor, and the store failed.

In 1812, Willis moved his growing family back to Boston—possibly because the Portland economy had collapsed due to the 1807 embargo—and opened a printing office, publishing mostly religious tracts and pamphlets. Cleverly combining his trade with his faith, in 1816 he began to produce the *Boston Recorder*, reputed to be the first religious newspaper in America. The success of the *Recorder* and its 1827 spin-off the *Youth Companion* (the first American periodical for children) finally provided the financial stability that had eluded Willis in Portland. This was lucky, because by 1821 he had nine children, along with a wife, to support.

As a young man, Nathaniel Willis was a worldly, politically active figure who, by all accounts, took great pleasure in dancing and the company of pretty girls and was "fond of his joke, and provided always with a good stock of anecdote."\(^36\) This was all to change in 1807 when, under the preaching of the Rev. Edward Payson, Willis experienced a religious conversion. The father Sara Willis grew up with was sober and gloomy, and although he was able to pass along a family tradition of editing and publishing—and, perhaps unconsciously, a belief in Jeffersonian democracy and natural rights—he failed to form any sustaining emotional bonds with his many children.

The change brought about in the household by Mr. Willis's conversion was tremendous. Fern's early biographers, including her third husband James Parton and her granddaughter Ethel Parton, write of the event in fatalistic, somewhat foreboding


terms. On the evening of March 4, 1807, there was to be the customary Republican ball to commemorate the election of Thomas Jefferson. At the same time there was scheduled an evening church meeting. The Willises, who had always attended the ball, had been "overcome by the terrors of Edward Payson's preaching" and were hesitant to indulge in the wickedness of dancing. Ethel Parton quotes her great-grandfather as saying, "I feared, if I went to the ball, I should dance off all my religious impressions." Ethel adds:

Perhaps he might have done so. Perhaps, if he had that evening swung one laughing partner after another to the clap of hands, the pat of dancing feet, and the exhilarating strains of Money Musk and Pop Goes the Weasel--But he went to the evening lecture instead, and saved his soul, and became Deacon Willis and a pillar of the church, who never let his children dance, because dancing is a lure of the Devil.

James Parton observes, "it was a day of destiny to all this family; for Edward Payson was the ruling influence for many years upon their fortunes, and upon their characters."

One obvious sign of Payson's impact on the Willis family is the name given to the child who was to become Fanny Fern. Nathaniel Willis determined to name his next child Edward Payson, only to be thwarted by the birth of a daughter instead of a son. Willis settled on the name of Payson's mother, and the child was christened Grata Payson Willis. Payson, however, objected: he said that his mother had never liked the name, and the family changed it to Sara. After the birth of another daughter, Willis

37 Ibid., 22.
succeeded in honoring his friend and minister by naming a son Edward Payson Willis in 1816.

There is a family legend that says Sara was a sickly infant who had difficulty breathing and suffered spasms. "She was hurriedly baptized, but, her parents reported, when Reverend Payson touched her forehead, she suffered her last spasm, gave a loud howl, and afterward was healthy and robust throughout her infancy and childhood."40 This odd little exorcism may not have cast out the devil that Hawthorne recognized in her writing, but it perhaps cast out her ability to fear the devil: in spite of the constant instruction by her parents to the contrary, Sara apparently never believed that God was wrathful or frightening, that she was a sinner, or that she would end up in hell if she didn't believe. Payson, in spite of his orthodoxy, was in part responsible for her belief in a loving, gentle, un-Calvinist God.

Who, then, was Edward Payson? The son of the Rev. Seth Payson, Edward was born in Rindge, New Hampshire, in 1783. Although his religious training began very early (conducted largely by his mother), Edward had not experienced conversion by the time he was ready for college; his worried father kept him home, afraid that a liberal education "while destitute of religion"41 was dangerous. The elder Payson finally consented, and Edward entered Harvard at age seventeen, graduated in 1803 without having distinguished himself, and went to Portland to serve as schoolmaster. Always a solemn and serious youth, Edward grew ever more interested in religion, and although he never had a traditional "conversion experience," he finally joined his parents' church on a visit home in 1805. He studied for the ministry with his father, and was called back to Portland in 1807 to assist Rev. Elijah Kellog in the Second Church. Very quickly, this previously unremarkable young man became a popular and powerful preacher. Portland was a thriving port town when Payson began preaching,

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and possibly aided by the economic collapse due to the embargo the following year, Payson found tremendous success in bringing people into the church. A religious revival began almost immediately, and the enthusiasm with which converts embraced the church was termed "Payson fever" by the irreverent.\(^{42}\)

Payson preached the hard-line Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, embellished with many horrific descriptions of eternal damnation. He described one of his best-remembered sermons to his parents in a letter dated August 3, 1808: "[I] attempted to show that by nature man is, in stupidity and insensibility, a block; in sensuality and sottishness, a beast; and in pride, malice, cruelty, and treachery, a devil."\(^ {43}\) This sermon prompted some of the less serious auditors to address one another as "brother devil" for weeks afterward—however, many of these jokers were soon won over and joined the church.

The power of Payson's preaching lay not so much in the doctrines but in his delivery. While speaking of the horror of a soul that must "writhe and agonize forever under the gnawings of the immortal worm,"\(^ {44}\) Payson somehow conveyed tremendous love and concern. "The friends of Edward Payson tell us that these awful utterances came from his lips with an effect totally different from that which they produce in print. He delivered them in sorrow, not in anger. It was not the priest rebuking the sinner, but the tender human being deploring the sad case of his fellow.\(^ {45}\) Payson's biographer, the Rev. Asa Cummings, assures us that "his severest expressions were uttered with the moving tenderness of a heart that yearned over the guilt and impending misery of his fellow-men. . . . Those on whom his strokes fell with deadliest effect, could not but feel that benevolence aimed the blow."\(^ {46}\)

\(^{42}\) "One of His Flock" [Isaac Weston], Our Pastor; or Reminiscences of Rev. Edward Payson, D.D., Pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Portland, ME., (Boston: Tappan & Whitttemore, 1855) 20.

\(^{43}\) Cummings, Memoir of Payson, 162.

\(^{44}\) Parton, Memorial Volume, 21.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{46}\) Cummings, Memoir of Payson, 163.
Payson's overwhelming sincerity and concern appear to have made an important impression on the young Sara Willis. Although the Willis family left Portland for Boston shortly after Sara's birth, Payson visited them regularly, as did many other traveling ministers. Nathaniel Willis had joined Park Street Church in Boston and soon became a deacon, and his house had become, as Fanny Fern would later describe it, "a ministerial tavern;--lacking the sign." While many of the visitors frightened and upset the child ("how I used to wonder if my heart was as 'awful hard and dreadful wicked', as [they] used to tell me"), Sara delighted in the company of Edward Payson. All reminiscences of Payson agree that whether or not one accepted his theology, Payson was a pleasant and personable conversationalist. Mr. Isaac Weston describes the "uncommon richness" of Payson's demeanor in ordinary conversation: "There was a combination of several rare qualities which gave a zest and an interest to his colloquial discourse, which charmed the attention and captivated the listeners. It was a fascination . . . You were held fast by it." Fanny Fern waxes rhapsodic in describing young Sara's dazzled response to Payson: "How low and musical was his voice! How gently he would lay his dear hand upon my head . . . . How softly I would tiptoe back to my little seat by the fireplace . . . to gaze upon his sweet, quiet face, and wonder if he wouldn't look like that in heaven!"

Clearly, Payson was a man of uncommon charisma and personal charm. His accessible humanity offered a sharp contrast with the image of religion young Sara confronted at weekly services. Park Street Church was a citadel of orthodox Calvinism, established to stem the rising tide of Unitarianism in Massachusetts and to evangelize the world. Nicknamed "Brimstone Corner" partly because of the hellfire theology espoused from the pulpit (also because actual brimstone, used for making

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47 Fanny Fern, *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (New York: Derby and Miller, 1853) 214.
48 Ibid., 215.
49 Weston, *Our Pastor*, 152.
50 Fern, *Fern Leaves*, 216. This article, entitled "The Prophet's Chamber," uses fictional names for the ministers. See Parton, *A Memorial Volume*, 30, for the identification of Payson as "Mr. Temple."
gunpowder, had been stored in the cellar there during the War of 1812), Park Street Church was much involved with missionary efforts and spreading the faith, which put extra pressure on the children of a "pillar" like Deacon Willis to become members. Fanny Fern would later write many articles attacking Calvinist doctrines that, in an effort to make Christians of them, continually torment children with threats of punishment and deny their natural energy and merriment. She also wrote of stiff, cruel or simply uninterested fathers placing a blight on otherwise cheerful families. The sanctimonious Calvinists that appear in Fern's writing--of which the Halls and Mr. Ellet in Ruth Hall are good examples--all share one feature: they are religious hypocrites. These class-conscious characters speak endlessly of Christian duty and Christian morals and Christian behavior, but they lack what Fern sees as central--Christian charity. They are universally more interested in the appearance of piety than actual piety, proving that they are concerned not with what God sees, but with what their neighbors see. They are stingy and petty, although some of them will contribute to missionary efforts to further their theology (a socially visible and quantifiable means of charity) while they ignore the poverty at their own doorstep. Many of these portrayals are based, some rather obviously, on Deacon Willis.

It is apparent from other sources, however, that Deacon Willis was not quite the stone-hearted ogre that appears in these articles and especially in the character of Mr. Ellet. Family life for young Sara and her eight brothers and sisters was warm and cheerful.51 This was largely due to their mother, Hannah Parker Willis, whom James Parton describes as "beautiful in person, gifted in mind, of an extremely cordial, sympathetic, hospitable disposition, and possessed, in ample measure, that facility of brilliant utterance which she communicated to her children."52 Deacon Willis was certainly a sobering influence, but Parton comments that in spite of New England's

52 Parton, A Memorial Volume, 15-16.
"grim" and "austere" reputation, there was "a great deal of innocent merriment, many jovial Thanksgivings, Fast Days and holidays, in the houses of the most orthodox people. Such is the pleasing inconsistency of human nature."53 Ellen Eldredge, Fern's daughter, remembers holidays where Deacon Willis would entertain the children: "Nelly and the other children present were provided with long sticks, and invited to chase their grandfather all over the house, whacking wildly at a big paper-wrapped pack he carried on his back."54 It is difficult to imagine the dry, heartless Mr. Ellet of *Ruth Hall* capering about the house with a piñata on his back chased by a pack of boisterous, stick-wielding children. Clearly, Mr. Ellet represents hypocritical piety, but it is simplistic to attribute the virulence of this caricature to a doctrinal dispute. Mr. Ellet is also the result of Fern's anger at her father over what she perceived as his betrayal when she was left penniless and then brought scandal on the family by her divorce.

*Ruth Hall* and some articles indicate that Sara did not feel loved by her father. Fern portrays Ellet as a sanctimonious hypocrite with no real faith. If Deacon Willis was sincere in his conversion and beliefs, however, and there seems every reason to believe that he was, then to him Sara was a particular concern. While the other Willis children became church members in their teens, Sara never had an orthodox conversion experience and did not join the church until after the birth of her second child. The Deacon and his wife were terribly concerned for the soul of their daughter, and sent her to several boarding schools with religious leanings in hopes of reforming her, which in the Calvinist mind would be the only means of saving her soul. In other words, while he was obviously no match for his wife in nurturing children (Parton calls him an "honest, plodding gentleman . . . not remarkable for breadth of view or vivacity of mind"55), he was not indifferent: bringing about conversion-seeking a child's

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53 Ibid., 26.
salvation—was the single most important duty for an orthodox parent. Because Sara never accepted Calvinism, she could not understand her father's attitude.

In Mr. Ellet and other representations of Willis, the feature that arouses Fern's particular fury is his coldness: in his daughter's eyes, he appeared completely devoid of natural human emotion. The cultural shift occurring during Fern's lifetime, founded upon the rejection of Calvinism and manifesting itself in a feminized conception of virtue, greatly exacerbated the generational conflict between Nathaniel Willis and his daughter. His theology dictated a doctrine of "disinterested benevolence"--i.e., the imperative to work for the greater glory of God with complete disregard for oneself and resistance to worldly attachments such as parental love. This "hyper-Calvinist" feature of Willis's piety, set forth by Samuel Hopkins in the eighteenth century, at least ostensibly blended with Willis's previous politics: it had given "evangelical Calvinism an activist, social thrust that became particularly evident during the Revolutionary era, when the self-effacing principles of Hopkinsianism merged with the public-spirited anti-luxury tenets of republican political thought."56 It meant that virtue lay in bringing his daughter to conversion, not in doting upon her.

In contrast to this doctrinal approach to child-rearing, Fern's generation had radically altered the perception of children by rejecting the doctrine of total depravity. If mankind was not born in sin and depraved unless salvaged by conversion, but was born innocent and remained virtuous unless corrupted, then children were not "naturally" sinners but saints. Parental affection was not only natural but spiritual--a devotional appreciation of virtue. Thus, what Deacon Willis considered Christian, Fern viewed as deliberate, unnatural inhumanity. Nevertheless, according to Ethel Parton, Deacon Willis and his severe piety did not totally devastate Sara's childhood:

Though at times the shadow of the tall steeple of the church at Brimstone
Corner reached far enough to dim the day for a little girl in the brick house on
Atkinson Street, it was never dark enough nor lasted long enough to spoil what
was essentially a happy and wholesome childhood, in a wholesome and happy
family.57

When James Parton and later Ethel Parton emphasized the impact that the Rev.
Edward Payson had on the Willis family, they were referring to the pastor's influence
over Nathaniel Willis, not to the impression Payson made directly on Sara. Both of
these factors, however, were important to Fanny Fern. On the one hand, the pallor
thrown over the household by the gloomy piety of Deacon Willis and the pressure
placed on his children to convert fostered a defiant attitude in his daughter, similar to
the response Katy and Tina had to their haircuts. On the other hand, Payson's sincerity
and sympathetic manner--his introverted, emotional piety--touched young Sara's heart
and confirmed her in her belief that she was in no danger of eternal damnation.

Edward Payson was notable for two things; his orthodox theology and his
loving and sorrowful personality. These two elements combined to make Payson's
preaching and praying style--i.e., his clerical performance--singularly effective. By the
turn of the nineteenth century, the monolithic Congregational Church of the Puritan
fathers was in splinters. Generally speaking, the central division was between a liberal
faction centered in urban areas, whose leaders were interested in reconciling
Enlightenment rationalism and progressive social ideas with Christianity, and the
evangelical orthodox faction, whose distinguishing feature was an insistence on at least
some aspects of Calvinist doctrine. These camps rose in opposition to one another--the
liberals, or Unitarians, in response to the anti-intellectualism, "provincialism," and

"unbridled passions of the predominantly rural revivals" of the Great Awakening; the orthodox as a reaction to the doctrinal laxity and heretical modifications they found spreading from Boston all over New England.59

It may seem odd to assert that a faction became rather than remained orthodox, but in fact the evangelical branch of the church experienced a revitalization of its theology--due in large part to the New Divinity movement brought about by the work of Jonathan Edwards and his prolific disciples Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy in the eighteenth century--that represented a return to an earlier version of orthodoxy. The men of the New Divinity movement resurrected the Puritan interest in theological study and explication, and in so doing maintained and developed an American version of Calvinism; the liberal branch had largely discarded Calvin in favor of universal salvation, which they felt was the only possible result of the atonement in light of their belief in a benevolent God. For the purpose of clarity in this discussion, "orthodox" refers to those who believed in the specific Calvinist doctrines of natural depravity and the limited rather than universal scope of salvation.

Among those here labeled "orthodox" there was great variation with respect to how these doctrines should affect behavior. As Richard Rabinowitz observes, changes in religious belief over time come about more through personal religious experience than scholarly doctrinal debate. Rabinowitz has identified three phases of what he terms "economy of religious experience" that occurred over (roughly) the first three generations of the nineteenth century, all of which nominally adhered to "orthodox" theology. The first phase he terms "doctrinal," as it emphasizes theology as experience: the doctrinalists "felt that the end of experience was to exemplify the truth of the

59 See Conforti, Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement, 2-3. Of course this is a simplified picture of the divisions in Congregationalism, "divisions," as Conforti reminds us, "whose complexity is not conveyed by alleging simply that a single pro-revival New Light faction opposed a unified anti-revival Old Light party." 2. My discussion of the state of orthodoxy in the Congregational establishment relies heavily on Conforti's very helpful explanation of Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity movement.
doctrines they espoused." As increasing industrialization gave rise to modern conceptions of individuality and selfhood, the doctrinal assumption that "the person belonged to God and that the major events of one's life concerned that higher relationship" became dissatisfactory, and people strove for more personal experience of religion.

The two responses to this problem Rabinowitz identifies are "moralism" and "devotionalism." To be a moralist meant "behaving with propriety under all circumstances" and "subjecting one's behavior to habits of rectitude:" i.e., actively doing good. Moralism is inherently a social "economy of experience," and gave rise to the myriad reform movements in the nineteenth century. By contrast, devotionalism (also termed "sentimentalism") represented the religious version of romanticism. As a response to the hyper-rationality of the Enlightenment, devotionalism emphasized the emotional experience of religion where the self is "inflated" to become "its own little universe," unconnected to any social structure. Religion then becomes an extremely introverted experience, entirely divorced from "worldly" matters, where devotional exercises become an end in themselves.

Clearly, the extreme self-involvement required by devotionalism is in complete opposition to the doctrine of disinterested benevolence, and ultimately brought about the demise of Calvinism. However, Rabinowitz's three phases did not occur in a strict chronological sequence but emerged as overlapping variations of religious experience. The first half of the nineteenth century (that is, the period from Sara Willis's birth to the publication of Ruth Hall) represented a period of coexistence. Deacon Willis appears, from his didactic editorials in the Boston Recorder and from accounts his biographers

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
give, to have been essentially a moralist. The Reverend Edward Payson, on the other hand, is identified by Rabinowitz as the quintessential devotionalist.

In converting, Nathaniel Willis took Payson's dogma to heart, and lived by the belief that his children were doomed to hell unless they could be brought to own the covenant and join the church. Willis did not, however, adopt the gentle devotional approach of his pastor. Sara, conversely, evidently rejected the idea that she was born depraved, or that she faced eternal damnation. She was, in Parton's words, a "natural Universalist," although she accepted all other aspects of the orthodox faith. Her love for Payson in spite of his theology is easily explained by the notable difference, not in his belief but in his behavior: he believed, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, that people "do not so much need to have their heads stored, as to have their hearts touched," and he eschewed doctrinal preaching for an emotional appeal to religious "feeling."

Payson had a way with language that would certainly have impressed a young literary talent like Sara Willis. He thought of prayer as poetry, and "his words breathed a fiery willfulness that was missing from musty doctrinalists and repressed moralists." Not only did his style contrast favorably with the more staid varieties of Calvinists, his portrayal of God, because more sentimental, was infinitely more palatable: "Payson was the only one who spoke of a loving God, and Fanny Fern argued throughout her career as a writer that religion should teach love rather than fear and should minister directly to the needs of the people." When the "grim creed" of Calvinism was driving the defiant Sara out of the church, Payson--"a different kind of

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63 Parton, A Memorial Volume, 28.
65 Rabinowitz, The Spiritual Self in Everyday Life, 163.
minister"—emphasized God's love, and made it possible for her to accept what to her was a more natural version of Christianity. 67

During her first sixteen years, Sara was exposed to an assortment of ministers and teachers, as the Congregational establishment engaged in ideological pamphlet war between the orthodox Calvinists and liberal Unitarians. The inclination of young Sara Willis to believe in a God of a different temperament, not a frightening judge but a kind and gentle saviour, was not uncommon. It mirrored a trend away from dry doctrinal Calvinism to a more emotional, Payson-esque Christianity. Deacon Willis was staunchly on the conservative side; it is likely that Hannah Willis was more of a devotionalist. "Her religion was a lovely and inspiring thing," 68 writes Ethel Parton of her great-grandmother. It is precisely as a loving mother that Fanny Fern later figured her God: "Fern's God was a nurturing maternal figure rather than a wrathful patriarch." 69 This was not really an issue of God's gender, but a shift to focusing on the mercy rather than the judgment of God—Old Testament to New, God the Father to Christ the Saviour.

This was to become a common transformation in the religious beliefs of Fern's generation. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, an aging and disapproving clergyman observed the change:

Very little is said at the present day of the condemning power of the law. God's mercy is magnified, while his adorable justice is kept out of view. Sinners were called upon to "submit to God." Now "Come to Jesus" is the song. . . . Little or nothing is said of the danger of self deception or a false hope. The Christian's life is represented as strewn all the way with flowers, while the Christian's cross-bearing and yoke are ignored. . . . I note these differences

67 Warren, Fanny Fern, 14.
69 Warren, introduction to Fanny Fern, Ruth Hall and Other Writings, xi.
because they mark a change in the current thought and style of preaching, and the views entertained then and now of certain great doctrines of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{70}

The "current thought" and "style of preaching" here noted were the work of a new wave of evangelical preachers of Fern's generation. These men--Henry Ward Beecher is the most famous example--were, like Fern, responding to the theology of their fathers. There were many others besides her parents, however, who influenced Sara's forming opinions about God, faith, and organized religion. Sereno E. Dwight, Joseph Emerson, Zilpah Polly Grant, and particularly Lyman Beecher and his daughter Catharine had a hand, along with Edward Payson, in representing orthodoxy to young Sara Willis.

Sereno Edwards Dwight was pastor of Park Street Church from 1817 to 1826; that is, from the time that Sara was six years old until she was fifteen. His father was the Rev. Timothy Dwight, grandson of Jonathan Edwards; a man who "provided a bridge" between the hyper-Calvinism of the New Divinity and the movement toward active Christian moralism.\textsuperscript{71} The elder Dwight was a dynamic "warrior saint," who assumed the presidency of Yale in 1795 and immediately began to stamp out "shameless and aggressive apostasy"\textsuperscript{72}--the rising tide of liberalism and cavalier notions generally attributed to (or blamed on) the French. He was a moderate Calvinist\textsuperscript{73} and a prodigious scholar who impressed his students with the "inexhaustible learning and the force of his rhetoric"--prompting one awestruck student to see "in the person of Dwight . . . the living point of a Yale education: the fully formed Christian gentleman."\textsuperscript{74}

Like his father, Sereno Dwight was staunchly

\textsuperscript{70} Rev. Nathaniel Bouton, cited in Rabinowitz, 178.
\textsuperscript{71} Rabinowitz, \textit{The Spiritual Self in Everyday Life}. 86.
\textsuperscript{73} Conforti, \textit{Samuel Hopkins}. 192.
orthodox in his theology. Unlike his father, however, he was "not a distinguished pulpiteer."75

Dwight's ministry was noted for the deliberate stirrings of a great revival, but was also troubled by his ill health and frequent absence. His best remembered efforts were in publishing a biography of his great-grandfather Jonathan Edwards and the memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd--two very successful predecessors who seemed to overshadow his career as a minister even as they provided substantial success as a writer. Whatever his effect on Sara Willis, it is likely that Dwight can be found represented in Fanny Fern's satiric sketches of dry theologians who ramble about minute points of theology and dwell too much on where other sects are mistaken in their beliefs.

Dwight, a sort of doctrinal/moralist, was particularly interested in indoctrinating children as a means to facilitate revival. He was one of the founders of The Society for the Moral and Religious Instruction of the Poor (popularly known as the Moral and Religious Society) which was an early proponent of the Sunday School. Children who attended the schools set up by the Society were hoped to be more easily converted when they got older. Rev. Dwight also began holding evening "inquiry" meetings, intended to encourage potential converts and answer their questions. In these ways, Dwight contributed to the brewing revival in Boston in the early 1820s. Sara Willis, however, still showing no signs of religious "seriousness" at age eleven, was sent off to boarding school just as the revival was beginning.

Along with her older sisters Julia and Louisa, Sara was sent to the Ladies Seminary in Saugus, Massachusetts in 1822. The school was run by the Rev. Joseph Emerson, a cousin of the renowned transcendentalist, and an orthodox Calvinist. Emerson was an energetic evangelist--author of a popular tract called Evangelical Primer--and he constantly pushed his students towards conversion. Like Sereno

Dwight, Emerson relied on the writings of Jonathan Edwards and Timothy Dwight. Instead of only reiterating New Divinity theology that Sara had already heard repeatedly, Emerson also encouraged skills that she found useful later in life: his teaching emphasized logic and composition, and he believed that women were every bit as capable of thought as men. Emerson's progressive teaching made an impression on Sara; the continual exhortations to seek redemption fell on deaf ears.

Meanwhile, in Boston, efforts to get up a revival were in full swing. Deacon Willis's religious newspaper, the *Boston Recorder*, called upon ministers and churches to revive the orthodox faith so that "righteousness would reign again throughout New England." By the end of 1822, the Calvinist clergy in Boston, including Dwight, sent for help to guide the increasing number of members and potential converts. Among those called to assist with the "growing harvest" were Edward Payson of Portland and Lyman Beecher of Litchfield, Connecticut.

Beecher had been at Yale when President Dwight overthrew the liberal majority and had been inspired to become an avid evangelist. It was Lyman Beecher who preached the sermon at the ordination of Sereno Dwight, and after that he became a frequent visitor to Boston pulpits. He was a driven man, known to deliver three sermons in one day, in addition to visiting several schoolhouses and all of his parishioners. He was leading the battle to drum the Unitarian liberals out of the Congregational Church, "the logical successor to Timothy Dwight . . . as general of the scattered orthodox forces." But Beecher was more than an eminent Calvinist minister, he was a social reformer; the essence of Rabinowitz's moralist. He was also a warm jovial man and, significantly for Sara Willis, a loving father.

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76 see Ibid., 86.
77 Ibid., 87.
Lyman Beecher came to Boston in 1823 and threw himself into the revival with tremendous energy. He preached sermons and conducted Bible study and inquiry meetings. Although Sara was in Saugus at the beginning of the year, a typhoid epidemic there in the fall prompted the Willises to remove their daughters from the school. Sara was later enrolled in Adams Female Academy in Derry, New Hampshire, but it is unclear whether she began there in the spring of 1824 or not until 1826, for which year she and her sister Mary are listed in the catalog. In any case, she would have been home in Boston for at least a few months during Beecher's tour de force of revivalism.

A few years later, Rev. Beecher was to have more of an effect on Sara's education, but first Sara went off to New Hampshire. The principal assistant from Saugus, Zilpah Polly Grant, had become the principal at Adams, providing an element of continuity in Sara's religious education. It was not, however, an element that Sara would have wanted to continue. Grant was an ardent Calvinist, and under her direction the students at Adams Academy spent a large percentage of their time in Bible study. It was Grant's dream, in fact, to train young women to serve God as men were trained at theological seminaries, and in this she did have a lasting influence on Sara Willis: while women like Grant and Mary Lyon, both of whom eventually ran their own schools, "did not proclaim themselves feminists . . . such pioneers urged their pupils to consider themselves as rational beings capable of improvement, and felt that they had begun to dispel the ignorance which had traditionally put women at a disadvantage compared with men." Christine Bolt suggests that these female educators "prepared the ground for the nineteenth-century women's movement." As Fanny Fern, Sara never

79 See Warren, Fanny Fern, 52.
81 Ibid.
proclaimed herself a feminist either, but her writings clearly advance the cause of women.

Zilpah Polly (as Fem later referred to her) was a friend of Sara's parents, had often visited their home, and was in complete sympathy with the theology of Deacon Willis. Sara remained unmoved, although she enjoyed attending services at the simple country church in Derry, where she felt the congregation was sincere and actually received comfort from their piety. This experience apparently offered a sharp contrast to Park Street Church, where Sara seems to have found only fear, boredom, and hypocrisy.

When the Adams Academy trustees added music and dancing to her curriculum, Zilpah Grant left Derry to found her own school. In early 1828, Sara was once again back in Boston. Deacon Willis was at a loss about how to manage his merry, boisterous sinner of a daughter, who was now compounding his problem by becoming a pretty and charming young woman. According to one biographer, the Deacon consulted his friend Lyman Beecher; according to another, it was Lyman's son Edward, now pastor of Park Street Church, to whom Willis applied for advice. In either case (and he probably consulted both), the result was that sixteen-year-old Sara was sent to the recently established Hartford Female Seminary, which was run by Lyman's daughter and Edward's sister, Catharine Beecher.

The Beechers were a remarkable family in the nineteenth century. Lyman and ten of his eleven surviving children made distinctive marks on American religion, literature, and politics. The seven boys all became ministers and one, Henry Ward Beecher, became the most famous and influential preacher of his day. Three of the four daughters distinguished themselves: Catharine as an author and educator, Harriet as a novelist, and Isabella as a proto-feminist struggling for women's legal rights. Only Mary decided to live a completely private life.
The Willis family in some ways paralleled the Beechers, in that they had a strict Calvinist father and children who followed his vocation but not his theology. Most of Beecher's children had a conversion experience and joined the church, only to find the theology untenable and try to change it. Similarly, Sara's brother Nathaniel Parker Willis experienced conversion at the early age of fifteen, went into writing and editing like his father, and soon fell into a period of such religious backsliding that he was excommunicated from Park Street Church in 1829. Sara Willis mirrored the experience of her much admired teacher Catharine Beecher: she never converted but grew to be an outspoken, famous and successful writer and a devout Christian of a new breed. There are other parallels between the Willis family and the Beechers that will be explored in Chapter Two; Sara's contact with the Beecher family was very influential for Fanny Fern.

Catharine, the eldest child of Lyman, had struggled throughout her adolescence with her father's theology and her own apparent lack of God's grace. When she was twenty-one, a decisive event caused her to give up her quest for conversion and dismiss Calvinism. Catharine had become engaged to Alexander Fisher, a brilliant young mathematician and a professor at Yale. Fisher set off on a trip to Europe after including his fiancé in his will: several months later the ship on which he sailed went down in a storm and he was drowned. Because Fisher had never experienced conversion, Catharine was faced with the task of reconciling her father's theology with her love for her fiancé: according to the orthodox creed, Fisher was in hell. After a long and wrenching struggle and near despair--for herself and her beloved--Catharine arrived at the belief that God is merciful and just, and therefore through Christ the Saviour, good people such as Fisher (and herself) would be forgiven and attain salvation.82

emphasis on mercy, and on Christ rather than God the Father, can be found in the writing of Fanny Fern.

Catharine Beecher was very fond of the irreverent, irrepressible Sara Willis, as was Catharine's little sister Harriet, who also attended her school as a pupil and tutor. Sara was also favored by Henry Ward Beecher and occasionally snuck out to go riding with him when he was visiting his sisters. Sara's especial fondness for her teacher and the other Beechers was due in part to the fact that in spite of their Calvinist upbringing, they all had a sense of humor, and here Lyman Beecher's influence can be discerned, filtered through his children.

In an outgoing, robust way Beecher offered a contrasting methodology of religion to the inverted devotionalism of Payson or the stodgy doctrinal/moralism of Deacon Willis. The major difference between the Willis family and the Beechers was that where Nathaniel Willis was strict and reserved, Lyman Beecher was warm, jovial, and tremendously loving. Although he traveled a great deal and was always busy, Beecher developed very close relationships with his children. Never close to his own father, he wrote to Catharine in 1821, "you have not and can not have a friend and confidant more affectionate and trusty than your father." This loving concern was exactly what Sara Willis missed in her father.

Lyman Beecher was also fun: he danced, played the fiddle and read Sir Walter Scott with his children—all activities that Deacon Willis forbade in his household. Sara was enchanted when she went to visit her beloved teacher in Boston during a vacation and discovered the venerable Rev. Beecher sitting on a table in his shirtsleeves and playing the fiddle:

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Harriet Beecher Stowe featured a fictionalized version of this episode—albeit with a happy ending—in her 1859 novel *The Minister's Wooing.*

Now this was the first time I had ever seen what I call a *flesh-and-blood minister*. It was a delicious revelation to me. Perhaps then, thought I, after all, one *may* laugh and be jolly, all the same as if there were no "ministers" in the world, since the great and good Dr. Beecher can "fiddle!"84

For all his love and merriment, however, Beecher's evangelical Calvinism remained harsh and unpalatable to the younger generation. Edward Beecher took the pulpit of Park Street in 1826 (Dwight had resigned due to health problems) at the urging of his father, although he had serious reservations about the theology he would be required to preach. Lyman was so eager that his son come to Boston, where he was now pastor of the new Hanover Church, and join him in his crusade against the Unitarians, that he ignored Edward's probing questions concerning orthodox doctrine. The proud elder Beecher preached the sermon at his son's ordination.

Less than a year later, Edward had a "revelation" where he discovered a "new mode by which to overhaul the unbending God of the Puritans (and of Park Street Church) and make Him more sympathetic to the principles of human right and honor."85 The Park Street congregation, of course, did not *want* their God overhauled, and by 1830 a committee of members was said to have approached Lyman Beecher with the hope that he would discreetly find a means to change Edward's theology or remove him from their pulpit. Lyman apparently said nothing of this to Edward. Soon Edward received a blunt and rather scathing letter from one Ebenezer Parker stating that "a great portion of both Church and Society are entirely uninterested in your preaching" and that "no man I think can wish to remain where they cannot give satisfaction and be useful."86 Edward resigned Park Street and went West to become

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85 Englizian, *Brimstone Corner*, 106.
86 Ibid., 109-110.
President of Illinois College, where he wrote out his ideas on theology and supported the growing abolition movement.

While Edward Beecher probably had little contact with Sara Willis, although she may have heard a sermon or two when home in Boston, his case illustrates that even the most seemingly orthodox of the rising generation were questioning the creed of their fathers. Harriet, the middle child of the Beecher clan, provides another close parallel to the life of Sara Willis, who was the same age and also the middle child (Harriet was sixth out of eleven, Sara fifth of nine.) At her sister's seminary in Hartford, Harriet reluctantly learned to be a teacher when she had really wanted to be a poet. Like Sara Willis, she eventually made a happy conventional marriage and also lost a child, but all the while she was writing stories and sketches for publication. Like Fanny Fern, Stowe did not publish her first novel until middle age, and when she did (Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly, in 1852) she was personally attacked by critics for being abhorrent and unfeminine.

Although she led a more conventional life than Fanny Fern, Harriet Beecher Stowe, along with her sisters Catharine and Isabella, was also interested in the issues of women's rights and women's proper "sphere." Like so many other women in the "feminine fifties," she chose to assert herself through fiction. Uncle Tom's Cabin, because of its abolitionist intentions and its unprecedented popularity, has been saved from the fate of most sentimental novels of the 1850s, but Stowe's many other works (such as Oldtown Folks) fell into obscurity along with the bulk of Victorian women's fiction. All these novels helped to modify the Calvinist theology of the authors' fathers, but in the opinion of Ann Douglas, they also served to enforce the codes of conduct required by the cult of true womanhood. Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall, however, attempted to explode the ideology of true womanhood by asserting that women both can and should achieve financial independence.
Sara Willis came to her rejection of orthodox Calvinism having known directly the leading representatives of the New England Puritan tradition in her youth. She also had contact with the leading female educators of her time, and her belief in not only her own ability but in the capacity of women to exercise social authority added fuel to her attack on the patriarchal structure of religion in her society. This attack is embodied in the novel *Ruth Hall*. 
Chapter Two: Calvinism, Spiritualism, and
Generational Revolt in Ruth Hall

When Ruth Hall applies for work at a paper "devoted to the interests of
religion," the editor volunteers an edifying Calvinist statement: "This is a serious
world, madam, and it ill becomes those who are born to die, to go dancing through it"
(121). It seems that Ruth, who fairly danced through the first chapters of Ruth Hall
and is now desperately seeking employment to feed her hungry children, is supposed to
accept the editor's assertion and repent. She has engaged in all manner of frivolous
activity according to the Calvinists in the novel—she has worn silk stockings, romped
about the meadow without a bonnet, kissed her child too often, become foolishly fond
of her husband, and even invited the minister to sit with her "jest as easy as if her hair
wasn't all flying round her face like a wild Arab's" (39). If Dr. and Mrs. Hall had their
way, by the end of the novel Ruth would die a hungry and friendless beggar in the
streets, and if Mrs. Hall could add a minor embellishment to this fate, she would cut off
Ruth's curly blonde hair before she died. "The Lord generally sends afflictions where
they are needed," explains Dr. Hall, "that tells the whole story" (46-47).

The "whole story", however, is that Ruth works hard, earns a lot of money,
and makes a fool of her mother-in-law who "expected she'd just sit down, after awhile,
and fret herself to death, and be well out of the way" (204). The Calvinists are proven
wrong. Fanny Fern, like her fictional alter-ego Ruth, triumphed over her detractors by
achieving financial independence due in part to the success of Ruth Hall. This victory,
however, was not without tremendous personal cost to the author. The
autobiographical nature of the novel was suspected at once, and Ruth Hall elicited a hail
of criticism for its ferocious and unfilial treatment of Ruth's (and Fern's) male relatives. Nevertheless, the critical attacks were tempered by the popularity and financial success of the book.

On February 16 of 1854, Fern signed a contract with the firm of Mason Brothers to write a "novel or tale" for them to publish. The agreement stipulated that Fern would do no other writing until the novel was complete, and for their part, Mason Brothers would "use extraordinary exertions to promote thereof, so as, if possible, to make it exceed the sale of any previous work." Fern's first book, a collection of her newspaper articles entitled *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*, had sold nearly 100,000 copies in the first year (1853), and the name of Fanny Fern was well known—but the name Sara Payson Eldredge was not.

Mason Brothers launched an unprecedented pre-publication advertising campaign, and when *Ruth Hall* came out, in December 1854, they continued to stoke public interest by citing positive reviews and responding to negative ones. Speculation as to Fern's identity was rife, but on December 30, William Moulton, editor of the *True Flag* (a Boston paper for which Fern had ceased to write) revealed her real name. This event, as Warren observes, "although catastrophic for Fern personally, dramatically increased the sale of the book." *Ruth Hall* sold over 70,000 copies; and not only had Fern proved her father, her brother, and her meddling orthodox in-laws wrong, she had publicly humiliated them. While much of the wrong-doing perpetrated by Mr. Ellet and the Halls is based on the actual treatment Fern received at the hands of her father and in-laws, these characters are also marked as villains by their religious orthodoxy.

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87 Contract between Mason Brothers and Sara P. Eldredge, February 16, 1854, in Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College; cited in Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 120.
88 *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* (Auburn, New York: Derby & Miller, 1853) was published June 1, 1853 by J.C. Derby, who became a friend of Fern in spite of her decision to have Mason Brothers publish *Ruth Hall*.
89 Fern's name at this time was technically Sara Payson Willis Eldredge, as she had dropped the name of her second husband, Samuel P. Farrington, as quickly as she could. The divorce was final in September of 1853.
90 Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 123.
It seems that in the discourse of sentimentalism, Calvinism cannot help but appear wrong.

It is clear long before the triumphant end of the story, however, that Fanny Fern considers the Calvinist characters not only wrong but cruel and immoral. This is most explicitly demonstrated in the Halls—fictive versions of Fern’s first husband’s parents Hezekiah and Mary Eldredge—who are both comic figures and appalling villains. The Halls are the only characters who are specifically identified as Calvinists, although it is done indirectly and humorously: Dr. Hall grew up on a farm in Vermont and is "as immovable as the old rusty weather-cock on the village meeting-house, which for twenty years had never been blown about by any whisking wind of doctrine" (22). In this brief passage Fern has managed to evoke rural New England and a narrow, rusty, out-of-date world-view without directly referring to orthodoxy.

The doctor and his wife both having been described as stubborn and "as persevering as a fly in the dog days," the narrator comments that their "conjugal collisions" were "intensified by each reminding the other of their Calvinistic church obligations to keep the peace" (22). The old couple constantly exchange insults in a nasty but comic manner. Dr. Hall is fond of puns, which disgusts his fastidious wife: "I call it simply ridiculous," she scolds, "for a man of your years to play on words in such a frivolous manner" (117). While he and his wife blame every disaster on Ruth’s "thriftlessness," Dr. Hall has a hand in killing both his granddaughter and his son. In the old doctor, Fern satirizes the Puritan heritage of rural New England—what she and her generation see as an interpretation of Christianity that eliminates the joys of life and grimly anticipates death.

When Ruth realizes her child is sick, she asks her husband to send for his father the doctor. Harry, who is "wearied out with an annoying day of business" (40), does not think it necessary to bother the old man. When they finally send their servant Pat to fetch Dr. Hall, he refuses to come. It requires the uncanny perception of the black
servant Dinah to convince Harry that Daisy is dying and the doctor is urgently needed. Harry must climb in the window to wake his father, who takes an inordinate amount of time preparing himself to go, all the while insisting that "ten to one when I get up there, nothing will ail the child" (43). The first thing he says when he sees Daisy, however, is "nothing to be done. . . . the child is struck with death; let her drop off quietly" (44).

This passage is constructed so that every detail of the delay Dr. Hall creates—putting on his wig, tying on a muffler, returning four times to remind his wife to lock the door after him, insisting that Harry drive slowly, stamping the snow off his boots, undoing his muffler, taking off his hat, repositioning his wig, hanging up his coat, and blowing his nose—increase the reader's anxiety at his slowness. The description of the old man's dawdling is prefaced by Harry urging, "hurry, father. Daisy is very sick," and it is interrupted by a paragraph displaying the real urgency of the situation. Dinah whirls about the kitchen boiling water, mixing remedies and ordering Pat to do several things at once: "GET OUT DE WAY, Pat! . . . put some more water in dat kettle dere; now stir dat mustard paste; now run quick wid dat goose-grease up to Missus." Dinah is already resigned that "de Lord wants de chil'; dat's a fac1," but her furious efforts offer a sharp contrast to the doctor's "distressing deliberation" (43).

When the old man declares that Daisy cannot be saved, Dinah gives vent to the reader's frustration: "Why didn't you come afore, den?" demands the faithful servant, "Don't you see you've murdered two of 'em?" (44) (The second victim to whom Dinah refers is Ruth, who is devastated, but not killed.) By this time, the reader is in complete agreement that the doctor is at least partially responsible for Daisy's imminent death, if for no other reason than his utter lack of concern.

After declaring that Daisy will die and nothing will help her, Dr. Hall applies leeches. He admits that it is "only tormenting the dying" (44), but clearly it is the only treatment he can come up with—his medical techniques are archaic, and they are destructive rather than healing. It is true of all the doctor's beliefs that what he
considers to be good and correct is actually (in the author's view) harmful: this is
Fanny Fern's opinion of his religion. Not only are the leeches detrimental, they are
disgusting. The elegant death scene--rendered in tableau with Ruth holding the child in
her lap and Harry kneeling by their side in the firelight--is distorted by dreadful blood
stains on Daisy's nightdress. The doctor's old-fashioned precepts have added
gratuitous horror to the situation.

Calvinism would cause a bereaved mother additional anguish if her child died
young, before it joined the church. Not only would the child be dead, it would be
dammed. Fern considered this to be a completely unnecessary torment, and totally
against true Christian teachings. She shared with Catharine Beecher the belief that
salvation is available to all good people, that children were born innocent and not
depraved, and that religion should be a source of comfort: Calvinism only added
needless trauma to everyday life.

The doctor remains consistent in his medical practice. When called to Harry's
bedside, where his son lies suffering from typhoid fever, the old man says "humph!"
several times and then "it is all up with him; he's in the last stage of the complaint,
won't live two days." He intimates--none too subtly--that Ruth is responsible for
Harry's death, but when he declares that he "must tell him that his hours are numbered"
Ruth attempts to stop him: "No, no,--you will kill him. The doctor said it might
destroy the last chance for his life." Always certain of his rectitude, Dr. Hall
announces "You may not live the day out. . . . You're a dead man, Harry; and you
know that when I say that, I know what I'm talking about" (56-57). This assertion, of
course, sends Harry into a shocked delirium and he dies shortly thereafter; his father
has destroyed his will to live. By explaining what the other doctor had advised,
however, Ruth has already informed us who is really to blame for Harry's death.

Dr. Hall and his wife remain quite unmoved by the death of their grandchild and
also of their supposedly beloved son. The two chapters following Harry's death offer
contrasting scenes of grief. The first is Ruth, who sits "faint, trembling and
distracted," with the corpse of her adored husband, struggling to accept his death. "Oh
God!" is twice repeated in this passage, indicating that the afflicted Ruth seeks comfort
in prayer even as she ponders "the dreadful might of Omnipotence." The narrator
emphasizes what seems to be natural human grief, as well as divine mercy, by
sympathetically interjecting, "Oh, how could Ruth (God forgive her!) look upon those
dumb lips and say, 'Thy will be done!'" (59). In the very next chapter Dr. Hall, with a
shrug of the shoulders, muses "well, it don't seem, after all as if Harry was dead, but
the Lord's will be done" (61). We have already been informed of the author's opinion
of human ability to accept loss unflinchingly--how could they?--and the doctor's
acquiescence only proves his coldness and incapacity to feel.

Harry's parents, encountered by the reader just before the funeral, exhibit no
signs of grief. They are busy gossiping about Ruth's family and convincing the
dressmaker that Harry did not love Ruth and was actually so miserable that he "was not
anxious to continue in this world of trial any longer" (61). Mrs. Hall is concerned with
appearing in the most fashionable mourning attire, especially in comparison to Ruth.
When the "crafty" dress-maker indicates that Ruth will probably have an extravagant
black veil (which "is not considered too much for the deepest affliction") the old doctor
gets angry and declares, "Ruth is in no deeper affliction than we are, although she
makes more of a fuss about it; so you may just make the hem of Mis. Hall's veil half-yard deep, too" (63). The Halls do not wish to be outdone in evoking sympathy.

The Halls' lack of pleasure in the world and preoccupation with death is
reflected in their surroundings as well as their behavior. The doctor's medical practice
is equally effective on plant-life, so that the Hall's cottage has "no friendly trees" to
shade it and "no drooping vines" or "creepers" to adorn it. He has demonstrated his
green thumb by "helping" Harry with the landscaping of his new home: "That hedge
won't grow, I'm certain. The downeast cedars thrive the best for hedges. I may as
well pull these up, and tell Harry to get some of a different kind," says Dr. Hall to himself, "and the doctor pulled them all up by the roots and threw them over the fence" (36). Dr. Hall's house is depicted as horribly sterile: "a wondrous glare of white paint . . . blinded the traveller whose misfortune it was to pass the road by the doctors house" (128).

Inside, the parlor is described with the terms "stifled," "immaculate," and "tightly closed." On the central table is some suitable reading matter, including a horror of a captivity narrative concerning "Eliza Cook who was partially scalped by the indians." The primary focus of the room is a mourning picture embroidered by Mrs. Hall as a young woman. This work of art depicts "an unhappy female, weeping over a very high and very perpendicular tombstone, which is hieroglyphiced over with untranslatable characters in red worsted, while a few herbs, not mentioned by botanists, are struggling for existence at its base." Not only is this ornamental reminder of death morbid, it is not very good--the tomb is unreadable, the plants unrecognizable, the overhanging willow "a most extraordinary shade of blue green," and the bird in the foreground resembles "a dropsical bull-frog" (128). Mrs. Hall, then, lacks an eye for beauty and artistic ability. She is, like her mate, better able to stifle and destroy than to nurture and create.

As ever presenting a contrast, Fern offers a lengthy description of Ruth's parlor, which is positively alive with flowers and creativity. The "long, white curtains, looped up so prettily from the open windows, are plain cheap muslin; but no artist could have disposed their folds more gracefully." The room is filled with wild flowers which Ruth gathers every day, so that "the room has the fragrance of a greenhouse." "See how skilfully they are arranged! with what an eye to the blending of colors!" rhapsodizes the narrator, who is obviously well pleased with "Ruth's little fairy room." Ruth has covered the chairs and sofa "with her own nimble fingers" (34); the parlor is
an artistic achievement. Where Calvinist tenets are a blight on every aspect of life, Ruth's warm and wonderful Christianity is a celebration.

This point is illustrated by the characters' hairstyles. Hair is a natural, growing symbol of life and beauty. In Ruth Hall, everything that it beautiful is natural, and what is natural is good. This philosophy is explained by Ruth's young daughter: the natural world was created by God, and therefore represents goodness. When Ruth, disturbed by the sight of a fuzzy caterpillar crawling up Daisy's arm, declares it ugly, Daisy innocently corrects her: "Why--God made him," she says, "with sweet, upturned eyes of wonder." (Ruth admits her error with "a strange feeling of awe" [37]). The exuberance of shining, flowing, curly hair is not only beautiful, it represents the glory of God.

But to the Calvinists, nature--especially human nature--is inherently depraved. As demonstrated above with old Mrs. Hall's cutting off young Katy's hair, the Calvinists feel that hair should not be curly or beautiful or exposed. The reader's first introduction to old Mrs. Hall is on the day of Harry and Ruth's wedding. She says to herself, "I remember the time when he used to think me perfect. I suppose I shall be laid on the shelf now." She is clearly jealous of Harry's love for his wife, and what she immediately criticizes is Ruth's "pale, golden hair." This blonde hair is particularly galling to the old woman. "Had he married a practical woman I wouldn't have cared--someone who looked as if God made her for something; but that little yellow-haired simpleton--umph!" (18). It seems to be Ruth's blondness alone that has her labeled a "simpleton," and the fact that Ruth is beautiful indicates that she is not "practical." Similarly, when Miss Asphyxia of Oldtown Folks met Tina, "she was somewhat puzzled, and rather scandalized, that Nature should evidently have expended so much in a merely ornamental way on an article which ought to have been made simply for
service." To Asphyxia, beauty is superfluous; to the more extreme Mrs. Hall, it is positively appalling.

The next day Mrs. Hall tells Ruth, "I should like your looks better, if you didn't curl your hair." When Ruth explains that she doesn't do anything, her hair curls naturally, the old lady responds, "That's a pity; you should avoid everything that looks frivolous; you must try to pomatum it down" (20). Rather than trusting nature as beautiful and good, the old lady sees it like original sin—as something negative that must be struggled with and overcome. Where Miss Asphyxia dislikes long curls simply because they require work to care for, Mrs. Hall proposes expending energy simply to repress beauty. Fern's criticism is much sharper than Stowe's: Asphyxia is merely utilitarian to a fault—Mrs. Hall is malicious. When Ruth is lying exhausted shortly after the birth of her first child, Mrs. Hall taunts, "I shouldn't wonder if you lost all your hair; it is no uncommon thing in sickness" (26).

Mrs. Hall's preoccupation with Ruth's hair is covered by a veneer of Calvinism, but the reader has already been informed that it is not morality but jealousy that spurs the old lady's interest. The Halls are scandalized that Ruth goes frolicking with her daughter "without a bit of a bonnet" (38) and that she is not ashamed of herself when the minister encounters her with her hair "all flying round her face like a wild Arab's" (39). "She'd look a deal more proper like," declares Mrs. Hall, "if she'd wear her hair smooth behind her ears, as I do" (39). This pretense of propriety and morality is belied by the jealous mother's statement: "I've no patience to see Harry twisting those yellow curls of hers around his fingers, and calling them 'threads of gold; threads of fiddlesticks!'" (39). The constant reference to Calvinist tenets, then, is insincere. Fern demonstrates that not only is Ruth perfectly Christian, even the old Halls don't really believe otherwise—they simply don't like her. Old Mrs. Hall's hatred

91 Stowe, Oldtown Folks, 978.
of Ruth's beautiful hair is compounded by the fact that her own hair, like her husband's, is a wig.

Mrs. Hall's assessment of Ruth based on her hair is evidence of a belief that inward characteristics such as morality are reflected or revealed by outward features. This belief is apparently held by everyone in *Ruth Hall*, but which features are most readable and how they are interpreted differs from the older generation to the younger one. The most explicit evidence that one should, in fact, be able to judge a book by its cover occurs in the chapter where Ruth's friend John Walter takes her for a phrenological examination. Professor Finman is able to develop an incredibly detailed character profile of Ruth by simply taking measurements of her head. Although Ruth does not "have the slightest faith in the science," she does believe that character manifests itself physically: "I believe that much more is to be told by the expression of peoples' faces than by the bumps upon their heads" (167).

Hair is seen as particularly indicative of spiritual condition, but again, it is interpreted differently by people of different theology. To the orthodox, smooth, controlled hair indicates a state of grace—the conquering of humans' natural willfulness and depravity. Richard Bushman cites an illustration of this in a story from the 1853 edition of *The Christian Parlor Book*. The story is about two sisters; one gentle and pious, one beautiful and vain. Laura, the vain one, has curly hair that she likes to flaunt. After various experiences and an edifying discussion with her straight-haired sister, Laura sees the error of her ways, and her first thought is to dash upstairs and change her hairstyle: "She rose and dressed her hair again; and while she smoothed with comb and brush the spoiled and tangled ringlets of her wavy hair, she shuddered at the touch, as though in every glossy, shining coil a serpent lay concealed with a
deadly sting."  As Bushman notes, "Laura had been given a new heart that showed itself in a new hair arrangement."  

Laura's revulsion at her curly hair brings to mind the response Stowe's character Simon Legree has to a disembodied lock of little Eva's hair, "which, like a living thing, twined itself round Legree's fingers. 'Damnation!' he screamed, in sudden passion, stamping on the floor and pulling furiously at the hair, as if it burned him. 'Where did this come from? Take it off!--burn it up!--burn it up!' he screamed, tearing it off, and throwing it into the charcoal."  

This case, however, is a complete inversion of Laura's because Legree is the most blatantly depraved of men and the hair to him represents not sin but virtue. The narrator relates that Legree had received an identical curl of his long-suffering mother along with the news that she had died. "There is a dread, unhallowed necromancy of evil, that turns things sweetest and holiest to phantoms of horror and afright."  

Legree had burned his mother's hair as he burned little Eva's, but in his dreams golden hair twines around his fingers, and eventually--assisted by a slave woman's escape plot--he goes insane and dies in the terrifying belief that his mother's ghost has come to claim him.

To Stowe's audience (and to Fern's) curly blonde hair was a signal of natural beauty and spiritual purity--"things sweetest and holiest."  

"For centuries European culture had identified dark hair with passion, blonde hair with purity," writes Lois Banner, noting that the women in mid-century fashion plates had dark, not blonde, hair--"a clear indication to nineteenth-century culture of an underlying sensuality."  

Thus the innocence and morality of Ruth and her daughters Daisy and Katy are emphasized by repeated reference to their blonde hair. Although old Mrs. Hall

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93 Bushman, The Refinement of America. 316.
95 Ibid, 434.
ostensibly adheres to Laura’s reformed view of curls as representative of sin, her jealous asides and evident hypocrisy show that Fern intends the old woman to appear more akin to Simon Legree and his horror at genuine virtue.

It is notable that a small inconsistency arises in *Ruth Hall* in regard to Katy’s hair. When she is first introduced her hair is brown. On this occasion, the eighth anniversary of Daisy’s death, Ruth is sitting with a box of remembrances, including a shoe and a lock of blonde hair. When Katy cries that she should like to die so that her mother would love her curls as much as Daisy’s, Ruth responds by adding Katy’s hair to her collection: "taking her upon her lap, she severed one tress of her brown hair, and laid it beside little Daisy’s golden ringlet" (49). A few months and chapters later, at the funeral of her father, "little Katy came forward, and gazed into the yawning grave till her golden curls fell like a veil over her wondering eyes" (63). Katy is now equipt to take over the role of "the pupil and yet the teacher; half infant, half sage, and whole angel!" (49). This decorative yet important role complements Ruth’s feminine but increasingly professional character, and as a combination they both combat the Calvinist tradition. According to David Reynolds:

In nineteenth-century American fiction there emerged two main types of moral exemplar: . . . The angel’s principal function was religious or philosophical. She first appeared as a rhetorical means of combating America’s powerful tradition of scholastic Calvinism, particularly the absolutist theology of Jonathan Edwards and his followers. . . . While the angelic exemplar was intended to present a benign version of God’s relation with humanity, the practical exemplar was meant the show the efficacy of good works, particularly the good works of women. . . . If the angelic heroine embodied a gentle alternative to America’s powerful orthodox religious tradition, the practical woman embodied a tougher alternative: her indomitable cheer flew in the face of
Calvinistic gloom, and her persevering good works put the lie to Calvinistic predestination.97

These two types of moral exemplar can be loosely translated into Rabinowitz's terms, with the practical woman as the moralist and the angel--whose influence is transmitted in display or performance of piety--as the devotionalist. It is important to note, however, that Reynolds' distinctions, like those of Rabinowitz, are not intended to be static. A single character like Ruth can exhibit aspects of both angel and practical woman along with other features--indeed, this is the kind of complexity that Reynolds labels "literary" (i.e., necessary for a work to be called "literature.").98 Ruth, perhaps, is not as complex as she might be, but her daughters allow for added dimension.

First Daisy and then Katy--and, to a lesser degree, little Nettie--provide a view of Ruth's piety and femininity that would otherwise be difficult to include. It is necessary for Ruth to be a mother: "By her child's cradle, Ruth first learned to pray. The weight her slender shoulders could not bear, she rolled at the foot of the cross; and, with the baptism of holy tears, mother and child were consecrated" (29). It is Katy's exile in the repressive home of her grandmother that provides Ruth's compelling motivation to achieve financial success. Katy, as discussed above, offers a foil to old Mrs. Hall's unfeeling Calvinism. Daisy's death, on the other hand, provides a glimpse of another aspect of Ruth's religiosity. Ruth's contemplation of her lost daughter hints at spiritualism, that is, the belief that the spirits of departed loved ones have the ability and power to influence or even communicate with the living.

98 Reynolds unfortunately concludes that although Fern's writing shows "remarkable tonal flexibility and, on occasion, preliterary complexity," it would take Nathaniel Hawthorne to synthesize the various types of heroine into one properly complex literary woman. I disagree, especially as Reynolds asserts that Ruth Hall ends with a conventional happy marriage, and makes other erroneous statements concerning the plot.
In 1848 in Hydesville, New York, the daughters of John D. Fox invented a code by which they reputedly could communicate with the "other world." The cult of spiritualism (or "spiritism") caught on immediately. In a letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Harriet Beecher Stowe gives a useful hint as to the appeal that contact with the dead held for her and her generation; "I remember a remark you once made on spiritualism. I cannot recall the words, but you spoke of it as modifying the sharp angles of Calvinistic belief, as a fog does those of a landscape." Spiritualism, then, is a sort of doctrinal sentimentalism--a way to reconcile the emotional response to death with an intellectual understanding of what death is.

Stowe's mother had died when she was a child, and the entire Beecher family, even the orthodox Lyman, showed a willingness to believe that their beloved mother (and wife) remained interested and active in their lives. The ability of the dead to linger near their living loved ones became even more credible to Stowe when her oldest son Henry drowned at the unconverted age of nineteen. Like her sister Catharine, who had lost her fiancé in a similar fashion, Stowe concluded that a benevolent God would not withhold the assurance of a conversion experience and then send an otherwise innocent soul to everlasting torment. Therefore, Henry must be in heaven. As she and her son were very close, she could not accept the idea that he could have lost interest in her--it was only logical for her to conclude that Henry would try to contact her.

The doctrinal debate that raged on in New England Congregationalism naturally raised questions in many people's minds concerning the nature of the hereafter, both for their loved ones and for themselves. There was tremendous speculation about the experience of death itself, and what happens after. "At the heart of the matter, prompting this concentration of attention, was the need for assurance." As Ann

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100 Caskey, *Chariot of Fire*, 288-331.
101 Ibid., 293.
Douglas observes, clerical disestablishment had reduced the ability of theologians to offer definitive answers; thus, the role of disseminating the spiritual world fell more and more to moral exemplars, particularly the frail, pious female very near death.

The nineteenth century saw a dramatic expansion of what could be called the mourning industry. Memorial biographies and consolation literature proliferated, remembrance jewelry became fashionable, and mourning attire became so complex that "entire department stores devoted to mourning costume thrived for the convenience of the bereaved." The garden (or rural) cemetery movement—inaugurated in 1831 by the opening of Mt. Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts—replaced the local churchyard, and professional undertakers gradually took over the task of preparing the dead for burial. The elaborate tombstones and ostentatious mourning apparel "were dedicated to the idea that the living, and the dead, still cared." The rise of spiritualism, in company with the "modern" practice of "comfortably" situating the deceased, went a long way to eliminating the terror and finality (even reality) of death in the popular imagination. As Douglas observes, "the rural cemetery's camouflage of death was so entire that its purpose came paradoxically to seem the creation of the illusion of death for the vicarious edification and stimulation of the living." Considering the elaboration of mourning practices, it is somewhat ironic that Fanny Fern accuses the Calvinists of being death-obsessed; her generation was engaged in a process of reconceptualizing death from stark black and white to a technicolor paradise of cherubs and lovely flowers.

The Calvinist characters in Ruth Hall, as discussed above, do not mourn as Fanny Fern believed they should. To the orthodox, the death of a loved one should be recognized as a sober lesson to the living about their own mortality—not as an

105 Ibid., 210.
opportunity to glimpse the pearly gates. As the unctuous dressmaker Mrs. Skinlin
remarks, "I always look at corpses to remind me of my latter end" (61). After Daisy's
death, as the grief-stricken mother wanders around her home in deep mourning, Dr.
Hall complains that Ruth has failed to understand the purpose of her bereavement:
"Now that proves she didn't make a sanctifying use of her trouble. It's no use trying to
dodge what the Lord sends. We've just got to stand and take it; if we don't, he'll be
sending something else. Them's my sentiments, and I consider 'em scripteral" (47).

Of course, these are not the narrator's sentiments—quite the contrary. Ruth's
mourning is sanctifying: when she next appears, she is "stamped with a holier beauty"
(48). It is eight years after the funeral, and Ruth is still in the business of mourning, of
keeping Daisy in the story. "To the mother's eye, she still blossomed fair as Paradise.
The soft, golden hair still waved over the blue-veined temples; the sweet, earnest eyes
still beamed with their loving light; the little fragile hand was still outstretched for
maternal guidance" (49). Near the end of the story Ruth has a dream in which not only
Daisy but also her father Harry returns to join Ruth, Katy, and Nettie in an idyllic
garden. Daisy, then, the little angel child at whose cradle Ruth learned to pray,
provides an element of spirituality to the novel.

Daisy's death is very much in the tradition of Stowe's Little Eva. "In Stowe's
time," writes Nina Baym, "when the Calvinist idea of natural depravity was losing
ground to the romantic idea of natural innocence, the image of the divine child was put
to special use." Baym notes that nineteenth-century literature often contained a child
remarkable for "precocious spirituality and unusual goodness and known by these
special signs to be designed for early death."106 Jane Tompkins takes this argument
one step further by identifying the evangelical purpose of these spirit-children: to
convert the survivors. "When the spiritual power of death is combined with the natural

106 Baym, Woman's Fiction, 15.
sanctity of childhood, the child becomes an angel endowed with salvific force."107 Thus, Little Eva distributing her hair to her loved ones before she goes to God is leaving her influence to work on their souls after she departs.

Ruth has saved a lock of Daisy's hair. This practice was common, even to the extent of making an article of jewelry from the hair of the deceased and wearing it, or creating a hair picture with it and hanging it on the wall.108 Uncle Tom, for instance, wore his lock of Eva's hair on a black string around his neck. Curly blonde hair, then, is not only symbolic of natural beauty and spirituality, it is an icon of Christianity; a feminized crucifix. It is no coincidence that Mr. Tom Devlin, another orthodox villain who owns a musty bookstore dealing in "theological publications of the blue-school order," sports "plastered wind-proof locks" that remain "unctuous" and "unruffled" (75-6). Ruth's flowing curls attest to her sanctity, as Mrs. Hall's smoothed, restrained, and artificial wig indicates her lack of it.

The contrast between Ruth's lovely hair and Mrs. Hall's cheap wig (or bald head) is extreme, as with the contrast between the women's parlors and other contrasts in the story. Ruth Hall is a satirical novel of caricatures. Where Oldtown Folks attempts to explore, explain and forgive even the most odious characters, villains in Ruth Hall are unremittingly bad because Fern uses each of them to amplify a particular fault and thus to amplify a historical and social gap between modes of family life. The Halls are old-fashioned, narrow-minded stiflers of the rising generation. Ruth's absurdly-named brother Hyacinth is a narcissistic, fashion-conscious sycophant; her cousin Mrs. Millet a social-climbing snob, and Mr. Millet a "wooden man," completely void of emotion and incapable of pity. Mr. Ellet is the embodiment of an unloving, unnatural parent and a cold-hearted, avaricious mock-Christian--he is among "those who make long prayers and wrap themselves in morality as a garment, and cry with

107 Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 129.
closed purses and averted faces, "be ye warmed and filled" (91). Ruth, on the other hand, is a paragon of shining and virtuous Christian womanhood. She is warm, sensible, adaptable, charitable, and completely unconcerned with the whims of fashion and society. Naturally, she makes the others look very bad, which is clearly Fern's intention. "Fern's strength did not lie in the creation of fully-developed characters of great psychological depth and emotional intensity," writes Joyce Warren, but her satiric portraits "simultaneously create a character and make a social comment." 109

All the contrasts in Ruth Hall reflect the contrapuntal structure of the narrative. Warren observes,

A cynical undertone constantly undercuts the sentiment... the tone of the novel shifts constantly and suddenly; each description of Ruth's early happiness is immediately undercut by a satirical scene portraying the other character's sour comments or unfeeling behavior... Thus each time the author seems to indulge in a tender description of family life or death, the reader is immediately snapped back to a harsher reality by an opposing scene. 110

The most striking juxtaposition of chapters occurs at the turning point in the novel. The chapter before this crucial contrast is entitled "Ruth applies for employment at newspaper offices"; it tells of Ruth braving rejection and exhaustion in her quest for work. Three chapters later, Chapter LXII begins, "Ruth has found employment" (125). However, the two intervening chapters have nothing to do with Ruth's career: they are Fanny Fern's definitive statement on religion. Chapter LX is a short account of the "weary, languid and dejected" (122) Ruth going to church and finding comfort and strength. The next chapter recounts a conversation between Ruth's father and a

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109 Warren, introduction to Fanny Fern, Ruth Hall and Other Writings, xxviii.
110 Ibid., xxvii.
"country clergyman." The minister, Mr. Clark, compliments Mr. Ellet on his worldly success. "Yes, Providence has smiled on my enterprise;" agrees Ellet, "my affairs are, as you say, in a very prosperous condition" (123).

The reader, of course, has seen Mr. Ellet tell his daughter to give up her children because he is not able to help support her: "I'm poor, Ruth, or at least I may be tomorrow, who knows? so you must not depend on me" (68). He has resisted Dr. Hall's proposal to match contributions to Ruth's support by declaring "I am a poor man, doctor; shouldn't be surprised any day, if I had to mortgage the house I live in; you wouldn't have me die in the almhouse, would you?" (71). Before his conversation with Mr. Clark, Mr. Ellet was last encountered turning his back on Ruth after informing her that old Mrs. Hall intended to keep Katy forever. When Ruth points out that she does not have even the fifty cents necessary to ride the train out to see her daughter, he "coldly" responds "That's for you to decide" and walks away, with her imploring calls of "Father!" following him down the street. Realizing that the Halls have tricked her into letting Katy go, and that her own father was in on the plot, Ruth desperately wonders "can good people do such things? Is religion only a fable?"

If not for Ruth herself, the reader of Ruth Hall might conclude that Fanny Fern thinks religion is only a fable. However, Ruth immediately answers her own question reassuringly: "No, no; 'let God be true, and every man a liar'" (119).

Mr. Ellet is a liar. Mr. Clark laments his inability to "get up a revival," saying that "Satan reigns, and the right arm of the church seem paralysed. Sometime I think the stumbling-block is the avaricious and money-grabbing spirit of its professors" (124). Of course, Mr. Ellet is as avaricious and money-grabbing as could be, but he simply gives a scripture-laden reply agreeing whole-heartedly with the minister. They then discuss the efforts of their church to convert heathens in the Sandwich Islands--the necessity of expending money and missionaries lives for the sake of spreading the
faith. "He who saveth a soul from death, you know, hideth a multitude of sins" (124), says Mr. Ellet.

This same biblical citation had appeared several chapters earlier as Ruth desperately gazed out her boarding-house window at the brothel down the street. "She knew now how it could be" that a woman could be driven to prostitution or other sinful, desperate acts. The verse, from the Book of James, advises that one who converts a sinner saves that sinner from death, and thus hides his sins.111 Ruth wonders where "shall he be found who, 'mid the gloom of so dark a night" (91) could save her before she had a multitude of sins to hide. When Mr. Ellet invokes the verse, although he is discussing missionary efforts, he emphasizes the hiding of sins rather than the converting of sinners. This implies that the act of converting hides the sins of the missionary, not the convert--i.e., that his evangelical endeavors hide his sins. Thus, Ellet has committed what he wrongfully accused Ruth of doing when she "foiled [him] with his own weapons:" "Perversion of Scripture, perversion of Scripture" (68).

Obviously Ellet has a "multitude of sins" to hide, and feels that his contributions to missionary efforts will compensate for his transgressions closer to home. Lest the reader miss the incongruity of Mr. Ellet’s concern for distant heathens while his own daughter approaches starvation, Ellet invites brother Clark to join him in an elaborate dinner. The minister accepts: "You have, I bless God, a warm heart and a liberal one; your praise is in all the churches." Ellet smiles at "this tribute to his superior sanctity." Fern ends the chapter with a superfluous reminder of Ruth's dire need compared to her father's "well-spread table": "SOME MORE SUPPER, please, Mamma,' vainly pleaded little Nettie" (125).

Of the ninety short chapters that comprise Ruth Hall, chapters LX and LXI stand out in their titles as well as in their power. All the other chapters have straightforward titles that identify the person or event featured therein: "Ruth's new landlady"

111 James 5:20.
or "Harry's funeral" or "The old doctor arrives too late." Chapters LX and LXI, however, have more illuminating titles that point towards the inherent didacticism of the novel. Chapter LX, in which Ruth goes to church, is entitled "The bread of life." The following chapter, rather than being called "Mr. Ellet invites the minister to dine," is labeled "A chapter which may be instructive." This title indicates that Fern especially wanted the hypocrisy of Mr. Ellet to be noted. The previous title emphasizes the existence of true Christianity in the face of overwhelming pharisaical insincerity.

The service Ruth attends is clearly not Calvinist because it offers comfort and reassurance. The sermon is on the text "there remaineth, therefore, a rest for the people of God" and it is precisely rest and reward that Ruth so desperately needs in her struggle to support herself and little Nettie, and to save Katy from the Halls. The minister speaks of God's love with no mention of who may be damned, and Ruth is rejuvenated:

The bliss, the joy of heaven was pictured; life,—mysterious, crooked, unfathomable life, made clear to the eye of faith; sorrow, pain, suffering, ignominy even, made sweet for His sake, who suffered all for us.

Ruth weeps! weeps that her faith was for an instant o'erclouded; weeps that she shrank from breasting the foaming waves at the bidding of Him who said, "It is I, be not afraid." And she, who came there fluttering with a broken wing, went away singing, soaring (123).

Ruth has experienced a conversion of sorts. In the Puritan tradition, a convert experiences a tortuous confusion of doubt, self-loathing and atheism which is all washed away by a realization of God's grace--thus a Puritan goes from reprobate sinner to church-member and saint. When this chapter begins, Ruth feels her life is

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112 Hebrews 4:9.
"scarcely worth the pains to keep the little flame flickering" (122). When she cries at the sermon, she re-embraces her faith and leaves "singing" and "soaring." The next thing we hear of Ruth is that she has found employment. From this point on, things improve rapidly: she becomes a popular writer and a savvy businesswoman. "Ruth felt as if wings were growing from her shoulders" (174).

The conversion Ruth has experienced, while precipitated by religion, is essentially a secular transformation. Ruth has gone from a sentimental heroine—the True Woman of the nineteenth century—to a female capitalist. At the same time that Fem skewered orthodox Calvinism, she co-opted the Puritan literary tradition of the conversion narrative\(^\text{113}\) and put it to use, not only in the interest of modernization and a free-market economy, but in the interest of women.

*Ruth Hall* converts from a sentimental novel to an Algeresque rags-to-riches story with a female protagonist. At first, it seems a simple enough idea to switch the poor boy in Alger's stories with a girl, but the ideology of domesticity and the proper sphere of women totally contradict Alger's teachings. Moreover, Fem does not propose a wretched, penniless orphan girl in place of "Ragged Dick," but a mature, educated widow with children. *Ruth Hall* is not an exhortation for the poor to help themselves, but for middle-class women to avail themselves of the entrepreneurial opportunities arising in a modernized society. Everyone could agree that the condition of the poor needed improvement; to a large portion of nineteenth-century society, however, the position of a middle-class woman was not to be pitied but to be admired.

Chapter Three: Fanny Fern’s Attack on Gender Ideology

When little Tina of Oldtown Folks realizes that Miss Asphyxia intends to take her in, she objects in the most definitive way she can muster. "I don't like you," she declares, "you ain't pretty, and I won't go with you."114 Katy Hall voices similar disapproval of the boarding house she must live in with Ruth after Harry's death: "'Tisn't a pretty place," she says, dejectedly, "'tisn't a pretty place, mother, I want to go home" (77). To these children, "not pretty" clearly means bad. Accordingly, when something is particularly delightful to Tina or Katy, it is something beautiful. This is true of Ruth's other daughters, Daisy and Nettie, as well as of Ruth herself. "Oh, how pretty!" exclaims little Daisy (twice) as she watches her father drive off to work on a snowy day in his picturesque sleigh (40); "Oh, how pretty!" squeals Nettie, when Ruth receives a bouquet of flowers from Johnny Galt (84); "O, how pretty!" cries Tina, as Miss Asphyxixia drives her past a "splendid clump" of flowers.115 As these examples indicate, beauty is to be found largely--if not exclusively--in the natural world. Nature, particularly flowers, is evidence of God's love, of everything good, spiritual, and feminine. As the narrator says of little Katy, "flowers were to her another name for happiness" (109).

The link between Ruth's response to the sublime beauty of flowers and trees and her spirituality is made explicit: "She could not look upon this wealth of sea, sky, leaf, bud, and blossom; she could not listen to the little birds, nor inhale the perfumed breath of morning without a filling eye and brimming heart, to the bounteous Giver"

114 Stowe, Oldtown Folks, 980.
115 Ibid., 982.
This portrayal of Ruth sets her in complete opposition to the nature-loathing Calvinists, and at the same time plays to the audience of sentimental novels: she appears to be the quintessential heroine of woman's fiction; the epitome of feminine beauty, virtue, and piety.

The flowery prose and gushing sentiment evident in *Ruth Hall* are responsible for the novel having been dismissed as just another "sob story" guilty of reinforcing the debilitating ideal of true womanhood. Twentieth-century critics have had difficulty, however, reconciling these overtly "feminine" elements with the biting satire and unconventional ending of the novel. Just the opposite was true of contemporary critics, who overlooked Ruth's manifest femininity because they were scandalized by the "unwomanly" tenor--even the ferocity--of the novel. Although *Ruth Hall* touches on many themes, the overriding issue is clearly one of gender roles, specifically, the definition of femininity and the social and economic role of women.

Some of Fanny Fern's most sentimental prose is dedicated to Ruth's rambles with little Daisy, "who already partook of her mother's love for nature" (29). It also applies to Daisy herself. Daisy's response to the great outdoors is a "rapture she had no words to express" (30). As discussed above, Daisy belongs to the class of angels who are recognized as too good to live; in Joyce Warren's opinion, the early portrayal of Ruth as a sort of Victorian wood-nymph is also not long for the world. Warren identifies a stylistic shift that reflects Ruth's transformation from a typical sentimental heroine--a representative of true womanhood--to a stronger, more realistic woman:

The domestic values of love and harmony which seem to be extolled at the beginning of the novel gradually give way to a cynical realism as the heroine evolves from a trusting innocent, who accepts the feminine role imposed on her
by her culture, into a hard-headed businesswoman who forges her own identity.116

There is an array of critical opinion on this point. It is certainly true that Ruth begins as what appears to be a very conventional sentimental heroine, and that her circumstances change drastically, but what sort of change this effects on Ruth herself, and what the ultimate message of *Ruth Hall* would therefore be, is debatable.

According to Mary Kelley, Fern accepted (even embraced) her prescribed feminine role and clung to it bitterly even when forced to step outside the bounds of convention by becoming a public figure. Kelley remarks that "Ruth's collections and [Fern's] language are totally colored by the sense of a woman wrongfully and unexpectedly burdened with a man's job, with male responsibilities, while simultaneously having to perform female duties."117 On the other hand, Nina Baym maintains that *Ruth Hall* represents an outright "repudiation of the kin and marriage structure" and a rejection of "the idea that women need a love they must lean on."118 Thus, while Kelley sees Ruth as an example of the True Woman forced out of her rightful place, Baym sees her as a woman who abdicates her feminine role entirely in order to assume a masculine one.

In between these two extremes are more complex readings. Warren suggests that the transformation of Ruth from an innocent and conventionally feminine young wife to a successful, savvy widow who is *still* feminine, amounts to neither a rejection nor an acceptance but to a redefinition of femininity. Both David Reynolds and Nancy Walker see Fern's manipulation of prose styles as a deliberately subversive act of feminism, disguised as a conventional endorsement of the patriarchal structure

118 Baym, *Woman's Fiction*, 252.
(although contemporary critical response to the novel indicates that this “disguising” was ineffective.) Susan K. Harris concisely argues this position:

Our interpretive conventions have been inadequate for assessing just how deliberately nineteenth-century women writers were capable of manipulating the writing conventions of their day. *Ruth Hall* is an excellent text to begin reexamining this question because in it Fem used sentimental imagery and language patterning as means, first, of disguising her goal to project a woman who grows into self-definition and verbal power and, second, of bringing the worldview implicit in the sentimental mode into doubt. In exploiting and subverting a rhetorical mode not only closely associated with women's writing but also commonly held to be reflective of women's nature itself, Fem was actively challenging the prevailing nineteenth-century view of ideal women.119

All of these readings assume, to some degree, the veracity of Barbara Welter's cult of true womanhood as the prevailing nineteenth-century view of the ideal woman. Frances Cogan, however, has found evidence for an alternate model— at least in the Northeast, between the years of 1840 to 1880—which she labels the Ideal of Real Womanhood.120 Cogan admits that there was, in fact, an existing cult of true womanhood—which Welter defined with the "four cardinal virtues" piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—and that also there was undeniably an organized women's rights movement, but that sentimental fiction, advice books, and other prescriptive literature of the period reveal a third model for women that falls somewhere in between. It is evident that, whichever way their sympathies may have leaned, the majority of American women did not throw down their needlework and become

120 See Cogan, *All-American Girl*, passim.
political activists for women's rights. But "how could vast numbers of American middle-class women," Cogan asks, "have [embraced] an ideal of the 'submissive maiden' when that ideal was physically injurious, economically unworkable, legally contraindicated for survival within the restraints of marriage, and intellectually vacuous?" 121

This is a good question, with which scholars have grappled for decades. What most of them have concluded is another permutation of Cogan's argument: that the "vast numbers" of women struggled with the rather untenable ideal of true womanhood, and then either tried to live up to it, rebelled against it, or modified it to form a more realistic and more fulfilling model. Fanny Fern proposes a new image of femininity that closely resembles Cogan's Ideal of Real Womanhood. Fern's woman (her name, of course, is Ruth) is fully as beautiful, pure, spiritual, and maternal as the true woman, but she is not meek, submissive, or dependent. By earning her own living she is not assuming a masculine role, nor is she denying that a masculine role exists, she is simply asserting that a capable woman should be allowed by her society to participate economically without being thought unnatural, unmotherly, or unfeminine. Fern did not shun domesticity, but she did demand that woman be allowed a public voice as well.

If a woman was married to a reasonably well-off man, had a home to run and children to raise, in the opinion of her society she was a success. If her husband died, she should mourn; if he did not leave her enough to live on comfortably, she should find a new husband. The emphasis on marriage indicates simply that it was generally a necessary step to establishing a domestic sphere. This is not to say that all women married, or that all widows remarried, but as Mary Ryan points out, "one of the most widespread contradictions of the doctrine of women's sphere" is that countless women either remained single or were widowed early. "The doctrine of the spheres must have

121 Ibid., 3-4.
rung a little hollow for thousands of women who made their living and built their lives on the fringes or amid the remnants of domesticity."  

In a sentimental novel the heroine leaves or is thrust out of her original home and must work her way into a new one, which she usually does by supporting herself briefly and then marrying. *Ruth Hall* differs from Baym's paradigm in that Ruth is a mature woman before disaster strikes. The typical heroine according to Baym is a child or young woman who comes of age in the course of the story. If Ruth does not change from child to woman, however, this certainly does not mean that she is not transformed; she goes from dependent to independent, naive to practical, silent to vocal, hollow to fulfilled, all by earning a living at a creative profession that requires an understanding of self disassociated from the domestic sphere. This is what Fanny Fern is recommending, but not without qualifications. "If a middle-class woman was widowed early in life, she was hard pressed to support herself and her young children" without remarrying.  

Fern, whose second marriage was so disastrous, offers an alternative: women should seek financial independence and establish a home of their own. Fern was aware, however, that there were many obstacles in the path of a woman who tried to follow this advice.

Although the country clergyman who makes the remark is referring to himself, Mr. Clark seems to speak for Fanny Fern when he complains, "there is no verse in the whole Bible truer, or more dishonored in the observance, then this, 'the laborer is worthy of his hire'" (124-125). In the course of *Ruth Hall*, both Ruth and the narrator express sympathy with working people of all kinds, particularly those who earn the least and whose work goes unrecognized. The selfish people in good circumstances who exploit or simply take for granted the labor of the less fortunate receive much less sympathetic treatment.

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122 Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 223.
123 Ibid.
Servants are portrayed as "kind and faithful" (64) people with funny accents and hearts of gold. Most of them are painted as colorful Irish or black stereotypes, with broad ruddy faces or woolly heads and bulging eyes, but servants such as Dinah and Pat at Harry and Ruth's country house, Betty and Gatty in Ruth's cousin Millet's kitchen, and Ruth's nursemaid Biddy are all honest, outspoken, and remarkably insightful. In their respective dialects, the servants make telling pronouncements upon the rich, haughty Millet family, Old Dr. Hall and his wife, Mr. Ellet, and Ruth's brother Hyacinth—the people who shun Ruth in her time of desperate need. "May the sowls of 'em niver get out of purgatory" (65), exclaims the Catholic Biddy; "White folks is stony-hearted" (83), declares Gatty.

Besides servants, Fern makes a point of giving credit to an assortment of unheralded workers—people whose work represents labor hidden from public consciousness in a way that parallels the hidden labor of the housewife. The narrator directly addresses the reader to inform them of the existence of the position of "sub-editor," a thankless "nondescript and unrecognized" job performed by "some obscure individual, with more brains than pennies," who is maintained by the nominal, "comfortably-fed" editor "in some garret, just one degree above starving point" (158). The impoverished sub-editor is represented as the one who does all or most of the writing attributed to the editor (who, in this case, is Hyacinth Ellet.) The narrator also laments the plight of the underpaid and unappreciated fireman: "who turned twice to look at brave Johnny Galt, as, with pallid face, and smoky, discolored garments, he crawled to his obscure home, and stretched his weary limbs on his miserable couch? . . . God bless our gallant, noble, but unhonored firemen." (199).

Even before Ruth is forced to find work herself, we hear that she is a pleasure to work for. "Missis Hall goes singing about the house so that it makes time fly," Dinah tells old Mrs. Hall, adding that out of concern for her mistress, she will not let Ruth do the ironing: "She? 'spose dis chil' let her? when she's so careful, too, of old
Dinah's bones?" (33). Once Ruth has been reduced to virtual starvation and has tried without success to get any form of work that would pay adequately, her sympathy and appreciation of the hard-working poor becomes even more apparent. When she finally begins to write, she feels for the typesetters whose work puts her articles in print: "poor things, they worked hard, too--they had their sorrows, thinking, long into the still night, as they scattered the types . . . of their dependent wives and children" (125). The description of a tenement across from Ruth's boarding house offers an array of poor laborers performing work that pays so little they are "barely able to prolong their lease of life from day to day:"

At one window sat a tailor, with his legs crossed, and a torn straw hat perched awry upon his head, cutting and making coarse garments for the small clothing-store in the vicinity. . . . At another, a pale-faced woman, with a handkerchief bound round her aching face, bent over a steaming wash-tub, while a little girl of ten, staggering under the weight of a basket of damp clothes, was stringing them on lines across the room to dry. . . . And there, too, sat a young girl, from dawn till dark, scarcely lifting that pallid face and weary eyes--stitching and thinking, thinking and stitching. God help her! (90).

The circumstances in which Ruth finds herself at the lowest point in the story are wretched; she winds up like the girl across the street, "stitching and thinking" for about twenty-five cents a week. Nevertheless, a distinction still exists between Ruth--a genteel, educated daughter of the middle-class--and the "tier above tier" of "pale, anxious, care-worn faces," the "ragged procession of bare-footed women" (90) she sees out her window.

Mary Herbert, a vapid former schoolmate of Ruth, explains to her husband why her friend Mrs. Slade would not give Ruth any needlework to do: "she told me the
other day that she never employed any of those persons who 'had seen better days;' that somehow she couldn't drive as good a bargain with them as she could with a common person, who was ignorant of the value of their labor" (81). Ruth's gentility, then, is an obstacle to her finding work. Ironically, although Ruth may be aware of the value of her labor, she is unable to command fair wages. The "fine work" she can do at home earns her pitifully little: "Only fifty-cents for all this ruffling and hemming, only fifty cents! and I have labored diligently too, every spare moment, for a fortnight" (96).

Ruth's primary difficulty in finding work is not class but gender. The story of Ruth's trials after Harry's death is a clear illustration of the restrictions placed on a woman's ability to earn money. First, of course, there is the cult of true womanhood--a.k.a. the cult of domesticity--which dictates that a woman's place is in the home. For all Ruth Hall's revolutionary implications, it never suggests that Ruth would rather do anything but stay with her children, in or near her home. According to Alice Kessler-Harris, "idealizing the family forced women to articulate reasons for working and to formalize a sense of jobs as instruments for family survival;"124 Fern, therefore, makes sure Ruth seeks work only to feed her hungry children. When she is widowed she is left no choice but to try to make a new home, and this can only be accomplished by re-marrying, which Ruth does not want to do, or by earning money, which Ruth does.

In this respect, as Cogan observes, a working woman could insure rather than destroy domesticity: salaried employment meant that if a husband died, or "when a husband drank, or gambled, or speculated with the rent money (as many novelists and advice writers suggest was a better than average possibility) a woman could still support her family--or leave and take the children with her."125 Although the novelists

125 Cogan, All-American Girl, 212-213.
and advice writers recommending that women be prepared with appropriate job skills should the need to work arise "strike what seems an early feminist note, we must remember that it is a severely qualified one; their discussion of self-reliance is understood to mean in case of a crisis, not a way of life."\textsuperscript{126}

Cultural attitudes aside, given the fact that many career possibilities require extensive education or training, a woman thrown suddenly into economic straits could not pursue them. A woman like Ruth, skilled only at domestic tasks, is eligible only to teach children, a job to which so many women were limited that opportunities were scarce; to become a servant or to work in a factory, both of which were below her station and probably impossible due to her children; and to sew, which pays almost nothing. A woman was assumed to have a male provider, and "the belief that women belonged at home permitted employers to pay wages that were merely supplemental."\textsuperscript{127} To support herself and her children, then, Ruth must look to something other than "women's work."

Ruth's only vocational training, as it happens, is her three years at the boarding school of Madame Moreau, where fortunately she studied diligently in spite of the fact that "she was every day growing prettier, and all the world knew that it was quite unnecessary for a pretty woman to be clever" (16). Ruth had been enlisted to help her vacuous roommates with their compositions, and they, in turn, had been "struck with the most unqualified amazement and admiration at the facility with which [Ruth] executed this frightful task" (15). If she knew nothing of the business, then, at least she had an awareness of her talent.

Fanny Fern, on the other hand, had actually served an apprenticeship of sorts. From an early age, Sara Willis had helped her father with proofreading for the \textit{Recorder} and the \textit{Youth's Companion}, and occasionally she would write an article when Willis

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 213.
\textsuperscript{127} Kessler-Harris, \textit{Out to Work}, 59.
was short on copy. Sara lived with her parents for six years after school and before marrying, and during that time she was especially active in the family business of writing, editing, and publishing. It is no coincidence that this is the business at which Sara succeeded. Two of her three brothers—the only siblings who would have anticipated having to earn a living—also went into the field; Nathaniel Parker Willis was a celebrated poet and editor of the *Home Journal*, and Richard Storrs Willis published the New York *Musical World and Times*. Including Sara, then, all three siblings who had careers at all had literary careers.\(^{128}\)

However, as Warren notes, "no one—least of all Sara Willis herself—would have dreamed that this unpaid labor for her father was providing useful training for her future career as a journalist."\(^{129}\) Mary Kelley adds that Sara's exposure to her father's publications "was a far cry from being a professional writer," and was of no use to her when she sought work. That Ruth Hall (or Fern) did not immediately think of writing as a career option Kelley blames on the domestic orientation of the socialization of women. Writing is a public business. Ruth thinks it odd that writing had not occurred to her sooner, "yet for a woman of her time it was not odd, not at all."\(^{130}\)

While Sara Willis's early experiences with the literary world probably did help in her career—at least she was aware, as all biographers agree, that she had writing talent—it is true that for Fern to have Ruth overlook writing as an option was not surprising. Kelley labels Fern and her contemporaries "literary domestics," because while they stepped out of the domestic realm to commit the public act of publishing, they wrote about what was familiar to them. "Their perspective was private and familial, their allegiance was to the domestic sphere, but they were also women who,  

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\(^{128}\) Of the third brother, Edward Payson Willis, little is known. Joyce Warren writes that she found very little information about him, except that he seems to have been in Ohio and in France, and in some kind of trouble. He died in 1853 at the age of 36, and, in any event, did not make a name for himself in the literary world. See Warren, *Fanny Fern*, 327 n33.

\(^{129}\) Ibid., 46.

out of step with their culture's past, wrote in public and necessarily wrote about private, domestic, female lives. This statement reflects the contradictory position in which women writers found themselves, but even more it indicates an excruciating consciousness of public and private in regard to gender roles.

Ruth Hall does not immediately turn to writing because she has been raised to expect a private, domestic life—the idyllic life she enjoys at "the Glen" with Harry and Daisy. When forced to go to work, she looks for jobs that will pay a wage for work she already does for her family—teaching or sewing. Although there were other female writers at the time, a literary career for women was still an anomaly that involved both exposing oneself and, implicitly, thinking enough of one's self to feel it worth exposure. No matter how self-depreciating, a woman writer was writing—an act that true-womanhood cultists could label immodest, indelicate, and unfeminine. Thus it was not only lack of training or inclination that limited a woman's employment opportunities, it was gender ideology.

When Ruth writes to her brother to ask for his help in launching a literary career, he responds by telling her that she has "no talent that way" and should seek "some unobtrusive employment" (116). This cutting remark—based on a letter Fern's brother actually wrote—hints at the reasoning behind a gender ideology like true womanhood that relegates women to a private sphere. Hyacinth Ellet, like his real-life counterpart, feels threatened by the prospect of competing with his talented sister on an open market. Horace Gates in Ruth Hall concludes that Hyacinth fears Ruth will eclipse him in the public eye, and "he wants to be the only genius in the family" (159). N. P. Willis, already a famous poet and editor of the Home Journal in New York, refused to help his sister, although, unlike Hyacinth, he does admit that her "writings show talent." 132

131 Ibid., ix.
N. P. Willis wrote to Sara that her "humor runs to vulgarity sometimes . . . in one or two cases they trench very close on indecency," and he was "sorry any editor knows that a sister of mine wrote some of these that you sent me." He is clearly concerned with her lack of feminine propriety at the same time that he is fearful of her competition, which gives a good indication of how and why this particular definition of femininity arose in the first place. Here it is important to note that a gender ideology defines masculinity as well as femininity, and that these definitions are in opposition to one another. Fern's disregard of a proscribed feminine role called into question both the position and the manhood of men in her society, and particularly of the men upon whom she was supposed to be dependent—the men in her family.

Jeanne Boydston observes that the ideology of "separate spheres" became more pronounced as men nervously watched more and more women go to work. "Their very presence in the new paid labor force . . . may have seemed to bespeak an 'unnaturalness' in society--an inability of wage-earning men to establish proper households." Thus, working women "became symbols of the threats posed to a particular concept of manhood--in this instance, a concept that identified male claims to authority and power with the status of sole wage-earner." Although Ruth's male relatives do not want the responsibility of earning money for her, neither do they wish to appear unable to do so. Inadequacy as a provider implies a failure to fulfill a masculine ideal.

*Ruth Hall* toys with gender ideology by satirizing current ideals and implicitly proposing new ones. Each failure of Ruth's male relatives is contrasted with an act of the appropriate masculine behavior by another character. When Katy's grandfather Ellet begrudges her a dollar, a strange gentleman tactfully slips a much larger bill into

133 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 154-155.
her bag and treats her so affectionately that "she wished the kind gentleman were her grandpapa" (89). Where Ruth's own father recommends that she give both her children up, the mysterious lodger upstairs politely offers to treat Nettie's illness for free. Ruth reflects that Mr. Bond has such an "air of goodness and sincerity about him" that he seemed to be just "what Ruth had sometimes dreamed a kind father might be" (127).

The most notable contrasts, however, are not set against the elder Ellet but against his son, Ruth's brother Hyacinth. Fern's opinion of "fashionable" people is represented in this reprehensible character. Hyacinth's central role in the high society of *Ruth Hall*--his marriage to an heiress, his control of a literary magazine, his advice on social-climbing to the Millet family--condemns the whole of it by association. Where Fern blamed two deaths in Ruth's family on Dr. Hall, she blames all of Ruth's social difficulties on Hyacinth. John Walter, who evinces a "warm, brotherly interest" (143) in Ruth, spends several chapters actively repudiating the harm done to Ruth's reputation by her real brother. As she did with her inadequate father, Ruth wishes to replace Hyacinth with John: "how sweet it would be to have him for a brother; a --real, warm-hearted, brotherly brother" (144).

Hyacinth is by far the most scathing caricature in the novel and the one responsible for a large portion of the scandal that followed the publication of *Ruth Hall*. N. P. Willis, on whom Hyacinth is unapologetically based, was both successful and unpopular enough to cause a great deal of interest and delight in his public humiliation. Several months before the publication of *Ruth Hall*, Fern published an article entitled "Apollo Hyacinth" that anticipates the character of Hyacinth Ellet, and "New Yorkers had no difficulty recognizing N. P. Willis in the self-centered social climber and dandy portrayed in her sketch." All sources agree that Willis was an almost unbelievably avaricious, lecherous, affected, and shallow man. Kelley cites an obituary notice by an

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unnamed journalist that seems to indicate that the character of Hyacinth was not so exaggerated as it seems: "A man of no settled convictions, of no depth of character, a gilded butterfly of society, whose only elysium was to bask in the evanescent sunshine of social favor, he became at last a crushed and broken thing, his powdered plumage soiled and battered." 137

Regardless of how accurate a representation of Willis, Hyacinth is an unremitting villain. John Walter implies that Harry Hall had lost all his money through some ruse of the "corrupt" Hyacinth: "had [Hall] been less trusting, less generous, to him, "Floy" [Ruth] might not have been left so destitute at his death" (178). John, like Harry, offers a sharp contrast to Ruth's effeminate, dissipated brother. Hyacinth subsequently rejects an offer of Harry's friend to collect money for Ruth, tries to keep her from writing, attacks her reputation, and, failing that, attempts to take credit for her success. Along with Mrs. Hall, he is the most malicious character in the story.

As the out-dated world of Calvinism is attacked in Dr. Hall and his wife, the contemporary world of fashion is skewered in Hyacinth. He is described by Dr. Hall as "a sensuous fop," an "ineffable puppy," an "a mincing, conceited, tip-toeing, be-curled, be-perfumed popinjay--faugh!" (70). His "toadyisms, fopperies, and impudence" (179) have earned him a bad reputation, although the most fashionable people seem to venerate him and "they make a great fuss about his writings" (70). Aside from being a terrible brother, he is definitely not Fern's idea of a man. This is made clear by the contrast presented by the novel's two ideal men, Harry Hall and John Walter.

Both Harry and John are referred to as "manly." It is the first word used to describe Harry, the second to describe John (the first is "bold"). Both these men are also "noble," fearless, honest and generous. They are respectful of women and cherish children. These are all qualities Fern attributes to true manhood. Needless to say,

137 Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage, 198.
Hyacinth does not live up to this ideal. It is notable that the two characters that most persecute Ruth are a woman who is portrayed as unfeminine and a man who is foppish and effeminate. Not only are Mrs. Hall and Hyacinth clearly represented as unnatural, they are the ones who try to remold Ruth into their conception of a proper woman.

Mrs. Hall, as discussed above, wants Ruth to restrain her hair, keep a rag-bag, restrict her reading to "an excellent sermon on predestination" and "a treatise on "The Complaints of Women"" (21) and refrain from "gad[ing] in the street." "Wives should be keepers at home, Ruth" (20), she admonishes. Hyacinth, on the other hand, critiques his sister's clothing, tells her she must learn to waltz, worries that her "hair is parted unevenly and needs brushing sadly" (58) when her husband has just died, and is "annoy[ed] and mortif[ied] exceedingly" (159) by her terribly obtrusive, unfeminine literary success. Both of the conceptions of womanhood endorsed by Mrs. Hall and Hyacinth are largely concerned with appearances, and both are—in Fern's opinion—incredibly artificial. As discussed above in reference to Calvinism, according to Fern artifice is odious.

It is interesting that Hyacinth is not only affected but effeminate. Combined with her veneration of nature, this gives force to the argument that Fern saw “true” gender roles as essential rather than socially constructed. It is also particularly notable that the literary journal Hyacinth edits—N. P. Willis's *Home Journal*—is entitled *Irving Magazine*. It cannot be accidental that Fern named the magazine after Washington Irving, the man who is credited with being the first professional American writer and who styled himself quite deliberately as an amateur and an idler. Hyacinth is the personification of Irving's literary persona, the amateur and idler Geoffry Crayon; Willis, in fact, created a persona he called the Idle Man. Hyacinth also embodies the earlier writer's misogynistic opinions about femininity and exposes his problematical

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138 Ironically, N.P. Willis titled a collection of his work *The Rag Bag* in 1859, thus fulfilling Mrs. Hall's ideal of true womanhood.

The position of the male writer in the mid-nineteenth century, as Ann Douglas and others argue, was similar to that of the disestablished clergy. Both of these professions had in many respects become "feminized." Religion, as discussed above, was becoming increasingly sentimental and falling more into the spiritual hands of women at the same time that books by female writers were flooding the market. Not only did "Willis and his popular sentimental brethren set themselves to please the ladies,"¹³⁹ they understood that their livelihood was entirely dependent on their doing so. As Willis observed, "It is the women who read... It is the women who give or withhold a literary reputation. ... It is the women who exercise the ultimate control over the Press."¹⁴⁰ Willis not only catered to the ladies, however, he inadvertently cast himself in a feminine role—a person ostensibly outside the world of commerce, dealing in sentiment and domestic interests. "The male sentimentalist showed as much guilt about writing as his feminine counterpart, perhaps because he believed it, or knew his society believed it, to be increasingly a feminine occupation."¹⁴¹ Nina Baym notes that Willis was one of only three men whose writing "enjoyed widespread success with women"¹⁴² but, it seems, other men almost universally disliked him as a man.

According to Fanny Fern's gender ideology, N. P. Willis is not a man at all. He is neither honest, generous, noble, nor courageous, and worst of all, he does not respect women. In Hyacinth, this utter failure of masculinity is emphatically highlighted. After Fern has drawn a clear association between femininity and flowers in the early chapters of Ruth Hall, it is difficult to miss the fact that, aside from cherubic little Daisy, the only person named for a flower is not a woman but Hyacinth. If the

¹⁴² Baym, Woman's Fiction, 13.
femininity of the name were not unnatural enough, Fern has chosen a particularly showy, cultivated flower, in contrast to the lovely simplicity of the daisy which grows naturally in the wild. Hyacinth is not only everything that a man should not be, he is everything a woman should not be: he is vain, affected, acquisitive, shallow, and spiritually bereft—a veritable monstrosity of gender ideology. While Fern would like to soften the sharp angles of patriarchal Calvinism and provide women with more freedom and independence, she does not wish to obliterate true masculinity.

Hyacinth's artificial persona, and presumably that of N. P. Willis, indicates that he did inherit some aspects of his father's creed. As painted by Fern, her brother took to heart the contempt for nature inherent in Deacon Willis's theology without absorbing any of the respect for God, love of Christ, or saving grace. He is a shell of his father, with the bad qualities grossly exaggerated and none of the good surviving at all. He has inherited only the artificiality that Fern abhors. Although N. P. Willis followed his father's and grandfather in vocation, he lacked the conviction—either political or religious—that gave their writing purpose, if not depth. It seems that in this respect it was Fanny Fern, who wrote with tremendous conviction of both a political and religious nature, and not her older brother who was the true heir to grandfather Nathaniel's revolutionary fervor.

Once again, an interesting contrast can be found in the Beecher family. While in some ways the career of Henry Ward Beecher parallels that of N. P. Willis, there are some important differences. Like Willis, Beecher followed his Calvinist father's profession, but while religious creed was expendable for a journalist, it was not for a minister. Beecher was able to adapt his father's work to suit himself—he was a highly sentimental and very popular preacher who extolled nature and emphasized God's love. While disagreeing with his father on doctrine, then, Beecher embraced the essence of religious belief and became a successful evangelist. N. P. Willis, on the other hand, adopted a mere veneer of religiosity and mouthed devotional platitudes while continuing
in a shamefully dissipated life (according to his critics, at least.) At the age of twenty-five, Beecher was installed in his first pulpit; at twenty-three, Willis was excommunicated.

Both N. P. Willis and Henry Ward Beecher were successful in manipulating sentimental forms. Beecher emphasized religious emotion in his preaching and encouraged his auditors to enjoy the world God gave them. "He made religion an agent of personal liberation and fulfillment." Believing that people can be converted through pleasurable means, Beecher was also active in the literary world, writing regularly for the New York Ledger along with Fanny Fern, editing a religious journal called The Christian Union (later The Outlook), and even publishing the sentimental novel Norwood, in which he expounded his views on the connection between faith and nature. Like Ruth Hall, Beecher found the natural world spiritual and inspirational. In a letter he writes,

There is something enchanting to me in the free outdoor singing of birds. That God made such things indicates what thoughts pass through his mind and what his disposition is. How beautiful was the new grass. I longed to lie down on it. I did so.... I think that the Bible is God's spelling-book. After we have learned our letters there, and how to read, then the material world and human life reveal more of God than we can learn anywhere else--at any rate, the most dear and touching views of Divine Nature.

Like all men who dabbled in the field of sentimental fiction, Beecher trod a fine line between appealing to women and appearing effeminate himself. Where N. P. Willis

(despite his success with women) was almost invariably referred to as a dandy and a fop, Beecher managed to separate himself from a harsh patriarchal Calvinism without compromising his masculine image. Indeed, it seems that he liked to toy a bit with people’s expectations of gender, all the while very carefully maintaining his masculinity:

Gardening was one of his passions, especially the cultivations of flowers. . . . he would pluck rare blossoms and buds from his garden and stroll about the streets looking for a suitably benighted passerby in need of floral edification. . . . If he delighted strangers with his affable demeanor, he was also famous as a man of tremendous stamina and physical courage. . . . Beecher could be by turns sentimental, skittish, bellicose, pompous, or jaunty. He loved making money and spending it with a free hand. . . . At the same time, he dressed simply, ate sparingly, and paid great attention to his physical fitness so that he would be true to manly values. 145

Beecher’s “combination of a mild, yielding nature with the truculent, masculine image” 146 made it possible for him to share his delight in flowers without being effeminate. In this balance, which her brother so utterly failed to achieve, Fern identified true manhood. She always liked Beecher, and she was not alone; he was tremendously popular with women. Beecher had successfully adapted gender ideology. N. P. Willis had not.

The feminist implications of Fern’s gender ideology beg the question: why does *Ruth Hall* stop where it does? Ruth could have rejected the margin to which she is relegated, she could have stood up and demanded her rights. At least, as Gatty

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146 Ibid.
suggested, she could have hung her laundry out in public and shamed her pretentious family. But Ruth adheres to certain element of femininity as defined by true womanhood. She "knows no more about the law than a baby" (76) and therefore allows Mr. Devlin to send all of Harry's clothes to her in-laws. Her decision to ask for assistance from Mrs. Millet in starting a private school disappears in a "sudden sinking of the heart"(76); her resolve to ask Mr. Millet or Mr. Devlin for their endorsement for a public school job "vanished into thin air, at [Millet's] icy reserve" (100). She blushed but endures uncomplainingly the humiliation of taking her articles door to door in search of a publisher:

It was very disagreeable applying to the small papers, many of the editors of which . . . were incapable of comprehending that their manner towards Ruth had been marked by any want of that respectful courtesy due to a dignified woman. From all such contact Ruth shrank sensitively; their free-and-easy tone fell upon her ear so painfully, as often to bring the tears to her eyes (122).

When Ruth does succeed, the masculine task of avenging herself on those who had injured her is left to the bold, manly John Walter--although in writing Ruth Hall, Fern actually reserved that privilege for herself. As Kelley remarks, "these characterizations can only be called an act of revenge, however true to life the portrayals may have been."147

Issues of the legal and economic status of women in nineteenth-century America are touched on in Ruth Hall, mostly by minor characters. The story of Ruth's friend Mary Leon is the most direct attempt to bring up the issue of women's legal standing. Mary Leon is a friend Ruth meets at the hotel in which she lives with Harry after the death of Daisy. Mary is the wife of a rich but unloving man who considers her a

147 Kelley, Private Woman, Public Stage, 154.
"necessary appendage" to his establishment. After Harry's death, Ruth visits the
"insane hospital" because Katy admires the pretty gardens, and discovers that a Mrs.
Leon has just died an inmate there. Ruth asks to see the body. While being guided
through the asylum by the matron (a Miss Asphyxia-type called Mrs. Bunce) Ruth is
frightened by the "gibbering" of an insane woman screaming for her child. Mrs. Bunce
explains:

   Her husband ran away from her and carried off her child, to spite her, and now
she fancies every footstep she hears is his. . . . She went to the law about the
child, and the law, you see, as it generally is, was on the man's side; and it just
upset her. She's a sight of trouble to manage. . . . but we don't have to whip
her very often (111).148

Mary, it turns out, had left Ruth a note--unheeded by Mrs. Bunce "for they don't know
what they are saying." It says, "I am not crazy, Ruth . . . . I cannot die here; for the
love of heaven, dear Ruth, come and take me away" (112). In this one chapter, then,
the reader is presented with two instances of husbands who essentially murder their
wives because they have grown tired of them: the crazy woman's husband "ran off"
and Mr. Leon went to Europe and left Mary "for her health," and both men are free and
clear. The legal status of women is obviously a problem, but both of these heinous
husbands ultimately had the power to cast aside their wives because they maintained
financial control over them. Ruth Hall indicates that the root of the problem is a
woman's economic dependence on her husband.

As Fern took on the ideal of true womanhood in Ruth Hall, it seems surprising
that she dealt so little with the women's rights activists who were engaged in the same

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148 Prior to the writing of Ruth Hall, it was generally true that the law favored the father, but that
was changing as the notion of the importance of motherhood gained prominence: "During mid-century,
courts began to reject the longstanding idea that fathers 'owned' children and should automatically
receive custody of them. Instead, many judges adopted the 'tender years' principle, meaning that
mothers, except those who were totally unsuitable, would receive custody of young children." Glenda
attempt to redefine women's place in society. But Fern's stance on the proto-feminism of her day is guarded. Ruth expresses sympathy with Lucy Stone, declaring that "it really did appear that those Bloomers of hers had a mission!" but she adds immediately, "still, I could never put them on" (173). Her view of professional women is anything but sympathetic. Mrs. Waters, Ruth's landlady who "styled herself a female physician" is described in the most unfeminine of terms: she is "barber-pole-ish and ramrod-y," "stringy" and "bolster-y," her hands look like "the yellow claws of defunct chickens" and "her feet were of turtle flatness" (113). "I am a physician--none the worse for being female," she declares; but Ruth neither sympathizes with her nor respects her professional qualifications.

In fact, Fem shows tell-tale remnants of her Puritan heritage by labeling the ambitious Mrs. Waters a witch. "She kept a sort of witch's cauldron constantly boiling over the fire, in which seethed all sorts of 'mints' and 'yarbs;''" she spends her leisure time studying medical books, attending lectures, and "fondling a pet skull," and she has the eyes of a "provoked" (113) cat. Ruth is not only unimpressed by Mrs. Waters, she is afraid of her. Mrs. Waters not only represents a woman attempting to force her way into a masculine role, she is an old, rural woman (as indicated by her dialect) and she is going about her rejection of femininity in an obsolete and ineffective manner. While Fern rejects the timid and delicate true woman, then, she does not propose that femininity be cast aside altogether, and certainly not in the aberrant old-fashioned way of Mrs. Waters. The way to an improved situation for women is not to adopt a traditionally masculine demeanor--it must be to redefine the limits of femininity.

For *Ruth Hall* to end with Ruth's financial success--and her clear intention never to remarry--was radical. The last chapter of the novel finds Ruth about to move to a different part of the country, and she takes the children to visit Harry's grave. Ruth's final action is to indicate (with a "mute appeal") to her friend Mr. Walter that she wishes to be buried next to her husband, implying that she has no intention of spending
the rest of her life (and eternal rest) with anyone but Harry. The self-assertion of her decision to remain unmarried is buried under all the flowery sentimental language the novel lapses into every time Ruth's dead husband is mentioned. Ruth's ambition, which she refers to as a "hollow thing" (182) is always glossed over by thoughts of beloved Harry, suggesting that it is only of necessity that she writes at all.

Nevertheless, she does write, and she succeeds. She shames her hypocritical relatives, buys bank stock, and anticipates establishing a home in a new city: "Home? Her heart leaped!—comforts for Nettie and Katy,—clothes—food,— earned by her own hands!" (181). While the message is certainly couched in sentimental forms, Ruth's financial independence is an obvious victory.

Ruth depends upon her friend John Walter for advice and companionship, but the association is voluntary—she is not dependent on him. The relationship of Ruth and Mr. Walter is a model of the gender relations that Fern envisions in Ruth Hall: they are friends, equals, business associates. Fern's rejection of Calvinism does not mean that she rejects her family heritage entirely. She did inherit, and benefit from, both the Republican ideology and the literary acumen of her father. Although mortified by his daughter's divorce and her portrait of Mr. Ellet, Deacon Willis was pleased with Fern's success and eventually they were reconciled, he accepting Ruth Hall as fiction. She remained a devout Christian, and in this respect it was she, far more than her famous brother, who best upheld a family tradition of earning a living from publishing a type of moral instruction.

In 1777, Nathaniel Willis Sr. and his partner printed a New Year's salute to their readers in the Independent Chronicle:

[We] cannot pass over, in silent forgetfulness, the cruel, inhuman treatment, that America has experienced . . . from those whom she once embraced as her

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149 Warren, Fanny Fern, 189.
bosom friends; and whose interest would, to this day, have been considered as inseparably connected with her own, had not . . . the great and good law of self-preservation, dictated a total separation. 150

If one replaces "America" with "Ruth Hall"--or better, "American womanhood"--it becomes clear that Ruth Hall is Fanny Fern's adaptation of her grandfather's exhortation. Fern encourages women to heed the "great and good law of self-preservation" rather than the ideal of womanhood being fed to them by people like N. P. Willis. By manipulating the sentimental prose of the day, Fern argues that "all, who have spirit, resolution, fortitude, and virtue," 151 including women, should take advantage of the rising commercial economy and declare their own (financial) independence.

150 Buckingham, Specimens of Newspaper Literature, 251.
151 Ibid.
Conclusion: The Spirit of Capitalism and the Spirituality of Literary Success

In the first chapter of *Ruth Hall*, the reader is informed of Ruth's personal history—her "plain" and "awkward" childhood, her loneliness, and her longing for love. While away at school, "her lithe form had rounded into symmetry and grace, her slow step had become light and elastic, her eye bright, her smile winning, and her voice soft and melodious", whereupon she brightens into an assured and optimistic young woman: "She, Ruth, could inspire love! Life became dear to her. There was something worth living for . . . her twin-soul existed somewhere" (15-16). As the very next chapter finds Ruth at the altar, next to one who "bends an earnest gaze on her who realizes all his boyhood dreams" (17), it seems that Ruth has located her twin-soul in Harry Hall. The quest for the twin-soul had been proposed as her "motive," her "aim," "something to look forward to," and only one page later that quest seems happily terminated. What, then, is the purpose of the rest of the book?

Already Fanny Fern has got the essence of a conventional sentimental plot out of the way. But with the birth of Daisy, the idea of a twin-soul becomes more complex. Daisy seems to somewhat eclipse Harry in Ruth's eyes: she is "her soul's child" (30), the one who teaches Ruth to pray. It begins to seem that motherhood and not romance is the path to the spiritual completion that "twin-soul" implies. Although Daisy is short-lived (she survives only a few chapters), hints of spiritualism keep her fluttering at the edge of the story. When Harry also dies, Ruth's only remaining deeply felt spiritual attachment is to God. Emotional fulfillment, it now seems, cannot occur in this life—she must join her spirit family in the next world.
Up to this point, *Ruth Hall* is a fairly typical sentimental novel. Ruth is a True Woman whose concerns, attachments, and emotional energy are all focused on her family and her piety. But then, Ruth finds her voice—she begins to write, and her spirit-world is no longer limited to her family. "Your printed words come to me, in my sick chamber, like the ministrations of some gentle friend," writes one reader, who adds "mysterious voices, audible only to the dying ear, are calling me away" (136). Ruth has been able to visit and comfort a living soul; not as a spirit like her dear departed husband and daughter who visit her dreams, but as a writer. She begins to get all kinds of letters, telling her of the connection she has made—the *spiritual* connection. Ruth Hall, then, finds not only financial independence, she finds in writing a kind of emotional fulfillment assumed by the conventional wisdom of her time to be possible only through devotion to family and devotion to God.

Fanny Fern was a modern woman, seeking to adapt her own place in society as rapid changes in theology, politics, and economics threatened to leave her and other middle-class American women out of the new structure. As Florence Bannard Adams, one of the first twentieth century scholars to discover Fern's work, put it, "she wrote with an unswerving purpose and unerring aim—women must be made ready for and become equal to the battle ahead to gain their rightful place in the new and changing world around them."152 Fern was also a "true woman," by her own definition and certainly by twentieth-century ideals, if not by the gender ideology of her time. She died in 1872, and although she had been happily remarried and was reconciled with her family since the time of *Ruth Hall*, she went by her pen name, in public and in private, until the day she died. On her tombstone in Mount Auburn Cemetery, the only name is Fanny Fern, and it is as Fanny Fern that she is able to visit her living twin-soul, her readers.

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