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Writing from the spirit, writing from the soul: Five nineteenth century American women writers as purveyors of spirituality and feminism

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Writing from the Spirit, Writing from the Soul:
Five Nineteenth Century American Women Writers As
Purveyors of Spirituality and Feminism

by Terry D. Novak

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
English.

Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 1995

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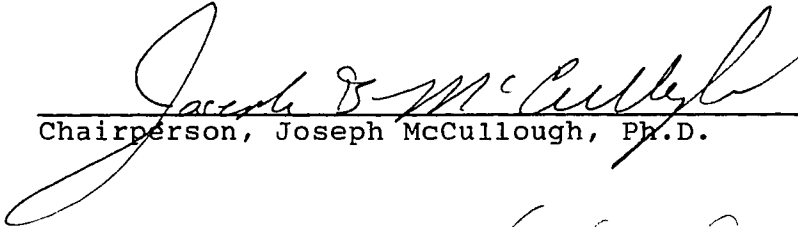
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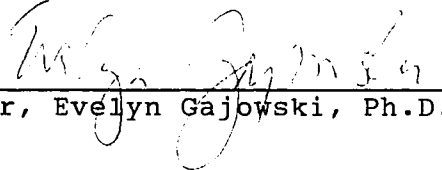
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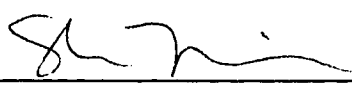
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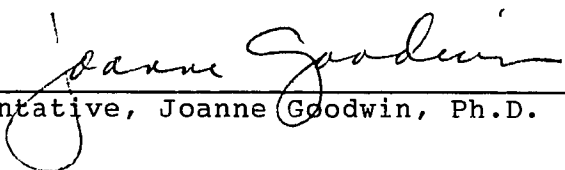
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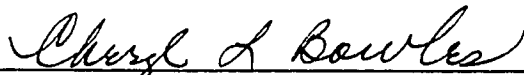
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May 1995

Abstract

Writing from the Spirit, Writing from the Soul: Five Nineteenth Century American Women Writers focuses on the fiction writing of Fanny Fern (Ruth Hall), Harriet Wilson (Our Nig), Rebecca Harding Davis (Margret Howth), Frances E. W. Harper (Iola Leroy), and Kate Chopin (The Awakening). Each writer is studied through her life and through the women characters she writes to come to an understanding of how each author uses her unique sense of spirituality and her unique life experiences to formulate a picture of women's life and experiences in nineteenth century America.

The concept of writing from the spirit and writing from the soul is explored with each writer and her work in much the same way that French feminist critics of modern day have explored women's writing from the standpoint of "l'écriture feminine." This work takes off on the ideas of the French feminists to deepen an understanding of the uniqueness and validity of women's writing, especially women writers of the past century. Biographical, historical, social, and theological considerations constitute the basis of this study.

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Chapter One

Tracking the Spirit and the Soul

"Woman must write her self," espouses French
feminist critic Hélène Cixous,

must write about women and bring women to
writing, from which they have been driven away
as violently as from their bodies--for the same
reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal
goal. Woman must put herself into the text--as
into the world and into history--by her own
movement. (245) (emphasis mine)

For Cixous, the act of a woman writing is an act rendered
through a woman's sexuality and "womanly being" in order
to "[give] her access to her native strength" and to
"tear her away from the superegoized structure in which
she has always occupied the place reserved for the
guilty" (250). Such an act frees not only the woman but
the female artist and, in turn, literature itself, for it
opens literature to a new path, one which does not follow
the linear edicts of a masculine writing. The resulting
product opens new possibilities to literature, especially
in its form and structure.

While Cixous concerns herself primarily with the
sexuality, in an effort to break from the linear

restraints of the accepted patriarchal definition of writing and literature, one can easily go beyond this concept of women's writing to include the concept of woman writing from her spirit and from her soul. When a woman writes from her spirit and from her soul, she does more than write textually as a woman. She rises from the freedom of form and structure that Cixous heralds to travel even further with her female self. The woman who writes from her spirit draws upon her own unique spirituality--her own sense of purpose and salvation, her own sense of god(dess) and worship, and her own healthy sense of fitting into this spirituality--to reveal prophetic decrees of right and wrong, good and evil, acceptable and unacceptable in her writing. Writing from such a spirit, the woman writer often shuns the accepted and "taught" patriarchal spirituality--or religion--of her day to give birth to a fresher, more grounded spirituality attuned to her female nature.

Writing from her soul, the woman writer delves into the true life experiences of herself and of her women friends to present through literature a much broader picture of history than is usually accepted--one which includes women as a matter of fact and one which places woman in her rightful place in history. Such attention to the soul often deepens women's literature to an unabashed autobiographical level; at the very least, it deepens women's literature to a sociological and

historical level.

Such a concept of unique (as compared to male-oriented and traditionally canonical) writing evidences itself in the work of the five nineteenth-century women writers who are the subjects of this particular study: Fanny Fern (author of Ruth Hall), Harriet Wilson (author of Our Nig), Rebecca Harding Davis (author of Margret Howth), Frances E. W. Harper (author of Iola Leroy), and Kate Chopin (author of The Awakening).

While these five individual women writers do indeed exhibit early evidence of women attempting to write as women, from their own female experiences of sexuality, marriage, and motherhood, much more in evidence is their ability and ease with writing from their unique female spirits and souls. Writing from the spirit, these women tap into their spirituality to embark upon themes resonant with the ideas of feminist theology as well as with those purest human ideals that the Jesus of their various Christian religions espoused: ideals such as equality and acceptance of the other. Despite the fact that feminist theology is most often deemed a late twentieth century phenomenon, the teachings of feminist theology, and, to some extent, the practice of such, is far from new, as will be seen later in this chapter. Feminist theology strives to remove God from a patriarchal order and to make God a divine being from

whom all human beings are created images; it also attempts to strengthen the position of woman's natural being as an intricate part of all spirituality and religion, thus giving women more credence in the realm of religion and more access to shared spirituality. The Jesus whom feminist theologians see in Christian scriptures is a Jesus most interested in freeing humans from all sorts of oppression--including gender-based--and in bringing all peoples together as equal individuals. These "modern" thoughts are deeply present in the writings of many nineteenth century women, and in the writings of the five women of this study very clearly.

These five women writers also concentrate on writing from their souls. Writing from the soul, these women enter into a deep social consciousness of their abilities, dreams, aspirations, and rights as female human beings living and working in mid- to late-nineteenth century America. They accurately and conscientiously present to their readers a picture of real life for nineteenth century women--and, sometimes, children--with the result of a body of literature which can serve historical and sociological purposes as well as literary ones, for the writer from the soul is deeply interested in sharing the experiences of her own life as lived in her particular place in history. Put together, the ability to write from both the spirit and the soul

results in writing styles and themes that are personally unique as well as consciously female in origin, allowing the physical aspects of these women as writers to also come into subtle evidence, akin to the modern French feminist criticism style of "writing from the body" with which critics such as the aforementioned Cixous deal extensively.

In order to better understand the tendencies of these five women to write from the spirit and the soul, it is necessary for the reader to become aware of the true religious and social climate within which these women existed due to their particular placement in history. Although there is a general tendency to think of the nineteenth century as a great vehicle for the mainstreaming of Christianity from its Puritan roots and its refinement through the Great Awakenings into a divided structure that was well suited to the patriarchal climate in politics and society, and although one tends to think of feminine theology as a purely twentieth century phenomenon, Christianity in the nineteenth century, while indeed a great experiment in mainstreaming and socializing, also served in many ways as a vehicle for change, particularly insofar as the rights of the oppressed (specifically slaves and women) were concerned. The development of religions that saw women as equal to men (such as the Shakers) and of religions that specifically uplifted the black race (such the

African Methodist Episcopal Church) made nineteenth century America particularly interesting. Such teachings and others complementary to modern day feminist theology were abundant. Long before Phyllis Tribble's "rereading" of the creation myth in Genesis 2-3, long before Elaine H. Pagels and Merlin Stone concerned themselves with the concept of God as mother/woman, long before Carol P. Christ and Mary Daly centered discussions around women's experiences as an intricate part of their spirituality,¹ other women, largely ignored in such context by history, were preaching the tenets of feminist theology in their own right. Historian Gerda Lerner, in her book The Creation of Feminist Consciousness, cites the twelfth century mystic Hildegard of Bingen and the fourteenth century Christine de Pizan as the first women to interpret Christianity and scriptures from a feminist point of view (142,143). Many women have followed suit, on into our contemporary times, most with a tendency for redundancy that Lerner explains as follows:

Over and over again, individual women criticized and reinterpreted the core biblical texts not knowing that other women before them had already done so. In fact, present-day feminist Bible criticism is going over the same used for centuries by women engaged in the same endeavor. (165)

Many of these women, perhaps unbeknownst to late twentieth century feminist theologians, were writing and preaching in nineteenth century America. That such knowledge has largely been kept from the more common retelling of history follows Elaine Pagel's theory on the

passing down of church history:

It is the winners who write history--their way. No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity. Ecclesiastical Christians first defined the terms (Naming themselves 'orthodox' and their opponents 'heretics'); then they proceeded to demonstrate--at least to their own satisfaction--that their triumph was historically inevitable, or, in religious terms, 'guided by the Holy Spirit.' (Gnostic 142)

Such historical edicts in the name of true Christianity continue to plague spiritual seekers today and certainly plagued those of the nineteenth century, starting with Judith Sargent Murray. Writing under the name Constantia on the cusp of the nineteenth century, Sargent Murray declares that "[women's] souls are by nature equal to [men's]; the same breath of God animates, enlivenes, and invigorates..." (21), a concept which hardly seems radical but certainly was not taught by nineteenth century Christianity. More radical, especially considering their publication date of 1790, are Sargent Murray's words concerning Eve and the Biblical Fall:

It doth not appear that she [Eve] was governed by any one sensual appetite; but merely by a desire of adorning her mind; a laudable ambition fired her soul, and a thirst for knowledge impelled the predilection so fatal in its consequences. Adam could not plead the same deception; assuredly he was not deceived; nor ought we to admire his superior strength, wonder at his sagacity, when we so often confess that example is much more influential than precept. (23)

Sargent Murray's theory of the true reasons behind the fall far precedes those similar ones espoused by mainstream canonical writer Mark Twain in his

"Autobiography of Eve,"² written in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and, of course, precedes as well the work of late twentieth century feminist theologians such as the aforementioned Phyllis Tribble. In addition, and more important to the study at hand, Sargent Murray's writings pave the way for an understanding of further feminine theological thought throughout the nineteenth century under the direction of such women as Sarah Grimké.

As Gerda Lerner points out, Sarah Grimké, along with her sister Angelina, was far better known in her time for her passionate and staunch anti-slavery lectures (160-161), fueled by the bitter personal experience of growing up in a slaveholding family and witnessing firsthand the travesties that accompany ownership of one human being by another. But like many other anti-slavery activists of the nineteenth century, Grimké found the parallels between black oppression and the oppression of women too keen to ignore. This feminism transcended itself to her spiritual life, where she found most nourishment and acceptance as a Quaker (Lerner 160), and which she helped to develop through the writing of her Letters on the Equality of the Sexes. According to Lerner, this "was the most radical feminist work of her [Grimké's] time...it was little known in her own day and entirely neglected for over a hundred years" (160). Despite the low profile of the work, the fact that such

feminist theological work being written and published at all is an important consideration in piecing together a picture of nineteenth century American religious life and what it meant to women. In Letter XV, Grimké tackles the issue of women's ordination by declaring

It is manifest, that if women were permitted to be ministers of the gospel, as they unquestionably were in the primitive ages of the Christian church, it would interfere materially with the present organized system of spiritual power and ecclesiastical authority which is now vested solely in the hands of men. (1891)

With her one brief statement, Grimké challenges patriarchal authority and power struggles as reasons to keep the oppressed down. On "the mistaken notion of the inequality of the sexes," Grimké writes,

As there is an assumption of superiority on the one part, which is not sanctioned by Jehovah, there is an incessant struggle on the other to rise to that degree of dignity, which God designed women to possess in common with men, and to maintain those rights and exercise those privileges which every woman's common sense, apart from the prejudices of education, tells her are inalienable; they are a part of her moral nature, and can only cease when her immortal mind is extinguished. (1892)

These thoughts of Grimké's find echoes ten years later at the much more widely known Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. At this historic meeting which was to set the stage for further convening, on a national level, over the issues of women's rights, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and other leaders of the convention succeeded in drafting and passing for approval a "Declaration of Sentiments" and a set of resolutions which put forth complaints not

only about the treatment of women by society but also about her treatment by religion (Behnke 64-68).

Declaring boldly that "all men and women are created equal," the "Declaration of Sentiments" goes on to assert, among a list of grievances against Man, that

He allows her in Church, as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church" (204)

and that

He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her conscience and to her God. (204)

The members of the convention further clarify their thoughts on women in religion and in society by stating among their resolutions

That, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means; and especially in regard to the great subjects of morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to participate with her brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by writing and by speaking, by any instrumentalities proper to be used, and in any assemblies proper to be held; and this being a self-evident truth growing out of the diversity implemented principles of human nature, any custom or authority adverse to it, whether modern or wearing the hoary sanction of antiquity, is to be regarded as a self-evident falsehood, and at war with mankind.

Such thoughts ring with familiarity to those acquainted with late twentieth century feminist theology; that they were such an integral part of the general women's rights

movement of the nineteenth century proves further not only that feminist theology is hardly a new phenomenon but also that such a theology was definitely on the minds of the more educated women of the nineteenth century--women such as the five authors who are the subjects of this study.

The concern with equality in religion ran throughout the entire century, all the way through to the publication of Cady Stanton's The Woman's Bible in the 1890's. A product of a good old American Calvinist upbringing, Cady Stanton evolved in her adulthood to embrace the "view [that] God was feminine as well as masculine, the apex of a system of masculine and feminine forces which permeated the universe and kept it in equilibrium (Banner 159). Cady Stanton wrote The Woman's Bible, more accurately a feminist commentary on the accepted books of the standard Bible, in conjunction with a "Revising Committee" of various female scholars and ministers; the women used as their reference Bible the only woman's translation of the Bible--that of scholar Julia Smith (Stanton 149). Smith's translation, an independent effort, was effected in 1843, at the height of the Millerite sect's hysterically preached prediction of the world's termination. Smith, a graduate of Emma Willard's famous Troy Seminary, wanted to see for herself what the Scriptures said. She translated on a strictly literal basis, a method which appealed greatly to Cady

Stanton and her committee (Stanton 150).

The Woman's Bible itself combines many "techniques" in order to make its commentaries fresh and lively. These do not seem, however, to be planned techniques; rather, the writing styles come from the heart and soul of the women commentators as they unconsciously pen what amounts to early scholastic forms of "l'écriture féminine," or writing in a non-linear fashion that allows woman to bring forth her own style without fear of breaking accepted tradition. The authors of The Woman's Bible were not concerned with breaking tradition--whether theologically or stylistically. Commentaries range from a discussion of the first creation account set forth in Genesis, where Cady Stanton points out the obvious, although often overlooked, fact of simultaneous male and female creation, undeniably proving in Cady Stanton's mind the joint masculine and feminine qualities of God, to several discussions on the Biblical credos of the Apostle Paul. When commentator Lucinda B. Chandler takes on Paul's Letters to Timothy, specifically those putting woman "in her proper place," she makes a brilliant argument against the illogical reasoning of Paul:

Paul exhibits fairness in giving reasons for his peremptory mandate. 'For Adam was first formed, then Eve,' he says. This appears to be a weak statement for the higher position of man. If male man is first in station and authority, and is superior because of priority of formation, what is his relation to 'whales and every living creature that moveth which the waters bring forth and every winged fowl after his kind,' which were formed before him? (Stanton 165)

Such is the type of irreverent yet refreshing feminist Bible scholarship that was published and likely known--at least by reputation and idea--by Frances Harper at the time of her writing Iola Leroy and by Kate Chopin at the time of her writing The Awakening.

In addition to the aforementioned examples of nineteenth century white women participating in feminist aspects of religion, several black women were actively pursuing the right to discourse on the gospels as well as the right to preach, mostly through the use of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church as a vehicle for their emancipation into the "man's world" of religion. The A.M.E. Church began in Philadelphia in the year 1814, founded under the direction of black Methodist preacher Richard Allen to specifically serve the needs of black Christians of the Methodist persuasion (Ahlstrom 708-9). According to Jualynne Dodson, "the origins of the [A.M.E.] church were deeply rooted in protests against discriminatory treatment of black people in religious affairs" (334). That black Americans in the early nineteenth century felt significantly empowered by their spiritual beliefs to organize and lead a respectably sized new denomination is in itself impressive; even more impressive, however, is the fact that black women seemed to feel especially empowered by the spirit of God and thus began to seek their own places in the hierarchal structure of the church.

Because of the existence of so many women who felt called to preach, at the first General Conference of the A.M.E. clergy in 1844, Nathan Ward petitioned for the right of women to preach; his petition was denied but continued to be brought forth at the church's conferences, so much so that the General Conference in 1860 "mandat(ed) that the pastor in charge of a local congregation may nominate a Board of Stewardesses" (Dodson 338). Such a board was to be placed under the strict control of male leadership, however, and ordination was specifically denied. The 1884 General Conference "approved licensing women as local preachers," largely because so many were already "unofficially" preaching or had already been given licenses by certain ministers; congressional approval would allow for control over these activities (Dodson 343). Apparently, room was left for a feeling of threat to male power, for the 1888 General Conference "reinforced the boundaries..., rigidly reaffirming the denomination's prohibition against women's ordination" (Dodson 344). Published records of the debate over women's ordination and the place of women in church life can be found in several issues of The A.M.E. Church Review.³

Despite the arguments and the controversy, it cannot be denied that nineteenth century black women did indeed hold important spiritual roles in the Christian church in general and in the A.M.E. church in particular. The fact

that the roles were not usually sanctioned or respected by the male authority figures of the church made little difference in the mission these women felt inclined to fulfill, for they were convinced they were following the sanctions of a much higher authority. Three of the more famous of those women are Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia A.J. Foote, all of whom felt a definite calling, all of whom became itinerant preachers, all of whom felt the need to use her preaching to help the cause of abolition, and all of whom left behind a spiritual autobiography.⁴ Like our modern day feminist theologians, these women had their own Biblical-based logic for women preaching. Jarena Lee writes in her autobiography,

For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God...Did not Mary first preach the risen Savior...? ...Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? (Andrews 36)

With like logic, Julia A.J. Foote, in her autobiography, exhorts her sisters in Christ to

not let what man may say or do, keep you from doing the will of the Lord or using the gifts you have for the good of others. How much easier to bear the reproach of men than to live at a distance from God. (Andrews 227)

While it is unlikely that Chopin, Fern, or Harding Davis were much aware--if at all--of these workings in the A.M.E. church, surely Wilson and Harper must have been keenly aware of the church's existence, purpose, and activities, even if not of the three specific women

preachers mentioned. It is also likely that all five authors were aware to some extent of the growth of the Quaker and Shaker sects and their implications for women. Both were open to the idea of the dual sex of God and both found a distinctive following among women. The Shakers even had a woman leader, "Mother" Ann Lee. In Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message, Shaker eldress Anna White explains the teachings of Ann Lee, including the tenets that God is both Father and Mother and that woman was created equal to man. In addition to the female leadership found in this Utopian movement, the much more mainstream Methodist church ordained its first woman minister, Anna Howard Shaw, in 1880. Shaw used her pulpit as a vehicle for preaching woman's true usefulness in social and political matters and especially advocated, through her religion, granting women the right to vote (Gifford 302-303).

Often tied in very closely with religious matters of the nineteenth century, the social history of the century was of such a boldly changing nature, for women and black Americans especially, that our five women authors could no more shelter themselves and their realities from those doctrines of change than could any other woman of the century. The diversity as well as the controversy surrounding women's issues helped to shape the souls of the women living through the excitement and the turmoil of their times. Although much of note happened in the

first half of the century, even more substantial changes occurred in the last half of the century, the same period of time during which the novels which are the subject of this study were being written. The now famous Seneca Falls Convention was held in 1848 and served as a political springboard for the active participation of women in the acquisition of their rights and in the struggle to have their say in the running of the country. As early as 1854 feminist leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Ernestine Rose gathered ten thousand signatures on a petition demanding women's suffrage as well as property rights for married women; this petition they presented to the New York legislature (Evans 103).

Working hand-in-hand with the women's political agenda, although not always so obviously, were the many reform movements such as the Boston Society for Prevention of Pauperism and the New York Children's Aid Society that mostly middle-class women were actively running and supporting (Evans 99-101). Working class women found themselves caught up in the beginnings of the American labor movement by participating in such activities as the famous Shoemaker's strike in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1860 (Evans 98-99). Black women, especially after the Civil War, often became active in fighting for black suffrage as well as for necessities such as proper education for their offspring.

Women of all classes and races were urged to buy into the teachings of the Age of Domesticity, setting themselves apart as the higher moral beings who must keep society together. As Sara M. Evans puts it, "if domesticity granted women the indirect power of influence, it also nourished female community in the separate sphere of home, religion, and female association" (96), which could work for or against women's struggle for freedom, depending on how one looks at the matter. It is such thinking that spurred major activism such as Frances Willard's Women's Christian Temperance Union, but it is also such thinking that kept many women confused as to how far, morally, they should push for individuality and freedom and as to what arena they would find their most effectiveness.

It is also interesting to note that the latter half of the nineteenth century opened up higher education to women. Quite a step above the female seminary idea that began in the early part of the century, women's colleges, beginning with the opening of Vassar in 1865, strove to give young women an education equal to that of young men. In addition, the women students at these colleges were offered courses that are the hallmark of modern university education, such as physical education and health and the arts, along with the traditional curriculum, thus obtaining a much broader education than were their male counterparts of the day. Like the female

student at a women's college in our contemporary times, the nineteenth century women's college student found herself drawn to the camaraderie, the freedom, the unique growth opportunities, and the sense of empowerment that comes from such an environment.⁵ Of course, there were co-educational colleges in existence by century's end and a smattering of women such as Elizabeth Blackwell fought their way into male-dominated professional colleges--in Blackwell's case, Geneva Medical College--(Evans 105, but the existence of women-centered higher education indicates more fully the opportunities beginning to truly become available to women.

Amidst all the religious and social changes and innovations of the nineteenth century emerged our five authors. As we all are, they were products of their times, yet, again as we all are, they were also five individuals caught up in the problems and joys of their daily lives. When they wrote from their spirits, they were writing not only as members of a Christianity that was being loudly challenged by many feminists, but also as individuals who found their deepest commitment to the inner life and struggle to be a most personal matter. When they wrote from their souls, they were writing not only as female members of the larger society of nineteenth century women, but also as individual women struggling through their own personal obstacle in order to attempt to emerge as whole and unique human beings.

In the spirit of evangelicalism, these women wrote as preachers of freedom from oppression and struggle through their own personal experiences with their own personal brand of salvation. Writing from their own spirits, writing from their own souls, they created mythological women characters to carry their messages of a good news that could transcend centuries while remaining firmly rooted in the essence of female existence. As this study progresses, these writers will be examined in biographical and evangelical terms, as women writing women from the spirit and from the soul: as Fanny writing Ruth, as Harriet writing Frado, as Rebecca writing Margret, as Fanny writing Iola, and as Kate writing Edna.

Notes

- 1 For essays by these women, see Christ and Plaskow, Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, San Francisco: Harper, 1979.
- 2 For the piece in full, see Baetzhold and McCullough, The Bible According to Mark Twain: Writings on Heaven, Eden, and the Flood, University of Georgia Press, 1995.
- 3 See, for example, Johnson's "Female Preachers" (10-1884) and Brown's "The Ordination of Women..." (4-1886).
- 4 See Sisters of the Spirit, included on works cited page.
- 5 For a good overview of women's education, see Solomon, In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America, New Haven, 1985.

Chapter Two

Fanny Writing Ruth

When Fanny Fern wrote the story of Ruth Hall in the 1854 novel of the same name, she was truly writing her own story. Almost all of Fern's current critics, such as Joyce W. Warren and Nancy Walker make much of the fact of the novel's autobiographical nature. Besides relating her own hardships through Ruth's experiences, though, Fern also quite adeptly illustrates nineteenth century American life for widows, for middle class white women, for working women, and for orphans. She also passionately concerns herself with issues of women's financial and spiritual independence while writing in a style that largely branches away from what has been termed sentimental literature and quite accurately models an early, very feisty form of what is today termed "l'écriture feminine."

The part of her life upon which Fern (born Sara Payson Willis)¹ focuses in Ruth Hall is perhaps the most painful and difficult part of her life. According to biographer Joyce W. Warren, after enduring a harsh Calvinistic upbringing which she survived due to a

uniquely firm set of personal convictions that helped her follow her own heart and soul in matters of daily living, Fern married Charles Eldredge at the age of 26. By all accounts, this was a happy marriage hampered only by the annoyances of Eldredge's financial failings, by the harshness of his parents, and by the death of the couple's oldest daughter, just a year before the death of Charles himself. Left with two young daughters for whom to care and without any financial comforts from Charles's indebted estate, Fern found herself in the midst of an ugly battle between her father, Nathaniel West, and her father-in-law over how much money each could (or, more accurately, could not) afford to contribute towards the livelihood of the widow and orphaned children. This argument was somewhat settled three years later when Fern agreed to marry Samuel P. Farrington purely for the sake of financial security.

Though such a marriage of convenience is not part of Ruth Hall's story, the abhorrence of such as a solution to financial troubles certainly crops up in subtle ways throughout the novel. Fern discovered quite quickly how disastrous such a solution could be and left this second husband after only two years. It is the struggle for financial independence during the next few years of her life that is displayed most climactically by Fern in Ruth Hall. As Fern struggled to begin a writing career, she found no help from either her father or her brother,

N. P. Willis, though both were well established in the writing and publishing business and though both were themselves quite comfortable financially. The ill treatment Fern received at the hands of her first employers is well documented and discussed, with only a light veiling of true identities, in Ruth Hall.²

Because of this autobiographical nature of Fern's first novel, Elizabeth Cady Stanton found it easy in the nineteenth century to declare that "Ruth Hall marked the beginning of a genuine female literature, because it was the first book by a woman to give an honest account of her life" (Huf 19). Perhaps the accompanying intensity of emotion present in such an "honest" appraisal of one's life experiences helped to win Fern the praise of Nathaniel Hawthorne which Joyce W. Warren discusses at length in her work, quoting from a letter Hawthorne wrote to his publisher shortly after reading Ruth Hall:

In my last, I recollect, I bestowed some vituperation on female authors. I have since been reading "Ruth Hall"; and I must say I enjoyed it a good deal. The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading. Generally women write like emasculated men, and are only distinguished from male authors by greater feebleness and folly; but when they throw off the restraints of decency, and come before the public stark naked, as it were--then their books are sure to possess character and value. (Fanny Fern 121)

Such praise, coming from a highly respected canonical writer, seems refreshing at first, especially in light of the largely negative criticism Ruth Hall received

immediately after publication,³ until one considers Nina Baym's point of view that Hawthorne's "praise, like his blame, should be taken with reservations since there is no evidence that he understood the intention of women's fiction" (251). Following this theme of intention, Susan K. Harris sees the real importance of Ruth Hall not so much in the "record of actual experiences," but in the fact that "it (Ruth Hall) records how [Fern] felt about [those experiences]" (111).

It is not just her feelings that Fern makes clear in Ruth Hall, however; she also makes clear her philosophy of how women should lead their lives. As Warren puts it, "Fanny Fern's portrayal of her heroine departs from most [nineteenth century] women's fiction in her encouragement of self-assertion as a positive virtue" (Fanny Fern 133). Most particularly evident in the novel is the exercise of that self-assertion through the realization of and hearty attention to one's passions, for the character Ruth Hall is nothing if not passionate. So deeply ingrained into her personhood are Ruth's passions that they formulate the crux of Ruth's soul and of her sense of spirituality. Fern's belief that "God was a nurturing maternal figure rather than a wrathful patriarch" (Fern xi) finds its way comfortably and evidently in Ruth's personality as she finds her female experiences, trials, and pleasures the basis of and in direct correlation to her understated though quite

existent spirituality. Though Fern makes little overt mention of Ruth's spiritual beliefs or life, the existence of such is quite evident, especially upon close examination of the novel. Truly Fern, the product of a strict Calvinistic upbringing, lends her own views on the spiritual (as opposed to the religious) to the character of Ruth. Fern herself "rejected the fear and horror of Calvinism" that her father tried so hard to instill in her (Warren, Fanny Fern 12) and found instead the philosophy of Catherine Beecher at Hartford Female Seminary, which Fern attended, to be much more palatable. Beecher's views put an "emphasis on character rather than conversion [and] also included an interest in benevolent activities" which boded very well indeed with Fern's way of looking at things (Warren, Fern 29), for, as Nancy A. Walker points out,

from childhood [Fern] was resistant to the atmosphere of piety. James Parton, her third husband, recalled that from childhood on she was 'something of a rebel against the leading doctrine of the orthodox church...She found herself unable to believe either that she was a depraved sinner, or that she was in any danger of everlasting perdition...' (6)

Fern looked to the common sense of her soul and to the purity of justice for her salvation and religion. Ruth Hall looks at her spiritual life in an equally open fashion.

To Ruth, God is a mother-like, nurturing presence who gives rest and shelter from fear to the believer. In the very midst of her troubles, Ruth goes to church on the Sabbath--as is her habit--with little Nettie and

finds solace from her grief:

Sweet and clear fell upon Ruth's troubled ear those blessed words: 'There remaineth, therefore a rest for the people of God.' 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 for us all--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 finds God a natural caregiver, just as she is to her own children. Most often, when Ruth encounters God and/or her spiritual side in the novel, it is through scenes of beauty and nature. Very early in the novel, Ruth is described as having

a strong, earnest nature; she could not look upon this wealth of sea, sky, leaf, bud, or blossom; she could not listen to the little birds, nor inhale the perfumed breath of morning, without a filling eye and a brimming heart, to the bounteous Giver. (29)

And at the very end of the novel, when Ruth silently invokes God's help for the future, she receives in answer "...a little bird..., trill[ing] forth a song as sweet and clear as the lark's at heaven's own blessed gate" (211). This perception of God poses itself in stark contrast to the dark and somber God that Ruth's (and Fern's) relatives perceive, worship, and try to emulate.

The very way in which Ruth approaches life and the very passions with which she fills her soul correlate very nicely with the characteristics of Christ. Both Ruth and Christ love others--children and the helpless

especially--very dearly. Ruth would die for her children if necessary; Christ proves the same devotion in the gospels. Both work hard and find a certain solace in the freeing sensations of nature. Just as Ruth seeks meditative outdoor space after a trying day, so does Christ. Both are decidedly independent beings, and both believe fiercely in working toward justice always. Ruth concerns herself not only with her own problems but with those of others, just as Christ consistently does. Most importantly, both are personally much more spiritual beings than they are religious beings. As Ruth finds more strength within than from church services, so does Christ, who defies the stringent rules of the temple. Neither Ruth nor Christ necessarily needs the structure or ritual of organized religion. Each finds much more value in communing with God on an individual basis and through living their lives as they instinctively know to be right and good, not as others dictate they should live. This type of spirituality that Fanny Fern creates in Ruth Hall is the same type of spirituality that modern day feminist theologians in general preach and strive to practice: a theology centered around a loving, non-patriarchal God, a theology that makes abundant use of nature's gifts, a theology that preaches the value of self-esteem and self-worth as ways of better reaching and understanding God's love, and a theology that is friendly to a woman's unique life experiences. Unlike the

mainstream, middle class woman of nineteenth century America, Ruth Hall is an exemplary literary predecessor to the modern woman who insists on the fullest, richest life possible simply because anything else is inconceivable. Not only does Ruth seek such in her spiritual life, but also in her personal, career, and financial life.

Very particularly, Fanny Fern deals with issues of marriage and widowhood, class structures and women, working women, and the importance of financial independence for a woman in nineteenth century American society--all issues which Fern herself felt deeply about and had personally been stung with the realities of many times. Fern writes Ruth as only briefly a wife in the novel. As such, she is a deeply loved wife but also one pampered by her husband almost as would be a pet. On the other hand, she is treated by her in-laws, especially her mother-in-law, as a silly and ineffectual child who knows nothing about "proper" housekeeping and she is treated by her father as a former burden who now completely belongs to her husband. Such characterizations fit very well into the status of white middle class women in nineteenth century America. The bulk of the novel deals with Ruth's widowhood and her struggle to support her two young children and to become financially independent. Once Ruth becomes a widow and finds herself virtually penniless, she also finds herself pretty well alone. A

typical nineteenth century "solution" to such dire straits would have been remarriage, as Fern herself fell trap to, for relatives would not long want the added burden of financially caring for "someone else's" family. Both Ruth's family and her in-laws make it abundantly clear that such a burden was one they considered quite out of the realms of Christian or social duty. When Ruth attempts to obtain a teaching job, she is doing what many needy but educated women of the time would consider practical under trying circumstances. When she fails to obtain a teaching position and ends up sewing piecework in her cramped rooms at the boarding house, the reader becomes acquainted with the realities of working class life, for Ruth has now fallen from her class and entered a market of labor where women were most welcome for their "willingness" to work hard for meager wages. As Nancy A. Walker points out, "Fanny Fern's awareness of distinct socioeconomic class divisions in an increasingly capitalistic American culture permeates Ruth Hall and carries with it an implied set of values that favors the working poor over the idle upper class" (56). Fern shows the reader through Ruth's experiences that it is far nobler for a woman to humbly earn her own keep than it is for a woman to be "properly" kept by a man, even though this lesson has preliminary bitter consequences for Ruth and her children.

When Ruth is tricked out of keeping her eldest

daughter, Katy, by her in-laws, the reader finds herself shocked by the coldness of such an act. According to historian Sara M. Evans, though, such thinking and action was not out of the question in the nineteenth century. One of the reform movements of the middle class was the New York Children's Aid Society, which actually had the policy of removing children from needy families and sending them to "worthier" families better able to care for them (100-101). In light of such thinking, the elder Mrs. Hall's actions seem less shocking in and of themselves; her wicked and selfish motives can in no way be excused, however.

Joyce W. Warren states that in Ruth Hall Fanny Fern "reflects the position of the widow in mid-nineteenth-century America. It was through her experiences as a widow in a patriarchal society that Fanny Fern was brought to a realization of the need for a change in the position of women," this change largely being a woman's need for financial independence ("Text..." 68). Fern writes Ruth as a woman who does indeed achieve financial security, as well as great fame, through her writing, just as Fern herself did. This success sharply contrasts the experiences of most nineteenth century American women but easily fits into the expectations of the women's rights movement of that century and achieves credibility with the undeniable fact of its author's likened success.

Unquestionably, much of Ruth's "independence" is forced upon her: with both her family and her late husband's family claiming their inability to help her financially or materially, Ruth has little choice but to fend for herself. Begging of any sort is out of the question for her; she believes in herself and her abilities enough to know she can survive her financial struggle and make a comfortable life for herself and her daughters. She endures the life of a boarding house, the consequent snubbing of former "friends," and the grueling trek to find work, just as did and do many single mothers. Ruth, however, takes things a step further: when she alights upon her plan to write for a living, she pursues such in a perfectly business-like fashion that takes her from dealing with her financial affairs on a strictly need-for-survival basis to engineering matters so that her best interests are served. Not only does Ruth's writing become a success, but so also does Ruth. Even when others--namely, Mr. Walter--finally step in to offer some practical assistance, it is Ruth's perseverance and her strong sense of self that make all the difference in her life.

Quite akin to her passion for independence, Ruth's passion for her writing--the work she has found for herself--becomes one of her most admirable traits, especially considering the historical time in which she is placed. Although the use of Ruth's talent in the

novel revolves mostly around financial necessity, Ruth does show signs early in the story of being "a poetess"; indeed, her very inspiration for seeking such work comes from the memories of early writing encouragement she received while at school:

She remembered that while at boarding school, an editor of a paper in the same town used often to come in and take down her compositions in shorthand as she read them aloud, and transfer them to the columns of his paper. She certainly ought to write better now than she did when an inexperienced girl. (115)

When she finds employment by means of her pen, Ruth works diligently at her task in order to produce enough work to care for herself and her family:

Scratch--scratch--scratch, went Ruth's pen; the dim lamp flickering in the night breeze, while the deep breathing of the little sleepers was the watchword, On! to her throbbing brow and weary fingers. One o'clock--two o'clock--three o'clock--the lamp burns low in the socket. (126)

Ruth works ceaselessly until she reaches that wondrous level of fame and financial security which allows her to slow down. But while reaching this point, her passions for her work and for her need to care for her children drive her on so that "she never was weary, or sleepy, or hungry. She had not the slightest idea, till long after, what an incredible amount of labor she accomplished..." (174). Perhaps Ruth never realizes the true ramifications of her struggle for and success at attaining financial independence; surely, though, Fanny Fern must have been aware as she wrote Ruth Hall that, as Joyce W. Warren points out, the novel "is nearly unique

in that, unlike other nineteenth-century American novels in which an impoverished woman is forced to support herself, it does not end with the heroine's marriage and the renunciation of her career" (132). Fern's own life did indeed culminate in a third--and quite happy--marriage, but still she never gave up her writing career.

Perhaps Fern was not quite as aware of the unique and liberating writing style which she used, for, after perusing several samples of her writing, one comes to realize that Fern's style seems largely one of comfortable spontaneity rather than a deliberate attempt at being different. Fern writes as if she is chatting cozily with the reader in her kitchen over a plate of cookies and a pot of tea. She does not allow herself to get bogged down in meeting the strict sterility requirements of a patriarchal literature. By writing in such a style, Fern--probably unwittingly--became a foremother of *l'écriture féminine*. "By focusing on the claiming of one's own language as a precondition of autonomy," Walker asserts,

by resisting the closure of the 'marriage plot' and by establishing her heroine within the matrix of authentic nineteenth-century culture, Fanny Fern made a major contribution to the tradition of American fiction. (62)

Still, Fern's work often becomes engulfed in the trappings of so-called "sentimental" literature, a term that tends to excuse and classify in a way that serves

only to second-class nineteenth century women's literature rather than to look at it as a brilliant extension of accepted language. Even Jane Tompkins, in her classic work Sensational Designs, explains Fern's role in American literature with an unnecessarily apologetic tone:

It is not my purpose...to drag Hawthorne and Melville from their pedestals, nor to claim that the novels of Stowe, Fanny Fern, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps are good in the same way that Moby-Dick and The Scarlet Letter are; rather, I...argue that the work of the sentimental writers is complex and significant in ways other than those that characterize the established masterpieces. I...ask the reader to set aside some familiar categories for evaluating fiction--stylistic intricacy, psychological subtlety, epistemological complexity--and to see the sentimental novel not as an artifice of eternity answerable to certain psychological and philosophical concerns, but as a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time. (126)

While Tompkins's intentions are surely good, it is important to move beyond the label of "sentimental," especially in the case of writers such as Fern. That women's writing is different from men's writing is often true, as are so many other issues of difference in gender, but difference does not mean less valuable. More accurately, writings such as Fern's illustrate similar characteristics of what modern French feminist critics call "l'écriture feminine," only writing more from the spirit and from the soul than from the body, as previously discussed in the first chapter of this work.

When Hawthorne recognized the "devil" in Fern's writing, what he was really reading was her writing as a woman, with no holds barred. Fern's gift of sarcasm--shown in her newspaper columns as well as in Ruth Hall--serves as a means of telling her story in the way in which it most intimately moved her soul. When she points out the religious hypocrisy of Ruth's family and in-laws in Ruth Hall, she is not sermonizing, as Tompkins suggests, but rather she is reaching to the depths of her spirit and soul to tell a woman's story as only a woman can. Fern writes in the same way and with the same purposes when she deals with issues of class, issues of women's work, and all other social issues which she tackles in Ruth Hall.

What Fern does best when writing Ruth is to write her as an exemplary feminist and spiritual woman, which Fern points out by illustrating the passionate nature with which Ruth deals with her children, her independence, her husband, her writing, and her deep commitment to justice and spiritual nature. Warren recognizes that Fern "was not an active member of the women's rights movement; she never gave a speech or participated in a meeting. Her practical feminism derived from the exigencies of her own life experience" (Fanny Fern 3). Such is quite true and quite important, for it allowed Fern's writing to be even more real and even more solidly soul-oriented.

In Ruth Hall Fern presents a tale of independence, a tale of love, a tale of mothering and single parenting, a tale of the artist, and a tale of justice as well as presenting the tale of a woman's passions and spirituality. Fern further presents evidence of realism through her character's criticism of things such as fashion and education (Walker 57-59). According to Linda Huf, "what it all comes down to is that Ruth Hall...is a woman to the last--sweet, selfless, sentimental, and long-suffering" (132). While this is true in a very certain sense, much more is true about Ruth Hall. She is not just a woman--certainly not by standard nineteenth century definitions; rather, Ruth is a woman who dares to not only be sensible of her deepest passions, but to actually live by those passions and to nurture those passions, taking them quite as seriously and as naturally as they should be taken. Because Ruth is so in touch with her passions, she is able to live a soulful life centered in the realizations of those passions. Living such a way creates in Ruth the deepest sort of spirituality and allows her to be something that most nineteenth century women--and, sadly, many current women--could never fathom themselves as becoming. Ruth Hall--along with her author Fanny Fern--is a feminist in the purest sense of the word and a spiritual woman in the truest sense of the word, transcending the realities of her nineteenth century life to bring her deeper messages to the consciousness of contemporary readers.

Notes

- ¹The author will be referred to as Fanny Fern only in this work, as that is the name she gave herself.
- ²For further biographical information, see Joyce W. Warren's excellent biography, Fanny Fern: An Independent Woman, from which the biographical information herein stated was largely culled.
- ³Warren gives a good overview of these reviews in Fanny Fern and also points out the tremendous general popularity and success of the novel, despite such negative criticism.

Chapter Three

Harriet Writing Frado

Just as Fanny Fern wrote the story of Ruth Hall by depending on her own life experiences for material, so also did Harriet E. Wilson, according to all accounts, in writing the story of Frado in the 1859 novel Our Nig write her own autobiography. Harriet's story, told through the fictional character Frado's life, achieves much more than autobiographical accounting, however. Wilson concentrates very strongly on the hypocrisy of "good" Northern Christians and abolitionists, making herself a spokesperson for truth and reality just as Jesus of the gospels was. Writing from her soul, Wilson reaches for the purity and the equality of the true Christian message as she attempts to illustrate how that Christian message became perverted in nineteenth century America not only by the slavery issue but also by the racism largely inherent in the North, even by the "best" of white Christians. Wilson's life experiences as a "free" mulatto woman in the North add credibility to the story; her honest style of writing adds just the right tone of realism to allow the reader to readily accept the

overtones of judgement and condemnation. Through her preoccupation with honesty and truth, Wilson achieves a true feminist stance in her writing, assuming that equality is her right and taking for granted her need and desire for total freedom and total self-sufficiency.

Our Nig, properly titled Our Nig or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black in a Two-Story White House, North, Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There and originally printing as its author, "Our Nig"¹, includes a short preface by the author (printed as H.E.W.) and an appendix of three letters testifying to the veracity of the author's tale. The rather short novel tells the story of Frado, product of an interracial marriage, who, after her black father's death, is given up by her white mother, at the age of six, to the white Bellmont family, where she toils as a much abused indentured servant for the duration of her childhood. At the end of her time of service, Frado strikes out on her own in an attempt to work as a domestic for neighbors. Her long abuse at the hands of Mrs. Bellmont has left her in quite precarious health, however, and her efforts to support herself continually fail and leave her at the mercy of the Bellmont family's charity, the charity of her more recent employers, and finally public charity. Frado eventually learns the trade of hatmaking and finally marries a "professed fugitive from slavery" (356) who ends up deserting the pregnant Frado for the sea. This husband,

Samuel, eventually returns and "rescues" Frado and her son from the poor house, only to desert them again for good, leaving the still frail Frado to scrape for a living for herself and her young child.

Though written as a desperate attempt to procure funds for herself and her child--"I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life," she confesses in her preface to the book (287)--and though written especially to her own race--

I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful band of supporters and defenders (287)--,

Wilson's book not only did not meet with any success during her lifetime but was virtually ignored. As Sandi Russell points out,

No contemporary reviews of the novel have yet been found. This is quite unusual, as there was a growing black press anxious to find new material and Boston [the place of Our Nig's original publication] was then the center of the abolitionist movement. (15)

So lacking was support of the book that six months after its publication, Wilson's son, ill and in need of the comforts money could provide, died (Russell 15).

Wilson's book was not given any serious attention until the early 1980's--over a century too late for her purposes--when Henry Louis Gates, Jr. discovered a copy of the book while rummaging in a bookstore and, after finally taking the time to read Our Nig, opened up

scholarship on Wilson (Figures 125). The second edition of Our Nig, published in 1983 under Gates's direction, contains documentation of Gates's research² as well as a chronology of Wilson's life put together by David A. Curtis. This very detailed chronology, coupled with Gates's extensive research and the testimonials given by the three letter writers of the original appendix, leave little doubt to the facts of Frado's life being almost exactly also the facts of Wilson's life. Gates has determined Our Nig to be a groundbreaking work in furthering (or even truly beginning) the voice of the African-American. Gates notes that

...not one of the three letters appended to Our Nig ever questions that Harriet Wilson wrote all the words in the text in their exact order. Her accomplishment is all the more astonishing because Our Nig reads so much more fluidly and its plot seems so much less contrived than... the fictions published before Our Nig in the Afro-American tradition; particularly since the authors of two of those novels, William Wells Brown and Martin R. Delaney, traveled widely, published extensively, lectured regularly, and educated themselves diligently. (Intro xxiii)

Of course, Gates does not take into account the fact that the "fluidity" and "less contrived" qualities of Wilson's prose comes from her ability to write from the soul, reaching into the depths of her experiences and her realities, as far as history and society had dictated these for her, to tell her tale as only she could. Her blatant honesty defies any sort of contrivance and her feeling what she writes--as a black woman living in the nineteenth century North--renders her writing both fluid

and easily felt by the reader.

There are many reasons that Wilson's book may not have been given any credence in her lifetime.³ Although the appendix to Wilson's book does include the testimonials quite common to slave narratives/African-American autobiographies of the nineteenth century, these testimonials are not written by people of any fame, as can be found in Harriet Jacobs's much better known Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.⁴ Wilson's testimonials come from a woman identified only as "Allida," who appears to be white, another presumably white woman identified as "Margaretta Thorn," and a third person of undetermined gender and questionable race.⁵ According to Barbara A. White, who has added to Gates's research by delving into the facts behind the "Bellmont" family of Our Nig, the family with which Wilson spent most of her sad childhood was in reality the "Nehemiah Hayward" family, a family well known for its abolitionist connections (22-23). Telling the tales Wilson tells about such an "upstanding" family made difficulties for Wilson when it came to having her book published and authenticized. According to White,

As Wilson prepared to publish, she had to face another predicament: although it was necessary to receive the support of at least some good antislavery friends to sell her narrative; she could not distribute it very widely without alerting the surviving Haywards, who all had abolitionist connections. (40)

Nor could Wilson, it seems, very easily obtain the type of testimonials really needed to sell her book. To her life's end, it seems she was subject to abuse in one form or another by the Bellmont/Hayward family.

Although Wilson apparently realized she would have to count on the African-American population for support of her book, even that attempt backfired, as mentioned previously. Russell explains the failure this way:

When Ms. Wilson wrote about the racism she encountered in the North as a free black indentured servant in antebellum days, the subject was not welcomed by white abolitionists, nor by free blacks afraid of antagonizing their white benefactors. (14)

Such a reason makes sense, albeit very sad sense that truly points out the extent to which racism and separatism permeated every fiber of life for the nineteenth century African-American. Gates believes that

perhaps another explanation for the obscurity of Our Nig was its unabashed representation of an interracial marriage, a liason from which the novel's protagonist was an offspring... (N)ever...was miscegenation depicted with any degree of normality before Our Nig. (xxviii)

Interracial relationships continue to annoy some factions of society; it is hardly unbelievable that treating such in a matter-of-fact way over a century ago would have upset people's sensibilities and thus the success of Our Nig.

Gates and other critics also mention the boldness of the book's title as a reason for readers--especially black readers--to find the idea of even opening the book distasteful. Whatever the reasons for the book's being

ignored, it seems clear that at the very least Wilson's life was a series of bad luck that could only end in tragedy for her and for her son. The hope behind that tragedy, however, lies in the messages Wilson set forth in her long ignored book. Because of the strength of her spirit--that part upon which she formed a relationship with the divine from her own sense of seeking and her own idea of the meaning of salvation-- and soul--that part from which she experienced all the daily traumas of living her life at one particular time in history and in one particular societal structure--, Wilson was able to leave behind as her legacy a piece of writing that adds significantly to the social history of black women living in the nineteenth century United States.

The basic history of nineteenth century black Americans--from the depths of slavery to the Civil War to Reconstruction--are fairly well documented by this period in time; it is the underlying attitudes and the real experiences of the time period that have too often been pushed aside and ignored. Wilson's work steps in to help shed light on the realities behind the basic history. One of the most important issues with which Wilson deals is that of racism, especially racism at the hands of supposedly liberal Northerners and self-professed abolitionists. As Hazel Carby puts it, "Wilson used her voice as a black woman addressing a black audience to condemn racism in the North and criticize abolitionists"

(44). Wilson makes no secret of how Frado is treated at the hands of the Bellmonts, especially Mrs. Bellmont and her evil daughter Mary. Even Jack, Frado's champion of sorts, holds his own brand of racist views. It is he, after all, who first looks upon Frado as an aspect of property and who makes comments which would be called blatantly racist by today's standards:

"Keep her," said Jack. "She's real handsome and bright, and not very black, either." (300)

When Mary objects to the family's keeping Frado, Jack answers with

"Poh! Miss Mary; if she should stay, it wouldn't be two days before you would be telling the girls about our nig, our nig!"
(300)

Although Jack is painted as the "nice guy" who repeatedly attempts to protect Frado in Our Nig, Wilson makes it clear right from the start that even the kind and liberal Jack is racist at heart. Unlike his mother and his sister, he does not physically and verbally abuse Frado, but in his heart he does indeed differentiate between her and his family on the sole basis of race. Further, neither Jack nor his equally "sympathetic" father ever makes any real attempt to stop Mrs. Bellmont and Mary from horribly abusing Frado. Neither ever insists on change; Mr. Bellmont never uses his nineteenth century male prerogative to decide how matters will be run in his home. Even the elder son James, who does not appear until later in the story, never is able to make good on his promise to take Frado away from the Bellmont

home and never is totally effective at keeping the wrath of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary from making Frado's life miserable. By pointing out such discrepancies between personal philosophy and action, Wilson makes it clear that even the most open-minded abolitionist could get caught up in society's largely racist attitudes. Much more than the highly touted Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin ever could hope to, Wilson's Our Nig condemns such attitudes and attempts to make a difference by showing the reality of the situation for black Americans, even for those supposedly "free" blacks living in the supposedly tolerant North. It is Wilson's ability to write from the spirit, from the depths of truth that existed in her life, and from her sense of what she as a human female must strive toward in order to fulfill her destiny and, ultimately, in order to find salvation with a loving god figure in another world that enables her writing to bring across blatant realities that other writers of the period--black and white alike--could not convey.

Wilson also attacks the nineteenth century cult of true womanhood in Our Nig, most especially by focusing on motherhood. Mothering was supposed to be a sacred trust, one of the few ways women could truly use their gifts to help shape the future of the nation. Christian motherhood entailed even more than that: the good Christian mother was supposed to be self-sacrificing and

all-loving. Wilson's portrayal of Mag Smith, Frado's mother, in no way fits that description. Mag, a white woman, is herself racist, despite the fact that Jim, Frado's black father, rescued her from poverty and shame to treat her as a treasure until his untimely death, and despite the fact that her children are biracial. "Black devils" is how Mag refers to her children. In addition to her racist attitudes, Mag fairly easily abandons little Frado so that her own life will be easier.

The other mother portrayed in the book, Mrs. Bellmont, proves no worthier of the True Woman title. Her own needs and desires always come first, even if to the obvious detriment of her children. The only hint of good mothering seen in the book comes from Frado herself, for whom we get a brief description at the end of the story as a mother who willingly and matter-of-factly cares for her child as she should. Perhaps Wilson is attempting to make a statement on race and the ability to mother with these examples, or perhaps she is simply pointing out that the Cult of True Womanhood was much more a nineteenth century myth created by a white patriarchal society than it was in any way a reality.

Wilson's theme of miscegenation takes up very little space in the book, so little that its impact or importance can be easily overlooked. As Jim ponders the idea of marrying Mag, a few significant considerations

come to his mind. Wilson writes,

Pity and love know little severance. One attends the other. Jim acknowledged the presence of the former, and his efforts in Mag's behalf told also of a finer principle... He thought of the pleasing contrast between her fair face and his own dark skin; the smooth straight hair, which he had once, in expression of pity, kindly stroked on her now wrinkled but once fair brow. (292)

As a means of convincing Mag to marry him, Jim says,

"You's had trial of white folks, anyhow. They run off and left ye, and now none of 'em come near ye to see if you's dead or alive. I's black inside, I know, but I's got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in white skin, or a white heart in a black one?" (293)

Mag accepts Jim's proposal because she knows no one else cares for her. There is no mention at all of love on her part. In fact, as Jim slowly dies of consumption, Wilson writes that Mag "cared for him only as a means to subserve her own comfort; yet she nursed him faithfully and true to marriage vows till death released her" (294).

More than miscegenation, Wilson deals with further racial issues in these scenes. There is the issue of race and sexuality, the myth of light skin being a means of powerful sexual arousal to the darker skinned, and the idea of white skin being a treasure, the "ownership" of which could elevate the status of a darker skinned person. This is in many ways a marriage of convenience; the fact that it works so smoothly should not be mistaken as Wilson's nonchalant attitude toward interracial relationships, however. Rather, it appears that Wilson is making much more of the fact that it was not a true

marriage--that is, a marriage of true love. It is much more a marriage that can be easily used as another example of society's inherent racism, a marriage which Wilson can use as another example of the depths of depravity with which racism engulfs itself, a marriage that obviously left Wilson with little to grasp to her heart when thinking of her own--and Frado's--parents in an attempt to find some comfort in life. There appears to be no evidence in these first short chapters that Wilson is trying to either shock readers by the marriage or to condone miscegenation. Relating this part of her tale is simply another way of writing from her soul, or from the very core of her life experiences.

Wilson's work has been often compared to a slave narrative. As Carby says, "...Our Nig can be most usefully regarded as an allegory of a slave narrative, a 'slave' narrative set in the 'free' North" (43). Neither Wilson nor Frado was, of course, a slave. There may have been more comfort for Frado if she had been a slave, born into that Southern system, rather than a 'servant' ostracized socially from anyone of her own race. Historian Darlene Clark Hine makes the point that despite the hard work expected of a slave woman, she at least had exposure to a network of sorts among other black women who toiled in the fields as well as in the home (226). In addition, Hine points out, the black woman's exposure to black churches became a means of hope and survival for

her:

At some fundamental level all black churches espoused a theology of liberation, self-determinism, and black autonomy. The promises embodied in Christian scriptures permeated all of Afro-American culture and possessed special meaning for black women's psychic survival and transcendence. The black church became the training arena that enabled free black women prior to the civil war to acquire leadership and organizing skills and an increased commitment to winning freedom for the slaves and more control over their own lives...In short, the black church ultimately served as an institutional base giving moral sanction to black women's quest for freedom and the advancement of the race. (228)

Not only is Frado not privy to the networks provided by living with other black women or by attending a black church, but the Christian religion to which she is exposed is a white Christian religion that rings much more of hypocrisy than it does of any type of love or empowerment for Frado and those of her race. When Wilson writes of this aspect of Frado's life, she writes from the soul, passing as harsh a judgement against religious hypocrisy as Christ himself ever did. Matthew records Christ as saying,

Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and
have neglected the weightier provisions of the
law; justice and mercy and faithfulness; but
these are the things you should have done
without neglecting the others.
You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and
swallow a camel!
Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you clean the outside of the cup and of the
dish, but inside they are full of robbery and
self-indulgence.
...You too outwardly appear righteous to
[others],
but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and
lawlessness.⁶

Wilson presents as harsh a criticism of religious hypocrisy as does Christ in the Christian gospels. In Our Nig Mrs. Bellmont is described as "a professor of religion" (311) despite the cruelties to which she subjects Frado--cruelties that sound disgustingly similar to those visited upon slaves in the deepest South by the harshest "masters." Though some members of the Bellmont family--namely, Aunt Abby--attempt to help Frado learn the tenets of true Christianity and take her to their church's evening services, Mrs. Bellmont declares that "religion was not meant for niggers" (324) and that "prayer was for whites, not for blacks" (339). Such twisted messages are not lost on Frado: at one point in the novel she wonders why God made her mother white but her black (314) and at another point expresses doubts that there is a heaven for blacks (333).

By so blatantly pointing out the hypocrisy of white Christians toward their black brethren and the strange catechism taught subtly by the white church to black seekers of Christ, Wilson does what feminist theologians are best known for doing: attempting to reclaim spirituality and God for all seekers, especially those in positions less than powerful and inventing their own means of gaining personal spiritual satisfaction, means which best suit their individual souls. Wilson portrays Frado as a seeker of truth and grants her a strength of soul that eventually gets her through life's trials.

With its bold theological messages, Wilson's Our Nig makes as much of a feminist theological statement as does Cady Stanton's The Woman's Bible and serves as a unique precursor of modern day feminist theology.

In addition to her feminist theology stance, Wilson also makes clear feminist statements, even though feminism was hardly an open arena for nineteenth century black women. Still, in her dealings with motherhood issues, freedom issues, issues of objectifying poor women and women of color, labor issues, and issues of independence, Wilson makes her mark in feminist literature and brings to light the special problems faced by black women attempting to live full, rich lives.

According to Claudia Tate, in Our Nig

...we find a complex antebellum, autobiographical novel that utilizes conventions of nineteenth-century white women's sentimental fiction in order to protest racial oppression by focusing on the moral sanctity of maternity through its denial and subsequent affirmation. (111)

Though the same objections to labeling Wilson's work as "sentimental" that were brought up in defense of Fanny Fern's work--that is, her style being a female rather than a "sentimental" one and, thus, a part of a true women's literature--apply in the same way, Tate's point of the protest nature of the novel is quite accurate. That sense of protest, wrapped in many more issues than maternity, is a truly feminist way of writing, one that exemplifies the idea of writing from one's soul and spirit. Beyond feminism, Wilson's work breaks new ground

for black feminism and black women's unique writing. As Nellie McKay puts it,

It is important...to note that the efforts to reverse the negative images of black women in literature began as early as these [nineteenth century] women began to find an opportunity to write: with the slave narratives, fiction, poetry, and nonfiction prose of the nineteenth century...Their boldness and assertiveness define these women as a highly intelligent, morally outraged group in a struggle against white injustice to blacks and male dominance of women. (251)

Wilson's stance as a black feminist touting her beliefs as well as her life in Our Nig marks a new sense of American women's literature as well as a new sense--and freedom--of African-American literature. Though both she and her protagonist are biracial, Wilson identifies with and focuses solely on her identity as a black woman. The courage it takes to assume such an identity so publicly and so strongly serves as a coup in Wilson's struggle toward independence and fulfillment. It is indeed sad to reflect upon the circumstances which surrounded Wilson upon the writing of Our Nig and it is sadder still to reflect upon what a miserable failure the book proved to be for Wilson's immediate purposes. Despite these facts, however, there remains the all important fact that Wilson's work has come to us in this century as a tool of teaching historical and social fact as well as as a means of giving spiritual and feminist guidance. By so honestly sharing her spirit and her soul, Wilson has left a legacy of women's writing that surely she never imagined in her time.

Notes

- ¹The edition of Our Nig from which all citations in this paper come is that edited by William L. Andrews.
- ²See Gates's introduction to the second edition of Our Nig, pages xi-lv.
- ³There is still no concrete evidence concerning the date of Wilson's death.
- ⁴Jacobs's work was authenticized by the well known Lydia Maria Child.
- ⁵This person signs with the initials C.D.S. only. According to Gates, these initials indicate indentured servant status.
- ⁶This scriptural quote comes from the New American Standard Bible; Matthew 23:23-25, 28.

Chapter Four

Rebecca Writing Margret

When Rebecca Harding Davis¹ wrote the story of Margret Howth in the 1862 novel Margret Howth: A Story of Today, she was not engaging in the type of autobiographical work which Fanny Fern created in Ruth Hall and which Harriet E. Wilson created in Our Nig. Margret Howth's story is not Rebecca Harding Davis's story per se; however, Margret Howth represents as much a part of Harding Davis's deepest consciousness, as much a part of her spirit and her soul, as Ruth Hall does Fanny Fern's and Frado does Harriet Wilson's. Through her creation of Margret Howth, Harding Davis gives the reader a good glimpse into mid-nineteenth century gender and class issues, labor issues, and spirituality issues--all things acutely important to Harding Davis's own life spirit. In addition, Harding Davis's work brings to light the very important issue of the silencing of women, an issue dealt with to great extent in modern feminist literary criticism by Tillie Olsen and others.²

Largely through Olsen's efforts in the 1970's, Rebecca Harding Davis's writing³ has been recovered from

the dusty shelves of obscure literature where the patriarchal canon had placed it for so many years and has been brought forth into the light of a feminist perspective. Harding Davis, who had often been silenced by her male editors and whose words were long silenced by the male literary establishment, was given a renewed voice through Olsen's scholarship. Subsequently, Olsen's work led to an even closer and more carefully accurate study of Harding Davis and all of her writing through the scholarship of Sharon M. Harris in the early 1990's. Other feminist critics have followed suit recently, bringing Harding Davis even closer to the attention and acceptance due to her work and slowly breaking the silences which have for so long bound her work to obscurity.

It was Olsen's discovery of Harding Davis's first published work of fiction, "Life In The Iron Mills," that began the slow trek to further recognition of all Harding Davis's work. Although Olsen found the anonymously written story in some old used bookstore copies of the Atlantic at the age of 15, she did not discover the author's identity until 1958, when she read the newly published Letters of Emily Dickinson and found included in the book a letter from Dickinson to her sister-in-law asking the latter for a copy of Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" (Olsen, "Biographical" 158). It

was not until 1962, through the financial assistance of an appointment to the Radcliffe Institute, that Olsen was able to free herself from household and work chores and begin to pursue a "discovery" study of Harding Davis (Olsen, "Biographical" 158). The length of time it took Olsen to complete her work on Harding Davis surely would have been understandable to Rebecca Harding Davis herself, who was acutely aware of the societal and class strictures put, in various ways, on all women. Harding Davis would also have understood well--and would probably even have read--Olsen's own creative work, which, as well as Harding Davis's, "provide(s) trenchant social commentary about conditions of the working class in America" (Malpezzi 1), only in a different time period.

Sharon M. Harris, who took over the scholarship dig on Rebecca Harding Davis and her works, acknowledges the debt of literary history to Tillie Olsen's work, but also strongly disagrees with Olsen on three main points concerning Harding Davis: Harris, unlike Olsen, persuasively demonstrates Harding Davis's life as a reclusive one; Harris proves that Harding Davis did not fade away after "Life in the Iron Mills"; and Harris asserts that Harding Davis was intentionally a social historian. Harris's scholarship has uncovered, to Harding Davis's credit, 11 novels, 16 serialized novels, over 260 short stories, 50 essays, and an autobiography--most all of the works unfortunately

available at this time only in rare book collections (xi). It is also very much to Harris's credit that she has rigorously pointed out an error in the canon of Harding Davis: the inclusion of an anti-feminist, pro-domesticity tract called Pro Aris et Focis. This tract was written by a contemporary of Harding Davis's who, like Harding Davis, had anonymously written a book called Waiting for the Verdict. Harding Davis, not wishing to have this new piece "credited" to her, attempted to correct the false allegation through a piece in the New York Daily Tribune (Harris 2-3). Despite Harding Davis's efforts, this piece of misinformation regarding her career continued to be picked up and handed down by scholars, including Tillie Olsen and Gilbert and Gubar⁴, until Harris's scholarship came to the rescue.

One of the most interesting facets of Harding Davis's Margret Howth is that this novel, along with "Life in the Iron Mills" is a major example of Harding Davis's pre-marriage writing. In the novel, according to Louise Duus, Harding Davis "takes a step toward providing an accurate picture of the commonplace life of the American woman" (276). Harding Davis's ability to do such stems from her ability to write from her soul, taking what she knew of and experienced in life to formulate the character Margret Howth as an example of the many facets of nineteenth century American women.

Rebecca Harding Davis was born in Washington,

Pennsylvania in 1831 but grew up in the steel mill town of Wheeling, Virginia (Harris xiii). Both of Harding Davis's parents were great storytellers; her father spun fictional tales, while her mother told stories of her own life. In addition, Harding Davis heard firsthand tales of the American Revolution and the Indian Wars from relatives (Harris 22). Harding Davis was the oldest of five children in a family considered economically prosperous (Yellin 275). Early on in life she was tutored, as were her siblings, at home by her mother. As she grew older, a hired tutor took charge of Harding Davis's schooling; at age 14 she was sent to Washington Female Seminary back in her own birthplace and her mother's hometown of Washington, Pennsylvania. (Yellin 275-276). Three years later, Harding Davis graduated with honors and returned to her parents' home, where she continued her education on her own, with the help of her brother, with whom she had a close intellectual bond and who had a more advanced formal education than she, and with the help of his old textbooks (Harris 22).

Though little is known about Rebecca Harding Davis's life in the thirteen years between the end of her schooling and the publication of "Life in the Iron Mills," it is known that Harding Davis had the habit of taking long walks where "she could escape the protective confines of her comfortable home in Wheeling" and see a bit of life firsthand (Harris 158). These walks, Jane

Atteridge Rose asserts, were presumably "wide enough to expose her to thieves, convicts, prostitutes, drunks, addicts, and suicides" (Rebecca 8). It is also known that in the late 1850's Harding Davis began to work for the Intelligencer newspaper, where she wrote satirical editorials for a column called "Women and Politics." It is here that Harding Davis had her writing apprenticeship and it is here that she first learned how to tone down her writing for the sake of appeasing a male editor (Harris 25).

All of these life experiences--the family stories, the educational means, the walks through the mill town, the teeth-cutting at the newspaper--brought Harding Davis the ability to write on the social topics she tackles in both "Life in the Iron Mills" and Margret Howth, topics for which she "proposes spiritual solutions" (Yellin 273) as well as feminist ones. When "Life in the Iron Mills" appeared in 1861, syndicated anonymously in the Atlantic (Harris 1), it was "immediately acknowledged as a literary landmark by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Louisa May Alcott, Henry Ward Beecher and Ralph Waldo Emerson" (Gilbert and Gubar 903). From the beginning Harding Davis learned, because of "economic pressures, to acquiesce to [Atlantic editor James] Fields's judgement about her work" (Harris 58); the beginning of a perfection of silencing techniques thus began to take form for the author. Harding Davis did win an early war

with Fields, though. He didn't like the title "Life in the Iron Mills," but Harding Davis insisted on either that title or "Korl Woman" and won the right to stick with her original title (Harris 57).

When Margret Howth appeared in 1862, it also was syndicated in the Atlantic, without Harding Davis's name. Instead, the credit read, "by the author of 'Life in the Iron Mills.'" This story was also changed per Fields's complaints: the title was changed from The Deaf and the Dumb to Margret Howth and the ending was changed from what Fields called a too gloomy one for war time audiences to a more upbeat ending. Even when Harding Davis wished to revert to the original ending (now lost) upon the book publication of Margret Howth, Fields refused and Harding Davis, characteristically, went along with his decision regarding her work (Harris 62-64).

Part of Harding Davis's willingness to acquiesce to editorial demands surely stemmed from her placement in history. Harding Davis's nineteenth century world was centered in a strict age of domesticity that, despite her bit of education, kept her largely in her parents' home until her marriage in her early 30's. Harding Davis lived in a world that was wrapped up in conservative spiritual values as well as in a separation of spheres--one for men, another for women. According to Jane Atteridge Rose, "the only way that women writing within the web of these values could combine their

multiple vocations as authors, women, and reformers was by writing moral fiction" ("Reading" 189). This was a time when "the image of the female-centered Victorian home...shaped the hostile environment in which debate on the woman question grew...into a full-fledged women's rights movement strongly allied with radical abolition" (Evans 95). While there is no evidence that Harding Davis was actively involved in the women's rights movement, it would have been impossible for her not to have been aware that society in general looked upon a woman's main role as being in the home and, further, that for poor working women such a stance made it easily possible for society to undervalue and underpay women's work outside of the home and to bar women from obtaining the skills necessary for higher paying "male" jobs (Evans 99). Surely Harding Davis had all this in mind as she created her working women characters and as she herself toiled at her art as an unmarried woman long past the "normal" age of marrying.

Amidst such a society, Harding Davis was raised in the Episcopal church but "rejected organized worship at an early age and periodically struggled with her faith, especially during the civil war years" (Harris 49). Harding Davis's personal religious beliefs and principles were highly liberating, according to Harris's various descriptions of them: she "aligned herself with a loving and merciful God," "believed that the Word was often

converted into a means of oppression," believed that "one has to work for salvation," and believed that that "work requires a concern for others as for oneself" (49). Harding Davis was a very strong believer in Christian activism (Harris 54-55).

The character Rebecca Harding Davis writes as Margret Howth doesn't have a duplicate life of Harding Davis's but certainly follows many of Harding Davis's spiritual and social qualities. Margret Howth represents a young woman who grows up in a middle class society but who ends up, through no fault of her own, a member of the working class. Though she tumbles bravely from shelter to reality, she remains socially a cut above the other characters, for her work is office work, not factory work. She is a highly spiritual woman and one whose innate goodness transcends her class experiences. But, as Jean Fagan Yellin points out, "in realizing herself as an independent moral agent, Margret also recognizes that, for her, the traditional role of wife and mother is best" (285), something with which obviously Harding Davis herself did not personally agree, for she quite took her time in acceding to marriage. Then again, Harding Davis, unlike Margret Howth, wasn't faced with having to work to support her parents. Her family was always quite comfortable; the writing she did fulfilled mental and spiritual needs rather than physical ones. Margret works out of necessity and, though she does her work willingly

and with good humor, the job really is nothing but a means of support for her.

Nonetheless, Margret does a brave stint at the factory and, when it looks as if love (in the form of the character Stephen) is going to fail her, she drums up the courage (albeit at the prodding of Dr. Knowles) to assert her independence, planning to go off to do missionary work--one of the very few "acceptable" ways of being a mostly independent woman in nineteenth century American society. Disturbingly, she gives all this up rather quickly and easily to fall back into the repentant arms of her lover, sealing her fate of silenced days forever.

Perhaps Margret cannot be judged too harshly for this⁵. She is, after all, patterning herself after her society's demands of women and after the example set by her mother. Mrs. Howth, Margret's mother, is the epitome of the stereotypical housewife: dull witted--"it took a long time for so stupendous an idea to penetrate the good lady's brain" (235)--whiny by implication, mesmerized by such joys as knitting and playing second fiddle to her husband, and astonishingly dependent. By virtue of allowing herself to partake in the structure society has set up for her, Mrs. Howth becomes an incredibly silent and secret woman--perhaps not totally of her own volition but apparently by pleasant consent.

The real female strength in this novel comes from the impoverished, crippled mulatto Lois, whom Laura Hapke

sees as "a poignant example of the hazards of the workplace" (26) and whom Yellin sees as "the quintessential true woman" (285) as well as one who "exemplifies the Christian faith, hope, and charity that are to save the nation" (282). Along these same lines, Harris believes that in Margret Howth Harding Davis "offers what she believed was the redeeming philosophy--Lois Yare's living faith, which incorporates a ritual belief in God, others and oneself" (67). Olsen believes that Rebecca Harding Davis saw in Lois "some tie of equality of kinship" ("Biographical" 85), which a glance back at Harding Davis's life and philosophies may indeed prove true.

Lois is always good, in the purest sense of the word. A visible symbol of the destruction with which factory life often leaves the lives of the poor, Lois is also a symbol of the forgiving, gentle women who attempts to see the best in others as a means of helping to make the world a better place. Unfortunately, Lois is largely ignored by her society, except as an object of pity and as a warning of what might be in store for them. Her silencing becomes especially cruel in the light of her loneliness and her progressive illness. Those lives which she does touch--most notably Margret Howth's--are lives which clearly are affected quietly for the better. At the end of the novel Harding Davis sums up well her feeling for the Loises of the world: "The cripple was

dead, but Lois, free, loving, and beloved, trembled from her person to her Master's side in the To-morrow" (author's emphasis) (262).

Of course, it is Margret Howth whom Harding Davis is writing; both Lois and Mrs. Howth simply serve as vehicles for Margret's development and growth. When Harding Davis writes Margret, it is largely from the spirit; the ideas of a true spiritual sense which Harding Davis presents through Margret Howth make up a large segment of modern day feminist theology. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza explains feminist spirituality as that which

proclaims wholeness, healthy love, and spiritual power not as hierarchal, as power over, but as power for as enabling power. It proclaims the Goddess as the source of this power, as the enabling context of human lives and of a non-hierarchal, nonauthoritarian, noncompetitive community. The Goddess is the giver and nurturer of life, the dispenser of love and happiness. Woman as her image is therefore not 'the other' of the divine. She is not body and carnality in opposition to spirit and soul, not the perpetrator of evil and rebellion. Being a woman, living in sisterhood under the aegis of the Goddess, brings us in touch with the creative, healing, life-giving power at the heart of the world. (author's emphases)
(137-138)

Margret knows personally of the power of female spirituality from the character Lois, who "knew...the Maker in whom she believed, saw Him in everything that lived, more real than all beside" (94-95). Lois sees God in everything and everyone, and, despite her handicap and pain, strives to make life happier and easier for

others. In many ways, Lois follows the path of the Goddess whom Fiorenza describes. Margret, ready to learn the true nature of her own faith and spirituality, is drawn to this simple figure and takes from her the same subtle lessons which so many people took from Jesus in his time. By novel's end, Margret has formed a sense of communion with the spirit of Lois: "Something of Lois's live, universal sympathy has come into her narrow, intenser nature; through its one love, it may be" (266).

What Margret--and Harding Davis herself--feels about her spirituality coincides very well with the gender specific expectations of her time. As Atteridge Rose explains it,

Associated with the doctrine of gender spheres were idealism, sentimentalism, and evangelicalism. Idealism led fiction writers to use fact as an inductive approach to spiritual mystery and caused women to perceive their role and their sphere symbolically. Like Christ's, their self-sacrifice was redemptive; like heaven, their home was a haven of loving peace. Related to idealism was sentimentalism, with its vision of a benevolent God. The supremacy of love as the definition of the Godhead was a primary force behind the elevation of women in the nineteenth century; hers was the affective domain of loving. Sentimentalism provided a way to view female self-abnegation as messianic. With its stress on the demonstration of love through self-sacrifice and on the social benefits of altruistic cooperation, sentimentalism was the antithesis of romanticism's defiant egoism. (9-10)

Truly, a large part of the age of domesticity rested upon the view that women were somehow purer and more moral than men and thus had the Christian duty to see that certain values were carried out in society, especially in

the home. Such a duty often did involve the type of self-abnegation of which Atteridge Rose speaks--and such can be clearly seen in Harding Davis's writing of Margret Howth. Margret goes to work at the factory to support herself and her parents. She does so because it is the right thing to do. When she begins to think seriously of leaving her factory work to join Dr. Knowles in his inner-city missionary work, she is again thinking of what must be the "right" thing to do as opposed to what she must do in order to satisfy her own soul and desires--and all at the persuasive prodding of Dr. Knowles, who declares,

I want you to do your work. It is hard; it will wear out your strength and brain and heart. Give yourself to these people. God calls you to it. There is none to help them. Give up love and the petty hopes of women. Help me. God calls you to the work. (154)

When Margret hesitates and questions the "calling,"

Knowles assures her that

He calls you. He waits for your answer. Swear to me that you will help His people. Give up father and mother and love, and go down as Christ did. Help me to give liberty and truth and Jesus' love to these wretches on the brink of hell. Live with them, raise them with you. (155)

To her credit, Margret finally shies away from this "calling," for she realizes that his is not her true calling. The mission is the work of Dr. Knowles; for Margret to join him would place her in a subservient position selected out of guilt and not free will. Margret is too deeply and truly spiritual to succumb to

such patriarchal demands. She knows somewhere deep inside herself that God has another plan for her and that she must be true to herself, as an agent and creation of God as fully as is Knowles or any other man. The clergyman Van Dyke, in a conversation with Knowles, affirms this estimation of Margret's true calling when he says,

I know this street needs paving terribly, Knowles; but I don't see a boulder in your hands. Yet the great Task-master does not despise the pavers. He did not give you the spirit and understanding for paving, eh, is that it? How do you know He gave this Margret Howth the spirit and understanding of a reformer? There may be higher work for her to do. (217)

The higher work of which Van Dyke speaks is quite simply the true work to which any person who honestly searches her heart finds herself unequivocally called. For Margret, this calling is that of being a wife to the fallen and repentant Stephen. That she finds her spiritual destiny fulfilled in such a commonplace arena for the nineteenth century woman does not mean that Harding Davis sells her out, however. Rather, by allowing Margret to make her own decision and follow her own path, Harding Davis does indeed write Margret as a figure of feminist empowerment. There is no sense in touting a woman's right to follow her own path if certain paths are deemed unacceptable by feminist standards. Modern day feminists continue to struggle with this concept, afraid that all will be lost if every woman does

not follow the same path toward personal fulfillment. Harding Davis cleverly speaks to this modern concern by allowing Margret to choose a vocation which would by most standards be considered too conventional and thus too trivial. It must be remembered, however, that Margret struggles deeply in making her decision, that she tries out the working world, that she seriously considers the option of missionary work, and that she long resists taking Stephen back after his first leaving of her. She does not go into marriage with a giddy schoolgirl mentality; rather, she follows that path with open eyes, a clear mind, and the self-assurance gathered from the depths of her spirit and her soul that what she is doing is the one right thing for her to be doing, which is, presumably, much the same way in which Harding Davis entered her own marriage. Olsen describes Harding Davis's thirteen years between her schooling and her marriage as thus:

The social life open to Rebecca in her own class was with young men intent on making the most of the possibilities for 'getting on'; and with young women whose concern--natural under the circumstances of but one sanctioned vocation--was with getting asked into the most advantageous possible marriage. All social activities were calculated toward these ends. Rebecca did not involve herself in the expected social round. Whatever the reasons were--subtle family ones, the lonely pull of obviously unshared interests--among them must have been Rebecca's refusal to remain in situations of emptiness, of falsity, of injuries to her sense of selfhood where there was choice.

(Silences 55-56)

Just as Harding Davis gave herself choices and options in

her life to whatever extent possible, so also Margret Howth is written as the same type of woman.

Certainly, the cheerful, pat ending of the novel in which everything quickly turns out the very best for everyone does not fit well with Harding Davis's talent for writing from the soul and from the spirit in the rest of the book. Suddenly the spiritual takes a back seat to the material and the soul gives in to too much convention. The feminist and spirituality qualities that Harding Davis brings out prior to the ending seem lost, at best. One must remember, however, that this was not Harding Davis's intended ending. In all fairness, one must assume the ending was meant to be much different, much stronger, and one must not chide Harding Davis too severely for succumbing to this silencing technique of her editor. Perhaps she simply knew that it would be better to get out as much of her true story as possible than to risk being totally silenced by being denied publication altogether. Such seems often to have been the fate of the nineteenth century American woman writer.

In any case, when Harding Davis wrote the character Margret Howth, she wrote a woman whose sense of spirit and soul were great enough to challenge the typical conventions of her nineteenth century society. The reader is left with the overall image of Margret as a strong woman, a feminist woman without labeling herself such, who defies the tenets of her society and makes her

own decisions for her own life. One is also left with the very strong feeling that this must be just the way Harding Davis herself strove to live her own life.

Notes

- ¹Though she was still Rebecca Harding when Margret Howth was written, the author will be referred to as Rebecca Harding Davis, the name by which she is best known, in this paper.
- ²See Olsen's book Silences, included on the works cited page.
- ³Specifically "Life in the Iron Mills"
- ⁴See Olsen's Silences and her biographical supplement to "Life in the Iron Mills" as well as Gilbert and Gubar's Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, all listed on the works cited page.
- ⁵And perhaps this final action of Margret's is very far removed from Harding Davis's original intention.

Chapter Five

Frances Writing Iola

Like Rebecca Harding Davis in her writing of the character Margret Howth, Frances E. W. Harper writes of concerns that touch deeply upon her own spirit and soul in writing the character Iola Leroy in the 1892 novel Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted, but Harper does not draw upon autobiography any more than does Harding Davis. Harper's story, unlike that of her fellow African-American writer Harriet E. Wilson, is not her own story, nor was it written under dire financial circumstances or under grave personal distress. Harper's novel presents the story of a much more upper middle class type of African-American woman than Wilson's Frado could ever hope to be; in addition, Harper's original intention with the novel, as so many of her critics point out, was to uplift her race as a whole--something Wilson's life circumstances prohibited her from doing, as her immediate need for self-preservation and the preservation of her son was much too pressing to allow for thoughts of anything else. Harper clearly states her intention of uplifting the African-American race in the

"Note" with which she ends her novel:

The race has not had very long to straighten
its hands from the hoe, to grasp the pen and
wield it as a power for good, and to erect
above the ruined auction-block and slavepen
institutions of learning, but

There is light beyond the darkness,
Joy beyond the present pain;
There is hope in God's great justice
And the negro's rising brain.
Though the morning seems to linger
O'er the hill-top far away,
Yet the shadows bear the promise
Of a brighter coming day. (212)

Frances Harper's life story reads much more closely to that of an upper middle class nineteenth century white society woman than it does to that of the typical nineteenth century African-American woman of whom one reads in history books and various narratives. Born in 1825 to free black parents in Baltimore, Maryland, Harper was an only child who was orphaned early and left to the care of her uncle, the Reverend William Watkins, who ran a school for free black children. Harper attended this school until she was 13, at which time she went to work as a domestic while engaging in training as a seamstress. In 1851 she was hired by Union Seminary, an Ohio school run by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to teach sewing. Harper left this school within a year's time and moved to another teaching position in Pennsylvania (Carby 65).

In 1853 a law was passed in Harper's home state of Maryland declaring that free blacks entering the state could be sold as slaves. It was at this point in her

life that Harper decided to "commit herself full-time to the anti-slavery cause" (Carby 65); she began lecturing against slavery in 1854 and continued to do such for most of her life. Along with her lecturing, Harper worked for and financially supported the Underground Railroad movement (Carby 65).

In 1860 Harper married Fenton Harper and retired from public life for four years, until she was widowed. She then returned to the lecture circuit, accompanied for a time by her daughter, who apparently died at a very young age (Carby 66). Somewhere along the same time period, Harper began her novel Iola Leroy, having been influenced by the reading of Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (Russell 16); the novel was not finished and published, however, until 1892, when Harper was 67 (Carby 63). Harper did busy herself with other writing, though. According to Marilyn Elkins, "Harper was the major black female poet of the nineteenth century" and also wrote short stories and essays for publication (44). In addition, she was the first African-American woman to publish a short story: "The Two Offers" appeared in 1859, the same year as Wilson's Our Nig (Russell 15).

Still, Harper was best known in her time for her anti-slavery lecturing and for her social activities. Like the famous nineteenth century black preaching women, especially of the African Methodist Episcopal Church ¹, Harper used her lectern as a pulpit in many ways.

Historian Jualynne Dodson records that "the origins of the [A.M.E.] church were deeply rooted in protests against discriminatory treatment of black people in religious affairs" (333); Harper rooted her lectures in protests against the overall discrimination of blacks in the U.S. So effective were Harper's lecturing style and message that her efforts were wholeheartedly supported by the A.M.E. church's publication Christian Recorder, while, at the same time, "because she was so articulate and engaging as a public speaker, some audiences thought Harper must be a man, while others thought she couldn't possibly be black and had to be painted" (Carby 66).

As a logical extension of her speeches--in which Harper, "although a devout Christian, extolling the virtues of temperance, thrift, industry, and initiative, showed the contradictions of the Christian doctrines with regard to slavery" (Russell 16)--Harper also joined the fight for passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. Along with Frederick Douglass, Harper, although also a strong believer in women's rights, took the stance that, for the betterment of the race, one must fight to get the vote for the black man first, then worry about getting the vote for women--a stance which placed her in direct opposition to Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Carby 67-68) as well as to Sojourner Truth (Evans 122) and scores of others.² Harper extended her social and political involvement to becoming active in the Women's

Christian Temperance Union, even though the WCTU, like so many other women's organizations of the nineteenth century, was made up of a largely white membership. Harper's answer to this was to urge other black women to join the organization (Carby 68).

Like many other educated, intelligent, well read women of her time period and means, Harper sought to instill feminist values and strength in other women. Interestingly--and still like other women of her nineteenth century social class--Harper also held on to a belief in the virtues extolled in the rhetoric of the age of domesticity. According to Carby,

Harper had a vision that women were potentially capable of transforming society, but although this vision was not limited to what women could achieve from the hearthstone, Harper did regard the home as a crucial sphere of women's influence. (69)

In writing the character Iola Leroy, Harper draws upon the deepest beliefs of her spirit and her soul to shape the type of African-American woman she would like to see all female members of her race become. Like Harper, Iola Leroy comes from a much more privileged segment of society than was usual for nineteenth century African-American women, and, like Harper, Iola is an intelligent, articulate, educated woman who strongly feels a duty toward the race. Iola is a fair-skinned biracial woman who grows up under quite unusual circumstances. Her wealthy, white Southern father, Eugene Leroy, takes her mulatta mother, Marie, as his

wife (though she is actually his slave and therefore, legally, his property); subsequently, the couple bring three children into the world--Iola, her brother Harry, and her sister Gracie. In an effort to protect their children from ever knowing of their slave roots, the couple raise them as strictly white and send the eldest two--Iola and Harry--North to boarding schools. The couple and their youngest child encounter tragedy on their way North to witness Iola's graduation: Mr. Leroy falls victim to a plague and dies. The heartbroken Marie returns to her Southern home only to find her husband's cousin Alfred ready to claim all of Eugene's property--including her and her children. Somewhat mercifully, little Gracie falls ill and dies. Iola, though, is tricked by means of a telegram sent to her school by the evil Alfred into coming home and being taken possession of by her father's cousin. Iola manages to cleverly and secretly warn her brother against coming back home ever, but she and her mother are left at the mercy of slavery and are soon sold to separate parties.

All this takes place as the Civil War is commencing; Iola manages to be rescued from her slavery when the Union army moves into town. Iola joins the army's forces as a nurse. There she meets both the white Dr. Gresham who attempts but fails to convince her to marry him and forever pass as white and the freed Robert Johnson, whom she later joins in a journey to find lost relatives and

who also turns out to be related to her. Through the course of the novel, all relatives are happily reunited and Iola engages in a lively intellectual life with a group of other educated blacks, including the black Dr. Latimer, whom Iola eventually marries. Iola, like Harper, largely leads a life of independence, working in and for the world, constantly seeking new ways to be of use to her race.

Harper's portrayal of Iola is very much the portrayal of a nineteenth century feminist. Iola, outside of her brief experience as a slave, always exhibits a great natural need for independence and work of her own to do. She is the educated, intelligent, articulate daughter of a woman who has enjoyed the same privileges that come from being sent to school. When Iola is freed by the army, she works diligently and wholeheartedly as a nurse. Once the war ends, she engages in the profession of teaching, working particularly with freed blacks. When she moves North with her uncle, Iola seeks and finds employment as a store saleswoman, explaining to her uncle: "I have a theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living. I believe that a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women" (154). In a further discussion on work with both her mother and her uncle, Iola explains, "I think that every woman should have some skill or art which would insure

her at least a comfortable support. I believe there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more honored among women" (158). Iola continues with these matter-of-fact thoughts on women's work throughout the novel and continues to earn her own living, even after her marriage to Dr. Latimer.

Iola also holds strong ideas on the importance of education for women. Besides her teaching efforts, she also presents a paper titled "Education of Mothers" to the group of black intellectuals who gather regularly in her home. As part of the discussion that follows this particular meeting, the Reverend Carmicle states,

I was delighted with my visits to various institutions of learning, and surprised at the desire manifested among the young people to obtain an education. Where toil-worn mothers bent beneath their heavy burdens their more privileged daughters are enjoying the privileges of education...[I] saw young ladies who had graduated as doctors." (194)

In addition to the feminist issues of work and education, Harper also tackles, through Iola, the issues of temperance and men's views of women. At a visit to the home of the uneducated and poor Aunt Linda, in which the woman serves "homemade" wine with dinner, both Iola and Robert take up the temperance argument:

'...ef alcohol's so bad, w'at made de Lord put it here?'
'Aunt Lindy,' said Iola, 'I heard a lady say that there were two things the Lord didn't make. One is sin, and the other alcohol...the Bible says that the wine at last will bite like a serpent and sting like an adder.' (139)

Such thinking fits perfectly well with the views of the century's WCTU, of which Harper herself was an active member. Iola's views on the "typical" male way of seeing women also fits in with the attitudes of nineteenth century feminist proponents. In a conversation with Dr. Latimer, Iola says,

'There is a young lady coming here to visit me next week. Her name is Miss Lucille Delaney, and she is my ideal woman. She is grand, brave, intellectual, and religious.'
'Is that so? She would make some man an excellent wife,' replied Dr. Latimer.
'Now isn't that perfectly manlike,' answered Iola, smiling. 'Mamma, what do you think of that? Did any of you gentlemen ever see a young woman of much ability that you did not look upon as a flotsam all adrift until some man had appropriated her?' (182)

This idea of appropriation holds an eerie correlation to slavery, one which was brought up in the writings and speeches of feminist activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Grimké sisters. Again and again, Iola and Harper clearly reflect the ideas of nineteenth century feminist thought, but Harper goes beyond portraying Iola simply as a feminist; there is much more importantly the portrayal of a nineteenth century black feminist in this novel.

As part of her portrayal of Iola as a black feminist, Harper makes Iola a staunch proponent of black rights in general and the uplifting of the race, just as Harper herself was. Carby explains this stance well:

Iola's dismissal of the assistance of white patriarchal power was symptomatic of Harper's

wider plea that the black community look toward itself for its future, not toward assistance and support from or alliance with the forces represented by the various white characters in the novel. By the final chapters of Iola Leroy, white characters have virtually disappeared; the group of black intellectuals had become self-sufficient, self-contained, and independent of the parameters of white intellectual debate. All were embedded within black communities and committed to the uplifting of the folk. Harper's novel was as much a part of that political program of uplift as her lectures and activism. (93)

This purpose of Harper's is somewhat criticized by Deborah E. McDowell when she refers to the character of Iola as "a human being less and less and a saint more and more." McDowell goes on to assert that "nothing about [Iola] is individualized, nor does this seem to be Harper's chief concern, for she is creating an exemplary type who is always part of some larger framework" (286). Without a doubt, Harper does have a social and political agenda in her novel, but the charge that Iola is not an individual is not solidly founded. While the novel Iola Leroy may indeed be steeped in a bit too much lecturing, the character of Iola is a wonderful example of what independent, strong beings women are capable of becoming. She in no way fits into the stereotypes of nineteenth century women in general or nineteenth century black women specifically. Instead, she is the perfect example of a nineteenth century black feminist--practically an anomaly in U.S. history--as well as the perfect characterization of Harper's very soul.

Along with Harper's portrayal of Iola as a black

feminist, Harper also portrays an idea of the worthiness of the black race. Early in the novel, the white Dr. Gresham, who is rapidly falling in love with Iola, discovers with horror her mixed blood.

'Oh, no,' said Dr. Gresham, starting to his feet, 'it can't be so! A woman as fair as she a slave?'

'Yes, it is so,' continued the colonel. 'In these States the child follows the condition of its mother. This beautiful and accomplished girl was held by one of the worst Rebels in town...'

'Well, well! Is that so?' said Dr. Gresham, thoughtfully stroking his beard. 'Wonders will never cease. Why, I was just beginning to think seriously of her.'

'What's to hinder your continuing to think?' asked Col. Robinson.

'What you tell me changes the whole complexion of affairs,' replied the doctor. (45)

Dr. Gresham overcomes this "complexion" issue, however, and does indeed ask Iola to marry him and forever pass as white. Iola refuses, steadfastly believing that she must align herself with her black heritage rather than with her white heritage. Well into the novel, Iola expresses her philosophy on the merits of the black race when she says, "Every person of unmixed blood who succeeds in any department of literature, art, or science is a living argument for the capability which is in the race" (150). As previously pointed out, Iola insists on spending her time with blacks exclusively and in the end marries a black doctor. Elizabeth Young offers a reason for this: "If interracial rape marks the endpoint on the spectrum of war, Harper suggests that interracial marriages in a context of slavery mark a potential conflict only

slightly less oppressive" (283).

Certainly this is true when one thinks of the marriage of Iola's parents and its hideous consequences, but it cannot be safely assumed that Harper continues this train of thought with Iola. It is more plausible to imagine that Harper, a radical in so many ways, portrays the practically white Iola as wishing to remain forever in black society as a statement that there is nothing inherently wrong with choosing black over white and, indeed, that the two can mingle peacefully (as they do in the case of Iola, Harry, and their mother's blood) without making either the natural inferior or superior. Harper makes it seem perfectly natural that choosing black society over white can be a rational, not forced, choice, and that one--even one as socially privileged as Iola--can find great intellectual and emotional fulfillment in the company of black society. In doing so, Harper manages to accomplish two things: she further uplifts her race to its proper place and she illustrates the perfect equality and balance that should naturally exist between black and white society, making one complementary society. As she does this, Harper writes from her spirit, leaning heavily on her Christian beliefs of equality and justice for all peoples, regardless of race or gender.

Harper writes Iola as a very spiritual being who is Christ-like in many ways. When Iola chooses to dedicate

her life to working for and with the "downtrodden" rather than to continuing a climb in upper class white society, she is following the same mission Christ set for himself in the gospel stories: working with the lowly and shunning the comforts that would have come from joining the ranks of the accepted priests and rabbis. Also Christ-like, Iola has no fear of sharing a meal with the poorest of the poor or of associating with what the highest of society would consider its dregs. She does not possess airs of greatness; like Christ, she humbly accepts everyone--however low on society's ladder--as important and very worth her while.

Additionally, just as Christ represents an intermingling of faiths--Jewish and Christian, specifically--Iola represents an intermingling of the races, illustrating that it is quite possible for people to live in harmony if that is their wish. Iola believes in the true Christian message with all her heart--just as her creator Harper did--and continually brings to light the inconsistencies preached by slaveholding and racist "Christians." Like Christ, she is a preacher of sorts, bringing forth a clear message of truth and faith. Iola makes her idea of true Christianity quite clear throughout the novel, but especially in two specific instances. In the first instance, she very succinctly sums up her philosophy of Christianity's role in the country when she states that "there is but one remedy by

which our nation can recover from the evil entailed upon her by slavery...a fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their application to our national life" (162). In the second instance, Iola makes a correlation between the fate of the Negro and the life of Christ:

Is there...a path which we have trodden in this country...into which Jesus Christ has not put his feet and left it luminous with the light of his steps? Has the negro been poor and homeless?...the Son of Man had not where to lay his head...Have we been despised and trodden under foot? Christ was despised and rejected of men...Have we been beaten and bruised in the prison-house of bondage? 'They took Jesus and scourged Him'...never, while the agony of Gethsemane and the sufferings of Calvary have their hold upon my heart, will I recognize any religion as His which despises the least of His brethren. (193)

The Christian religion is a very important part of the novel. Besides pointing out the discrepancies between true Christianity and the religion of slaveholders, Harper designs the church as a place where lost relatives can find one another after the war: indeed, it is at a Methodist conference where Iola finds her long-lost brother Harry. Harper also paints the tenets of Christianity as twisted by a "reconstructionist" society too eager to remain racist and separated. When Iola is denied a teaching post after letting the matron know of her racial connections, Harper writes that "these women, professors of a religion which taught, 'If ye have respect to persons ye commit sin,' virtually shut the door in her face because of the

outcast blood in her veins" (157). Just as Harper uses Iola Leroy as a means of touting her social beliefs, so she uses the novel as a means of expressing her religious beliefs. In writing the character Iola from her soul and from her spirit, Harper creates a semblance of her deepest self and her deepest consciousness in order to best bring forth her urgent messages. By doing so, she brings to light the same type of messages which feminist theologians seek to bring forth: messages proving that people (the poor, the non-white, the female) are often kept in oppression and submission simply because the largely white, privileged patriarchy deems its safest to keep them there, "contained" in their places, so that the established authority may continue to enjoy all the privileges of an elite society, even though such privileges work in direct opposition to the true meaning of Christianity.

When theologian Judith Plaskow rewrites the rabbinic myth of the "evil" Lilith, she creates a woman formed by God in equal partnership to man, but a woman whom Adam finds distasteful, for she has no desire to be subservient to him. Plaskow's Lilith runs away from Adam and eventually comes to help the second woman, Eve, created from Adam's rib, seek personal empowerment and fulfillment, much to Adam's horror (206-207). Harper creates the same type of creature in Iola Leroy: she creates a race and a gender which are threats to the

established Christian authority but which make perfect sense in following the messages of equality and justice set forth by Christ. Iola--and, by implication, all women and all African-Americans--was created by God on an equal basis with man, as was Lillith. Whereas Adam finds Lillith's independent streak annoying and thus wishes to have her banished, so does the white male hierarchy of Iola's experience find independent tendencies in women and/or African-Americans an annoyance to be avoided at all cost. Though the Christ they worshipped teaches justice and equality, the "Christian" hierarchy of Harper and Iola's time refuses women the vote and sees slavery as either biblically condoned or as something to be replaced by sending the freed slaves back "home" to Africa. Ahead of her time, Harper takes religious matters further than even Elizabeth Cady Stanton did in her Woman's Bible by addressing such current issues of justice and equality. Cady Stanton's work becomes a light-hearted jab at the religious right when laid next to Harper's work, which points out again and again realistic and harsh indictments against the nineteenth century Christian male. Harper creates life-like instances in which accepted religion does not work but true religion--and, more importantly, true spirituality, that which only the most open-hearted and humble can experience--most certainly do.

Though not a carbon copy of Harper's life, the

character Iola Leroy possesses as much of Harper's soul and spirit as is possible without being one perfect duplicate of her author. Iola brings forth all the social issues which were of such deep concern to Harper and she brings forth the spiritual beliefs which Harper dearly felt as true and so important to a rich life. In writing Iola, Harper gives the reader a unique look at life for nineteenth century black women as well as an undeniable look at her own self.

Notes

¹See Sisters in the Spirit, ed. William L. Andrews.
Indiana University Press, 1986.

²This issue caused such division between women's rights
advocates that major political splits occurred among
activist women. See Evans, Born for Liberty,
pg. 122-125.

Chapter Six

Kate Writing Edna

As with the cases of Rebecca Harding Davis writing the story of Margret Howth and Frances E. W. Harper writing the story of Iola Leroy, Kate Chopin's life story is not exactly the same as the life story of her character Edna Pontellier in The Awakening, but the character which Chopin created is a definite example of Chopin's deepest consciousness in spirit and soul. As Emily Toth puts it, "Kate did not write her autobiography in The Awakening, but she drew on and reshaped what she had learned in forty-eight years" (330). Indeed, as with the other writers in this study, the reader can easily see from whence Chopin gathered her material to create Edna Pontellier. Writing from her soul, Chopin reached into her sensibilities and experiences as a nineteenth century woman living in a time of great upheaval and change for women of her class standing to shape an Edna who would herself fit into such society. Writing from her spirit as well, Chopin gathered together her thoughts and beliefs in spirituality to create an Edna who is deeply spiritual, though not in conventional, patriarchal

terms. Chopin created Edna's spirituality as freedom-inducing and much more feminist in origin than conventional or society-abiding in any way.

Kate Chopin's life was quite different from the lives of the other women writers presented in this study. Although also brought up under the tenets of Christianity, Chopin's family practiced Catholicism; such an upbringing indubitably colors one's view of life and the spiritual world beyond, as it did indeed color Chopin's perceptions. As Sydney Ahlstrom points out in his A Religious History of the American People, Roman Catholics made up an extremely small portion of the nineteenth century American South and the Roman Catholic Church of the South was extremely steeped in its hierarchal traditions. As far as war and slavery issues were concerned, the Roman Catholic Church remained "moderate" in its stance (696). As a member of this strict society, Chopin was brought up under a tradition of very specific rules of behavior and decorum, especially for women. Besides learning to be selfless and to follow rules set up by men, Chopin and her female peers learned as part of their Catholic education to turn to the Virgin Mary for "aid" in times of distress (Toth 46-47). Chopin, though similar to some of the other writers in her upper middle class social standing, is the only writer in this study who was born and spent her life in the South, where as a white woman of "good stock" she

encountered definite set social attitudes toward race and gender. According to Helen Taylor, Chopin's exposure to the Southern slave system affected her most by making her nonchalantly accepting of racial division. Her own St. Louis family were slaveholders; among the family's slaves were a number of mulatto children (Toth 57-58). Furthermore, the Louisiana family into which she married had been slaveholders; it is recorded that her father-in-law was an especially cruel slaveholder (Toth 122). In addition, Chopin's husband and brother-in-law were highly involved members of the racist White League (Taylor 144) and her own family were staunch Confederate supporters during the Civil War (Taylor 143). Chopin's very childhood was filled with commonplace sights such as "slave auctions [which] took place on the steps of St. Louis courthouse which in 1857 saw the Dred Scott v. Sandford case" (Taylor 142). Though Chopin never really deals with issues of racism in her work, it is important to remember this part of her reality, especially since her creation of Edna revolves in so many ways around having long lived a sheltered existence blind to most of life's injustices toward others.

Other facets of Chopin's life shed equal light on the woman as writer and on the woman Edna whom she created. According to her most recent and exhaustive biographer, Emily Toth, Chopin was born on February 8,

1850 in St. Louis (24) to a father 23 years her mother's senior and to a mother who had married at 16 not for love but to provide financial stability for her family, who had been deserted by their father (26-29). Chopin's Catholic education began in 1855 at Sacred Heart Academy, which she attended off and on throughout her academic career and from which she finally graduated (26). The same year that Chopin began school, her father was killed in a train accident¹(31). The death of her father led to many life-influencing changes for Chopin. With her father gone, she grew up in a matriarchal household consisting of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother as well as herself and her siblings (52). It was her quite independent minded French great-grandmother who largely molded Chopin's education in the years following the death of her father (34-7).

On June 9, 1870 Chopin married Oscar Chopin, a man with whom she was reportedly happy and with whom she had several children (100). Upon the death of her husband in 1882, Chopin took over the family's business affairs (113) and also began an affair with the married Albert Sampite², a man who reportedly was a wifebeater as well as a well practiced adulterer (168-171). According to Toth, in 1884 "Kate decided to return to her mother [in St. Louis], choosing a mother's love over a man's uncertain passions" (172). One can only hope that a large part of Chopin's reasoning to leave Sampite (whom

critics claim to be the model for the often used character Alcée Arobin in Chopin's stories) lay in her inability to stay with a man who openly abused his wife--and perhaps even abused Chopin herself. Though Chopin's mother died shortly after Chopin's move back to St. Louis, this move marked an important beginning for Chopin: attempting to deal with her intense grief over her mother's death, Kate Chopin began in all earnest the writing career for which she is now known (174-175).

Though Kate Chopin was living at the height of social change for women in nineteenth century America, she apparently was not involved or interested in the women's suffrage movement per se, choosing rather to live her own life as independently and intellectually as possible without seeing any real need to become a part of the larger political process. This does not necessarily mean Chopin was blind to the important issues of woman's need for independence, however. As Toth again puts it, "Kate Chopin was not an activist, but her earliest stories were about women who created their own destinies" (182). Of course, The Awakening continues that tradition of Chopin's, with the character of Edna very much in ultimate control of her own destiny and very much a part of Chopin's life experiences. Toth writes,

When she herself was twenty-nine³, Kate Chopin had moved to Cloutierville and given birth to her last child. Then her own bittersweet romance with another man had taught her about passion and pain and disillusionment--and had

set her on the path to becoming a published author. (330)

Such pain and success experiences helped Chopin to shape Edna into much her own image.

Edna Pontellier of The Awakening is very much like her creator, Kate Chopin. Edna is a member of an upper class Southern society steeped in traditions, both social and religious. She has no worldly worries. She is well provided for by her husband and she can afford the leisure of summers at sea. She is also a mother and the society into which her marriage thrusts her is full of the traditions and rituals of Catholicism. She is also a woman striving to find her own true self--through her swimming, through her art, through her attempt at total independence. These are the things Edna holds most in common with Chopin. Other particulars of her life show a commonality between Edna and the soul of Chopin--the social belief system within which Chopin existed and her views on what true womanhood really meant to an intelligent, seeking nineteenth century woman.

Very important in Chopin's portrayals of Edna are the three women with whom she most has quality contact: Mme. Lebrun, Adèle Ratignolle, and Mlle. Reisz. Each woman affects Edna substantially, though none of the three is Edna in any but the basest sense. Each does, however, represent a part of Chopin's soul that becomes very important in her portrayal of Edna and each serves as an example of nineteenth century American womanhood from a woman's perspective. Mme. Lebrun, who runs the

Grand Isle resort where Edna and other privileged women of her social standing spend their summers with their children--and occasionally with their spouses--, represents the independent businesswoman as well as the matriarchal head of this colony for women and children, an enterprise which "enable Madame Lebrun to maintain the easy and comfortable existence which appeared to be her birthright" (47). She is a successful woman and one who carries that success quite naturally. She is also an independent woman without stepping out of the bounds of her nineteenth century society. Surely she is the type of woman Chopin strove to be when she took over her husband's business affairs upon his death and surely she is the type of woman who can help shape Edna's youthful ideas of womanly possibilities.

Adèle Ratignolle is the quintessential mother figure in the novel, a "sensuous Madonna, with the gleam of the fading day enriching her splendid color" (55). Perpetually pregnant or recovering from pregnancy, Mme. Ratignolle is an earth-mother type. Like Chopin herself, she both accepts and delights in her children, but this does not make her any less a sensual being or any less a woman who feels free to be herself. She serves, in fact, as the instrument of one of Edna's first realizations of female sensuality as a natural and necessary part of a woman's life. Sitting on the beach with Edna,

Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, 'Pauvre chérie.' The action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress. She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others. (61)

Yet, once experienced, Edna enjoys Adèle's physical attention and learns from her the natural, calming effect of giving in to her sensual side. It does not matter with what gender she enjoys that sensuality; the important thing is that Edna's spirit has been opened to the peace that she finds in her sensual side.

Mademoiselle Reisz takes Edna's lessons in sensuality even further. Like Chopin the writer and mistress of her own society and future, Mlle. Reisz is an artist who prefers and manages to go her own way in life. Her music helps to set Edna's soul free as she, too, becomes inspired to take up art and an independent spirit as perfectly sensible ways of life. Edna finds a fascination in her acquaintance with Mlle. Reisz, as she does with her acquaintance with Adèle. For perhaps the first time in her life she is allowing herself to be mentored and influenced by women. Chopin is writing here a woman who is much like the struggling nineteenth century woman searching for freedom and independence through means of female camaraderie; she is also writing

a variety of women whose types stir familiarity in her own soul. Even though Edna is not quite these other women, she is, along with them, seeking a new frontier of independence and comfort for herself, one highly symbolized by the sea and her relationship with that rhythmic, sensual force of nature. Edna

...wishes to become a 'bold swimmer,' both literally and figuratively. For Edna Pontellier, a housewife and mother ill-fitted for the roles she must play in life, the sea comes to represent the vast, romantic, challenging world through which she would like to move with freedom and fortitude. Unlike the 'mother-women' of her acquaintance--who 'idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels'--Edna craves 'the taste of life's delirium.' (Barrett 41)

This is not to say that Edna does not fit into her role as mother as well as do the other mothers; she merely fits into her role in a different way. As Linda Huf writes,

Although Mr. Pontellier never tires of complaining that his wife fails in her duty to their children, the effect of her uneven but intense love has been that her boys are more self-reliant than the children of the 'mother-women.' Indeed, when either Raoul or Etienne takes a tumble at play, he is not 'apt to run crying to his mother's arms' but is more likely to pick himself up, wipe the 'sand out of his mouth, and go on playing.' (75)

The independence that Edna seeks for herself she also seeks for her children. Such actions of hers are somewhat a foreshadowing of modern day feminist motherhood: the woman who is not bound totally by her procreative ties but who rejoices in exploring all

aspects of her personality and who encourages her children to do the same. Though Edna may take this stance to an extreme--surely by nineteenth century standards--she still makes a positive step in a forward direction for women.

Of course, there are issues other than motherhood and true womanhood which Edna encounters and which Chopin addresses with all of her nineteenth century feminist savvy. These are notably the issues of social standing, marriage, and men in general--all tie into Edna's story of her desperate struggle for independence and all are spoken from Chopin's soul, from her life experiences with such matters and her subsequent conquering of such. As a woman of a certain social class, Edna enjoys various privileges but is also trapped by many obligations--including the keeping of Tuesdays as her "reception" day for callers. When Edna first gives up the practice of staying home to greet callers and play hostess on this special day, she is severely chastised by her husband, who explains,

Why, my dear, I shall think you'd understand by this time that people don't do such things; we've got to observe 'les convenances' if we ever expect to get on and keep up with the procession. (101)

Edna ignores the chastisement and continues to miss her reception days. When she decides to move into her own little house, her husband is again upset because of what this behavior of his wife's will in effect say to others

and makes up a suitable story to cover his social standing.

Edna begins to decide upon her own social conventions, some of which actually do fit in well with her class's ideas of conventions. When she throws an intimate dinner party on the evening of her twenty-ninth birthday as a way to celebrate her transition from one home to another, one life to another, she practices the art of hostessing as perfectly as would have any other woman of her class for any more "acceptable" reason. It is difficult for Edna to give up all conventions, for as a woman she knows too little of the world at large to properly invent her own conventions while striking out on her own. Chopin writes her thus as an illustration of social strictures enforced upon the nineteenth century woman. Chopin also writes Edna as an example of what prey the nineteenth century wife normally fell to. The relationship between Edna and her husband is one quite typical of the period.

From the beginning of the novel Mr. Pontellier looks upon Edna as both his property and his ward. He is upset when she stays in the sun too long, thus risking damage to her delicate, fair skin, and he is perturbed when she "childishly" decides to remain on the porch one night rather than coming in to bed as would be proper. In many ways, Mr. Pontellier feels he has the right to rule over Edna and to expect her total devotion and obedience in

return for his care of her worldly needs. When she plainly begins to rebel against his authority, Mr. Pontellier chooses to think of Edna as "unbalanced":

It sometimes entered Mr. Pontellier's mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally. He could see plainly that she was not herself. That is, he could not see that she was becoming herself and daily casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world.
(108)

In typical nineteenth century husband fashion, Mr. Pontellier consults a physician about Edna's "problem" and receives a typical bit of derogatory advice:

Woman, my dear friend, is a very peculiar and delicate organism--a sensitive and highly organized woman, such as I know Mrs. Pontellier to be, is especially peculiar. It would require an inspired psychologist to deal successfully with them. And when ordinary fellows like you and me attempt to cope with other idiosyncrasies the result is bungling. Most women are moody and whimsical. This is some passing whim of your wife, due to some cause or causes which you and I needn't try to fathom. But it will pass happily over, especially if you let her alone. Send her around to see me. (119)

Chopin gives the reader a good taste of nineteenth century medical opinion on women here; she also points out the total lack of understanding of a woman's psyche on the part of men and the eagerness of a husband to restore his wife to that happy sanity of subservience and obedience. Edna, of course, does not return to this "happy" state of affairs. Rather, she blossoms out and finds herself involved with two other types of men--Robert and Alcée, further examples of the society Chopin sought to illustrate in The Awakening.

Robert represents the carefree male whom society

allows--even encourages--to play with his sexuality at the expense of women while never having to take any responsibility for his own actions. The women with whom he takes up, however, are hardly given society's blessing. When Robert begins his flirtation with Edna, it is nothing unusual for him: "Since the age of fifteen, which was eleven years before, Robert each summer at Grand Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel" (53). When Edna returns his attentions, it is she, not he, who tends to look wicked in the eyes of society. The same is true of Robert's relationship with the "saucy" Mariequita, who is portrayed as "easy" while Robert is simply seen as a red-blooded American boy.

Alcée, though older than Robert, is much the same type of man. He plays with Edna sexually, though he knows she is married and undoubtedly knows of her infatuation with Robert. Alcée is content to get what crumbs he can in order to satisfy his own desires and one gets the impression that he cares not that he is just filling in during Robert's absence and that he will easily find a replacement for Edna once she is no longer available to him. Society accepts him in this role; it is Edna who ends up looking immoral from her liaisons with him.

While Chopin spends much of her novel portraying the social realities for nineteenth century upper middle

class American women, she also gives the reader a good look at spirituality from a woman's point of view. Writing from her own spirit, Chopin creates Edna to be a most spiritual being whose struggle to become free of social strictures fits very well into a feminist interpretation of Christian scripture. Though not a Christ figure, Edna does somewhat represent in action and spirit the three biblical Marys with whom Christ had special, non-conformist relationships: Mary the mother of Christ, Mary the sister of Martha, and Mary Magdalene. While Sandra Gilbert sees Edna's existence in terms of a "feminist myth of Aphrodite/Venus as an alternative to the patriarchal myth of Jesus," (20-21) Edna is much more a complement to the teachings of Christ which, in their purest form, are far from patriarchal. As discussed previously, Edna is a mother figure, though not quite in the same way as the other women at Grand Isle are. Like the mother Mary, Edna is there for her children but not in a suffocating way. Though Mary the mother of Jesus had no choice but to accept her son's independence, Edna encourages such by virtue of her nature. One cannot, of course, call Edna a Madonna figure, for Mary is many things Edna can never be, but it is interesting to note their similarities on mothering issues, when one puts aside ideas of self-will and forced will. Her very nature allows them much freedom and when she realizes that she and they must be separated by death, she accepts

this edict with as much natural resignation as does the biblical Mary, realizing that in this parting death lies true freedom and salvation for all concerned.

Edna also resembles Mary sister of Martha, the biblical woman who chooses the male intellectual and spiritual company of Christ over the tedious household duties traditionally assigned to women, the duties which Martha finds so crucial to acceptance as a good woman. When Edna chooses to neglect her set duties as Mrs. Pontellier to fulfill the yearnings of her spirit, she is choosing the same path which Mary chose; she instinctively knows what is best for her and follows that usually ignored path as bravely as did Mary, though not for the exact reasons as did Mary. Nevertheless, Edna's reasons fulfill her spiritual destiny as well as did Mary's fulfill hers.

Likewise, Edna follows the model of the accepted view of Mary Magdalene as she explores her sensuality and sexuality, natural forms of one's spirituality which Christ not only accepted in Mary Magdalene but also, by all reasonable conclusions, delighted in. Mary Magdalene's free spirit and her key role in spreading the message of the resurrection can be likened to Edna's free spirit, though Edna's involvement with resurrection is much more personal than was Mary Magdalene's. As Edna opens up to the possibilities that come with developing her free spirit and, thus, her sensuality, water--the

sea--becomes an important aspect of life to her--just as it is in the Christian religion as a means of cleansing the soul, gaining rebirth, and assuring one's salvation. Carol P. Christ sees Edna's experiences with the sea as mystical experiences⁴ and indeed they are. The ecstasy and the intuitive feeling of acceptance Edna encounters in and with the sea bring to mind like feelings recorded by Christian mystics such as Teresa of Avila, whose own spiritual ecstasy as depicted artistically by Bernini borders very much on the sensual and the sexual, just as does Edna's.

Even before Edna learns to swim, as she "was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her," (57) she finds a strong spiritual connection to the sea:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, unfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (57)

Already, at the novel's beginning, Edna is in touch with her mystical qualities and she is drawn to the power of nature as the symbol of her God, a true indication of her feminine and feminist way of encountering religion and spirituality. When Edna learns to swim at the end of the summer, she experiences "a feeling of exultation..., as if some power of significant import had

been given her to control the working of her body and soul" (73)--a baptismal sort of strength as she allows herself the freedom to deal with her spiritual and sensual awakening, even though such fills her momentarily with terror and fears of death. Carol A. Christ asserts that "...Chopin clearly intends the reader to compare Edna's awakening to those religious awakenings commonly called conversions..." ("Images" 331); such an assertion makes perfect sense, for Edna is indeed converted to a new way of thinking and living through the catalyst of her personal Great Awakening.

Edna's final swim represents a continuation of her spiritual awakening, a second baptism of sorts, like the Confirmation ritual of some Christian sects and the Baptism by Fire ritual of others. Perfectly naked, she swims into eternity, foresaking all but her need for fulfillment and peace. Elaine Showalter says of this final scene of the novel:

Readers of the 1890s were well accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgression against morality, and most contemporary critics of The Awakening thus automatically interpreted Edna's suicide as the wages of sin. (52)

But one needn't necessarily look upon Edna's final swim as suicide or at her life as a sin-filled one; her act is far more an attempt at salvation" or, as Gilbert explains it, her Good Friday sacrifice which will culminate in an Easter resurrection (31-32). Most of all, Edna's final act ties together her social and spiritual sides in a

positive, self- and life-affirming way. Carol P. Christ writes,

The strength of the novel is Chopin's convincing portrayal of a woman's awakening, including her awareness of the spiritual dimensions of that awakening and her unflinching recognition of the powers arrayed against the awakening of women in her society. ...Chopin's choice of physical death for her character rather than the alternative of spiritual death by returning to a conventional life reflects Chopin's courageous affirmation of women's awakening. (Diving 39)

By taking her final swim, Edna makes a conscious decision to opt for the best in life. She does not swim off into panic but rather swims into peace and loveliness. Like the three biblical Marys, she is choosing an unconventional path but one which she believes to be best for all, including herself--an act which fills her soul with mystical contentment. She is also choosing a path that allows her female body to become a pleasurable instrument toward gaining her own personal salvation. Her sensuality becomes an extension of her spirituality, one of the purest ways in which she can develop and understand the depths of her relationship with something more than an earthly, flawed, rule-ridden existence.

Using her own experiences as a nineteenth century woman and her own feelings toward matters of spirituality and religion, Kate Chopin writes Edna Pontellier as a woman symbolic of all women of her class. She writes a soulful Edna struggling with social constrictions and she

writes a spiritual Edna awakening to new mystical possibilities. Neither the soul nor the spirit of Edna is separated by the author; like Jesus Christ's female companions, Edna's person is melded together by spirit and soul in all ways--including the sexual. What results is a character who symbolizes true freedom and true enlightenment in the most feminist of fashions.

Notes

¹This death is alluded to in Chopin's "Story of an Hour."

²Toth suggests this affair may have begun well before Oscar's death.

³This is also Edna's age at the end of the novel.

⁴See Christ's works Diving Deep and Surfacing and "Images of Spiritual Power..." both included on the works cited page of this work.

Chapter Seven

Connecting the Tracks

While each author in this study uniquely writes from her own spirit and from her own soul, she also writes collectively from her experiences as a nineteenth century American woman and from her sense of unique female spirituality. As each does this, certain connections can be made between the experiences and feelings of these writers--some opposing connections and some parallel connections, but all connections nonetheless, for studied side by side through their sense of spirit and soul, Fern, Wilson, Harding Davis, Harper, and Chopin represent nineteenth century womanhood, socially and spiritually, within their women characters to bring to the modern day reader a much clearer understanding and appreciation of both the lot of the nineteenth century woman and her important role in forming the future of all American women.

As writers from the soul, these women present through their characters a deep awareness not only of nineteenth century women's history in general but also of race relations in nineteenth century America from a

woman's perspective. The two African-American women writers in this study--Harriet E. Wilson and Frances E. W. Harper--best illustrate life for the nineteenth century black woman, though each comes from a different perspective. Both Wilson and her creation Frado speak for the non-privileged, downtrodden segment of the race. Though not a slave by legal terms, Frado is quite practically a slave by the very nature of her color and, thus, her position in society. Life is a continuous series of hardships for her, as it was for Wilson. Harper, on the other hand, shows a different class within the African-American community. While Harper's Iola does spend time as a legal slave, she is by birth and upbringing of a much higher social class and, after the travesties of the war, lives a very much middle class life, one which one does not usually associate with African-American society or literature until well into the twentieth century.¹ Obviously, both depictions of African-American life are accurate and, of course, both depictions show that, despite class or breeding or situation, the African-American woman of the nineteenth century found herself quite basically the victim of societal prejudice and downgrading throughout her life solely by virtue of the color of her skin.

Darlene Hine writes:

In the late nineteenth century, America moved inexorably toward a society best characterized

as 'biracial dualism.' While white America, North and South, accepted black subordination as representing the Darwinian natural order, black leaders of the race focused almost completely on winning educational, political, and economic rights. (234)

Sara M. Evans explains the meaning of freedom for the nineteenth century African-American as "...among other things...making one's own decisions, not taking orders from whites, sustaining an independent family life, and learning to read and write" (120). Both Wilson and Harper show these aspects of racial reality in their novels. Just as important as Harper and Wilson's portrayal of racial issues is the treatment given the same topic by the three Caucasian women in this study, for these three write racial issues from a soul that truly cannot know the real meaning of racism--and which sometimes cannot even make itself care about such things. This is not to say that these writers write from cold souls; rather, it is a statement meant to place these Caucasian women according to their time period and their circumstances, though not necessarily by their individual spirits and souls.

Rebecca Harding Davis exhibits genuine sympathy toward racial issues in Margret Howth, particularly in her portrayal of the mulatta Lois. Lois is the only truly good figure in the novel--an interesting attribute for a white author of the nineteenth century to give a biracial character. In addition, everyone in the novel feels a genuine concern for Lois. Harding Davis's Margret Howth is especially caring toward Lois, most

noticeably toward the end of the novel while Lois lay peacefully dying. This treatment Harding Davis gives to her African-American character weaves into the racial themes Harper and Wilson exhibit. Although Harding Davis can in no way give a genuine account of the treatment and lives of African-American women, she can--and does--give the notion that at least some members of white nineteenth century America found their black counterparts as worthy of humanity as themselves. While this view may be no more important to Harding Davis's real life than it was to, say, Harriet Beecher Stowe, its presence in the novel shows a side of Harding Davis's soul that found the matter quite worthy of inclusion in her writing.

On the other hand, Fanny Fern seems ignorant of racial issues in her novel Ruth Hall. The character Ruth Hall encounters tremendous social conflict as a woman in nineteenth century society, but Ruth's life never meaningfully interacts with any black women figures. Writing from her soul, Fern seems to show by this exclusion a lack of interest in the issues facing black Americans--perhaps simply because both Fern and Ruth Hall are largely well-to-do Northerners for whom Black America is only an interesting point of discussion but not of any true pertinence in their daily lives. This attitude and exclusion are important aspects of Fern's writing, especially as it ties into the study at hand, for it is important to remember that not every segment of American

society was overly impressed and concerned with the plight of the black American. To pretend otherwise would paint a grossly unfair picture of the time period.

Kate Chopin, unlike Fern, shows in The Awakening a real awareness of racial issues but, like Fern, seems to carry an attitude of nonchalance about the matter. For the Southern Chopin and her equally Southern character Edna Pontellier, the racial dichotomy is something that just plain exists in life--there is no question of fairness or of what is morally right in a civilized society. Chopin writes from her soul a white upper class society which accepts black Americans as a natural servant class and as a portion of society for whom the concept of equality has no sensible meaning. Although Chopin deals in much more depth with black women characters in some of her other works², she leaves any concern she may have for such women as an aside, at best, in The Awakening. This view nonetheless fills out the study of racial issues here, for it represents that very real portion of nineteenth century America which it seems would have been quite content to have never seen slavery end.

Racial issues aside, it is when looking at other social issues which pour from these writers' souls that more profound connections of concern and attitude can be made. Each author deals with a definite part of the class structure apparent in nineteenth century American

women's history. Taken together, these five women present a good overview of class limitations and possibilities for women of their time. Harriet E. Wilson's Frado clearly portrays the working class woman, but this working class woman is far from the type of woman modern readers know. Wilson shows through Frado a woman limited to very few choices in life, due to her status as a woman and as a black American. For Frado, having to work for a living without the "benefit" of any male financial protection means living forever in an impoverished state. As Wilson's life itself can attest, adding a child and poor health to the situation results in circumstances of irreversible demise. Writing from her soul, Wilson uses Frado to illustrate the social plight of a substantial number of nineteenth century women.

Rebecca Harding Davis also deals with working class women in Margret Howth, although to a much lesser degree. Harding Davis writes this portion of her novel from a soul more attuned to the social problems of her time than from a soul actually experienced with such problems, but nonetheless, her depiction is as valuable as is Wilson's in terms of accurately illustrating nineteenth century life for American women. Harding Davis's Lois is the epitome of the poor working class woman. When Lois becomes ill as a result of industrial hazards, she is forced to live by means of the charity of

others. In Harding Davis's version of such a predicament, certain people willingly and graciously help the poor cripple. This is more a dream of Christian idealism than it is a depiction of nineteenth century social realism, however. The charity of those able to give was not often given so freely to women of Lois's condition. A true-to-life Lois would more likely have found herself coerced into some type of institutionalization or, at best, entry into a social program designed by idle, upper class women. Nevertheless, Harding Davis's depiction of such a class helps connect options and realities for the women of her time.

Much more realistic is the author's portrayal of Margret Howth, whose family falls from middle class security and for whose sake Margret herself is forced into a working class situation. With the comings and goings of economic security in nineteenth century America (or any century, for that matter), such a situation is realistic, although, again, Harding Davis does not write from any personal experience here but merely from her knowledge of life in the industrial town in which she was raised and resided for a good many years. When Harding Davis takes Margret Howth back to the security of the middle class, there her experience shows itself.³

Frances E.W. Harper touches on a much fuller range of social classes than does Harding Davis. Harper's Iola

Leroy moves from the sheltered comfort of upper class life to the horrors of slavery, then moves back up the ladder to the acceptable comforts of middle class life, albeit a black middle class, which then, as even now, meant something a bit different than it did for white Americans. Harper truly writes from her soul in portraying the black middle class, for she herself was a part of that class. As a social warrior battling issues of discrimination that ran the full gamut of slavery through all forms of inequality exhibited toward supposedly "free" blacks, Harper, in writing of Iola's cruel fall to slavery, writes from a soul especially empathetic to the deepest sadness of class structure for nineteenth century African-American women.

Fanny Fern deals as well with a woman's fall from class. Fern's Ruth Hall, however, has the advantage of being white--and that makes all the difference in her life possibilities. Still, Ruth's life is beset with hardship because of her need as a widow and as a mother to obtain a good source of income for herself and for her family. Fern writes Ruth's story from a soul that holds close a story much the same as Ruth's. Because of the autobiographical nature of Ruth Hall, the reader receives an excellent picture of the possibilities of a woman attempting to rise in her financial situation against all odds and with very little outside help. Fern writes from her soul to give an historical account of what a

nineteenth century woman had to endure in order to become financially independent; at the same time, Fern also gives the reader an excellent account of what life was like for the working class woman. Before Ruth finds luck in her writing, she experiences the coldness of a world which has no room for "unattached" women and which sees only one solution for widowhood: to find another man and leave the rest of the world alone. Fern not only allows Ruth to survive and successfully overcome her hardships; she also allows her to do so without turning to remarriage as an answer to all life's ills. Like Iola Leroy, and to some extent like Frado, Ruth finds an independent way of living that clearly nineteenth century women desired, even if perhaps they did not all find such independence.

Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier also strives for independence, but she comes from a much different class than do the characters of the other four writers. As the only upper class character in this study, Edna gives the reader a look at ownership issues between husband and wife as well as illustrating the accepted tenets of the age of domesticity. Writing from her soul, Kate Chopin paints this picture of Edna from her own knowledge of upper class life and certainly from her knowledge of what the Age of Domesticity expected of women. Of course, Chopin's experience, like Fern's, is void of the same type of horrors which Wilson and even Harper experienced,

but those experiences on which she chooses to focus are nonetheless valuable in order to portray a complete view of nineteenth century women's life. By placing Edna Pontellier's life struggles next to those of the other portagonists in this study, the reader receives that complete picture of nineteenth century women's existence that is necessary for a true study of the period from the viewpoints of real women of the era. The soul experiences that these women authors share through their writings allow for a true historical picture of nineteenth century women unlike any picture that can be pieced together solely by means of studying the limited historical studies of women of the period.

These five women authors also write from their spirits to bring together an amazingly complete picture of women's religious and spirituality issues in the nineteenth century. Frances E. W. Harper and Harriet E. Wilson shed light--to differing degrees--on religion, spirituality, and black America in the nineteenth century. Rebecca Harding Davis and Fanny Fern bring to the reader a view of mainstream white religion as well as the spirituality of the middle class woman. Filling out the spectrum, Kate Chopin represents "high" religion in her novel--most specifically, the Roman Catholic church. Though these various standard religions are represented by the characters in these women's novels, so also are each of the character's unique spiritual realities as

well as each character's unique way of relating to the standard social religion with which she is familiar.

Harriet Wilson's Frado discovers painfully that there is no place for her in the "white" churches; such nearly turns her away from Christianity totally. Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy, on the other hand, finds solace in the Christian services of her black brethren. Had Frado the same chances for black fellowship as does Iola Leroy, however, surely she would have found comfort in the established church. Church aside, both women find a deep source of spiritual strength within themselves--a strength which has been built upon their unique struggles as black women in nineteenth century society and a strength which they share with other members of their race, very few of whom have the fortune enough to be exempt from a variety of societal ill treatment.

Rebecca Harding Davis's Margret Howth grows up in and attends a mainstream church which serves the white population well. Margret's church teaches her to be long-suffering and to give to those in need; both traits find their way from the pulpit to Margret's life, for two basic reasons. As a woman living in the Age of Domesticity, Margret finds her role best defined in terms of service and suffering and as a woman with her own definite spiritual sense, she finds a real need to discover through service and suffering her true role in society.

Fanny Fern's Ruth Hall follows much the same guidelines as does Margret Howth. For Ruth, though, those guidelines take on even more significance, for she must always think in terms of her children and their welfare; therefore, her life instinctively revolves around a giving aspect. Unlike Margret Howth, Ruth's spiritual life contains another very significant aspect--because of her circumstances and the actions of those around her, family most especially included, Ruth's story points out very poignantly the religious hypocrisy quite evident in the "Christians" of her era and of her experience. Though such hypocrisy is not especially unique to the nineteenth century, it is important to realize that the century did include more than its share of such, especially as that same hypocrisy affected major social and political events of the era, most notably slavery.

Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier experiences both religion and spirituality on a slightly different level than do the other characters. The religion to which the reader is exposed in The Awakening is Roman Catholicism, in one of its highest, most traditional forms. The Creole community in which Edna finds herself engulfed is highly Catholic. Edna herself succumbs to some of the religious celebrations, although more for the sake of her companion than for herself. Still, the fact that Chopin includes a picture of Roman Catholicism at all in her

work--though, of course, that is the religious tradition in which Chopin herself was bred--becomes an important part of literary history. One does not usually associate nineteenth century American life with Roman Catholicism, when in fact Roman Catholicism was one of the largest religious denominations in the country.⁴ Chopin's work in this way helps fill out a true picture of nineteenth century life.

Although no one can quite call Edna Pontellier religious--as one could some of the other women characters in this study--, she can certainly be called spiritual as well as can the others, despite the fact that her sense of spirituality is a bit different. Edna's spirituality hinges upon her sensuality and her sexuality. Like a mythical creature of nature, she finds her rawest essence in need of fulfillment by coming to terms with her most natural self and struggling to celebrate that natural self as a means of honoring and celebrating her spirituality. Edna realistically travels farther in this direction than do the other women characters travel in the deepest realm of their dreams--even though such desires and fulfillment wishes can easily be seen somewhere in each.

By studying the modes of religion and spirituality by which the women of all five novels live, one finds herself gaining a genuine picture of religious life and women's experiences in nineteenth century America. Most

importantly, one begins to better understand how the tenets of modern day feminist theology were already so clearly in place--privately, at least--in the lives of nineteenth century women. It is most important to keep in mind that these pictures of religion and spirituality are created by women authors who in their own personal lives fought to find peace with their sense of true spirituality.

By writing unself-consciously from their souls--that is, from the purest core of their life experiences and sensibilities--and from their spirits--from that deepest place in their beings from which flows true life as well as a true connectin to a god-being--these nineteenth century women authors give to us women creations who strive for and achieve individual empowerment through their personal searches, their personal trials, and their personal triumphs. Such characters are fairly easy for these women to write, for they each are writing from a spirit and from a soul which has struggled to become free of societal and religious constraints in order to become themselves truly empowered as individuals and as artists. Because of the personal experiences and sensibilities which these women bring to their writings, their women characters exhibit a strong sense of empowerment as spiritual beings and as--along with their creators--purveyors of the social truths of their time. Much more than can a standard history text or a standard

study of American religious history, these novels--exactly because they are written from their author's souls and spirits--present to all future generations of readers a unique picture of life for nineteenth century American women, a precise picture that stems from pure reality, pure pain, and pure seeking on the part of the creators.

Although a little something different about historical and religious matters can be seen in each novel, each work is connected to the others by its desire to bring forth truth. In order to gain a more complete picture of life for the nineteenth century woman, each work depends upon the others for the brightest and broadest form of truth. Taken together or taken separately, however, the novels are excellent examples of feminist literature striving to ignore a male-dominated canon and to forge a new path of realism that can only come from a woman's spirit and soul--as well as excellent examples of feminist theology. Though none claims to be a theological text, the strong underpinnings of religion and spirituality that exist in each help to formulate a very personal theology for each writer and for each protagonist--the same type of personal theology which one finds at the very center of feminist theology. All five authors shine forth as perfect examples of writers from the soul and from the spirit who continue to touch both readers who are seekers and those who are not. Women

writers all, working from their unique female spaces, they also continue to forge forth as early prophets of a feminist literary tradition. Writing from the spirit, writing from the soul, writing Ruth, writing Frado, writing Margret, writing Iola, writing Edna, Fern, Wilson, Harding Davis, Harper, and Chopin come together as masters of American literature as well as as purveyors of truth both social and spiritual and as foremothers of the American feminist literary tradition.

Notes

- ¹Harlem Renaissance writers such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset are particularly known for their depictions of middle class African-American life.
- ²See Chopin's short story "La Belle Zoraide," for instance.
- ³It must be remembered, however, that this "pat" ending was against Harding Davis's initial artistic wishes.
- ⁴See Sydney Ahlstrom's work for various references to the history of the Catholic church in the United States.

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