Sites Unseen:
The Literary Politics of 19th Century American Domestic Space

by

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I stood in a garret bare and old,
The sun poured in a flood of gold;
In my hand I held a slab of wood,
And I gazed on the place where a spectre had stood.
For a space I gazed, then I turned away,
And I watched the sunbeam’s quivering play
On a rafter and sleeper and plank and band,
Then I look at the slab I held in my hand.
It was old and gray, but a trace it bore,
From a hand that had held it long before.
I could not read the words that were there,
But they seemed to be floating about in the air,
And to lie as plain on my very soul
As I read them now on the written scroll:

Ida Clare, 1859
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Introduction

Another will curious be
To know what this garret contains;
And then, they will hear of me,—
If this, my record, remains.
Ida Clare, 1859

The latter half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century in America was a time of unprecedented transitions for women and the home, which were affected by legal, cultural, and economic changes. On a broader scale, Andrew Jackson’s presidency from 1829 to 1837 left the country more socially and economically mobile than ever before, a benefit that was felt both nationally and in individual homes; the Civil War took the lives of hundreds of thousands of men, ruined cities, and finally produced a unified nation and the abolition of slavery; and the structure of the country – down to its cities, families, and women – were soon to transition in the upcoming Industrial Revolution.

These national changes coincided with a growing movement for the economic and social liberation of women. Bound to the home, women were responsible for either performing or overseeing all forms of housework and childrearing, and were inhibited from entering commerce or politics. Yet in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, this was beginning to change. Married women began to have the right to own personal
property as the Married Women’s Property Act was gradually passed state by state. Women were beginning to petition for suffrage. The concept of childhood as a time for children to play and learn was emerging, and children were given their own nurseries within homes. These small and slow political- and cultural-based movements, however, applied only to white, free women. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1865, many African Americans in the South were hardly free, falling prey to systems like sharecropping, which were practically continuations of enslavement, and Native Americans were not granted citizenship in the United States until 1924 (“Great War & Jazz Age”). White women were beginning to fight for more federally sponsored freedoms, and yet they and their fellow African American and Native American countrywomen were nonetheless constrained by norms and laws that restricted them to the home.

This thesis addresses the role that the home played in this time of political and social change by analyzing the ways in which contemporary women authors portrayed women characters within private domestic sites. The home in these texts is a structure purposed for and inhabited by family life, and the ideal home is a single-family site that housed a married mother and father, their children, and perhaps domestic servants. Authors Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Jacobs, Fanny Fern, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Wilson, and Kate Chopin crafted vivid and heartbreaking stories of women in particularly hidden, forgotten and unvalued spaces such as garrets, attics, and cellars.

These authors – the wife of a Bowdoin professor, the house servant in upstate New York, the scorned and forgotten sister of a famous New York City-based literary
author and editor, the free spirited New Englander who picked up and left for California, the impoverished former child servant living alone in Boston, and the widowed St. Louis belle – told stories based on real experiences that revolved around women in unseen and unsung spaces within the home. Though these authors came from opposite coasts and social spheres, their depictions of women in domestic sites call attention to the perceived mental health of women and their political opportunities, or lack thereof, that existed in late 19th century America. The often-true accounts can give the 21st century reader a view into spaces within the 19th century American home that were otherwise undocumented.

The authors formed these alternative sites within the home as spaces in which women could be liberated from the oppressive social and political structures that existed not only outside the home but also even within the home’s more public rooms. How women figures act within these hidden rooms gives a look into how the world around them affects their inner mind and will. These domestic sites thus serve as barometers for the cultural and political climate of the authors’ reality. Through these works we can see the women characters live more intimately than if we had been their houseguests, and can understand the world of the authors as if we were present in the 19th century.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, the daughter of a prominent, outspoken, and intellectual Calvinist family in Connecticut, wrote her serialized magnum opus *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* between 1850 and 1852 in Brunswick, Maine, surrounded by young children while her husband was a professor at Bowdoin College. Stowe was inspired to write the novel both by political events – namely the Compromise of 1850 – and
personal ones. Her much beloved son Charley died of cholera at one and a half years old, and his awful death opened her sympathies to enslaved mothers whose children either died or were taken from them and sold into slavery (Stowe xxvii). Though the grief for her Charley was an overpowering motivator for her at this time, during the creation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe was also a mother to many other children. In 1850, her twins Harriet Beecher and Eliza Tyler were 14, her son Henry Ellis was 12, Frederick William was 10, her daughter Georgiana May was 7, and Charles Edward had just been born (“Stowe’s Family”). Stowe’s family consisted of particularly ambitious women – her mother “read mathematical and scientific treatises for pleasure” and her older sister Catharine started a Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut – and Stowe followed this tradition by accompanying her many wifely and motherly duties with intellectual pursuits (“Beecher Family”).

Harriet Jacobs, on the other hand, set out on an unfamiliar and less supported path when she wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* between 1853 and 1858 in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York (Jacobs 246). The formerly enslaved Jacobs furtively wrote her memoir in between her duties as a domestic servant in the country. Jacobs, as recounted in her memoir, was born into slavery in North Carolina and escaped to the North when she was a young adult (Jacobs xvii). She began to work for Nathaniel Parker Willis, the famed third generation literary editor and author, as a house servant in New York City and in 1853 moved with the family to Idlewild, their home in Cornwall-on-Hudson (Auser 19, 15). It was at Idlewild where Jacob’s friend Amy Post, an abolitionist and feminist activist whom Jacobs met when first escaping slavery, finally convinced her to write a memoir in order to teach the public the
horrors of slavery. Though she lived in the house of a leading force in the literary world, Jacobs felt the need to keep her writing secret out of modesty for her ability and shame of the affair with her master’s white neighbor that her memoir described. Her daily duties to the Willis family, which included household work and caring for their five children, took up much of her time, but Jacobs persistently wrote when she could – in an 1854 letter to Amy Post, Jacobs admitted, “I have not written a single page by daylight” (Jacobs 265, 259). This startling admission illustrates Jacob’s drive, in spite of her lack of support, in writing her memoir.

Fanny Fern, born Sara Payton Willis, wrote *Ruth Hall* in 1854 in Boston in the boarding house rooms she shared with her daughters. Fern was the sister of Nathaniel Parker Willis, though, like Jacobs, was unsupported by this close connection to the literary world. Willis scorned his sister when she decided to divorce her second husband Samuel P. Farrington after two years of marriage (Fern xiii; Baker 161). Fern, with no financial support, was forced to live in cheap boarding houses and to send one of her two daughters to live with their paternal grandparents (Baker 162). Fern had always been a naturally gifted writer, even as a young girl when she studied at Catharine Beecher’s Female Seminary in Hartford. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catharine Beecher’s sister, was a pupil-teacher at the Seminary and fondly remembered Fern as a “‘bright, laughing witch of a half saint half sinner… The girl with a head of light crépe curls—with a jaunty little bonnet tipped to one side, & laughing light blue eyes—writing always good compositions & fighting off your Arithmetic lessons’” (qtd. in Fern xii). Fern’s combination of strong writing and will drove her to begin to write for a living, and soon Boston-based family papers *Olive*
*Branch* and *The True Flag* began to publish her work. Around this time, she took up the pen name Fanny Fern, and later wrote her novel *Ruth Hall*.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman also began her writing career after leaving her husband. Gilman wrote her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” in 1890 in a beloved cottage in the sunny and warm Pasadena, California, where she lived with her daughter. Gilman was born in Hartford, Connecticut and moved to Providence, Rhode Island with her first husband Charles Walter Stetson, but left him in 1888, and moved with her daughter Katharine into a small cottage on “the corner of Orange Grove Avenue and Arroyo Drive” in Pasadena (“The Evolution”; “The Living” 107). Though far from the harsh weather and intellectualism of Bowdoin College and the Willis family, in her memoir Gilman credited this more temperate climate to her literary success: “With Pasadena begins my professional ‘living.’ Before that there was no assurance of serious work. To California, in its natural features, I owe much. Its calm sublimity of contour, richness of color, profusion of flowers, fruit and foliage, and the steady peace of its climate were meat and drink to me” (“The Living” 107).

Though also close to the ocean, Harriet Wilson wrote her autobiographical work *Our Nig* while living alone in the less peaceful environment of Boston’s commercial wharves between 1856 and 1859 (Wilson xxiii). Wilson was born free but abandoned by her mother at a young age and treated as a slave by the family that housed her. When, as an adult, she left the family, she encountered more hardship through poverty and the death of her husband. Wilson was forced to do as her mother had done to her, and leave her child in the care of another while she moved to Boston.
to try to make a living (Wilson 129). From 1856 to 1863, Wilson lived at 4 Webster Avenue and earned her small income through hairdressing (Wilson xxiii, 137). Wilson lived without a husband or her child, but was far from alone. The 1862 Boston Directory published by Adams, Sampson & Company reveals that 2 Webster Avenue was the home of a widow, and 8 Webster Avenue was home to two more and their male boarder, who, like Wilson, was a hairdresser (The Boston Directory). Across the street, at 1, 3, 5, and 7 Webster Avenues, were a tailor and a “laborer,” a mason, a clerk, and two widows (The Boston Directory). Wilson’s neighbors were not families; on the contrary, they, like herself, had either lost their loved ones or left them, and were working for their livelihood.

Kate Chopin also was widowed, but her white, upper class background enabled her to lead a much more comfortable life than Wilson did. Chopin wrote The Awakening from 1897 to 1898 in her large home at 3317 Morgan Street in St. Louis, Missouri. Chopin was born into a prominent and wealthy St. Louis family (Chopin vii). She married Oscar Chopin, moved with him to Louisiana and together they had six children (“Biography”). Chopin was widowed at just thirty-two, and soon after returned to her hometown, but this time “half a city away from the old neighborhood” on Morgan Street (“Biography;” Toth 103). The home was “a grand three-story Federal-style home with intricate stonework” which in many places “would have been a small mansion” (Toth 103). When Chopin was writing The Awakening, her children were between the ages of 18 and 27, certainly old enough to do some of the housework and some most probably no longer living at home.
Stowe, Jacobs, Fern, Gilman, Wilson, and Chopin wrote in entirely different settings across the United States, and yet their portrayals of women in unseen domestic spaces suggest a commonality between the way in which 19th century women across the country related to the home. These authors’ stories prove that it was in these attics and garrets, cellars and hovels that women of the 19th century were free to act as they chose.
Chapter 1

The New Natural:
A Comparative Look Into the Politicization of the Attic Space

I do not remember, now,
How I came here, or when, or for what;
But I feel, as I beat my brow,
By the world I am all forgot.
Ida Clare, 1859

It is no secret that the social, political, and economic domains of Victorian America worked together to control women and their freedoms. Current politics, religion, science, and literature supported a sexist worldview that claimed to be natural both biologically and by the sanction of God. From this worldview arose a concept of natural womanhood that existed within parameters of behaviors for certain spaces. The proper behaviors for these spaces coincided with the accepted political and cultural institutions of slavery and upper class etiquette. The actions considered natural for an enslaved woman on a plantation, thus, was to submit to her enslavement within her master’s estate, and the actions considered natural for a free, white, upper class woman was to raise her husband’s children within the home. Behaviors that broke with the conventions of these institutions – such as an enslaved woman resisting slavery, or a free, white, upper class woman engaging in labor outside the home – were thus unnatural. It is perhaps because of these restrictions on women’s rights and accepted behaviors that three influential women writers of
antebellum America – Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Fanny Fern – portrayed women who escape the gendered order by situating themselves in unexpected locations. Jacobs’ *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1854) included strong women protagonists who, like women in general during the time in which these books were published, were stripped of any political powers. Stowe’s strong-willed figure Cassy and Jacob’s protagonist Linda Brent, as enslaved women, had no legal voice or personal rights. Fern’s title character Ruth Hall, though born white, was still not as free as a man and could neither handle her own finances nor hold any occupation without legal pushback and social disapproval.

Stowe and Fern’s strong and persevering women protagonists, whose stories were modeled after true experiences, escape this natural world by situating themselves in attics and garrets: small, confined and peripheral spaces within the domestic sphere. These spaces are unnatural for many reasons; in them, these authors often allowed their figures to create a new natural order, which rejects the natural order they escape from and establishes a new set of boundaries for behavior and thought. It is following this creation of a new natural that these women authors exhibited in their characters the 19th century definition of madness by defying the norms and roles of the many ordered institutions such as motherhood, wifehood and family. The authors’ usage of these attics and garrets created spaces within the home that were political, and, moreover, politically dissenting. While the domestic sphere is placed in opposition with the political, it is perhaps only within these hidden away,
forgotten spaces within the home that women authors were able to make political statements.

Unlike Stowe and Fern, Jacobs created a leading woman in her memoir who presents an exception to this cause and effect, an artistic choice that consequently implied the unique relationship that Jacobs had with her readers. In *Incidents*, Jacobs narrated her own life story through the character Linda. Unlike Stowe and Fern, Jacobs portrayed her protagonist employing the natural order in this unnatural space. Counter intuitively, this decision to portray Linda as apolitical within her garret was perhaps the most effective maneuver to politicize not only the text but also its readers: by choosing to portray Linda as adhering to the social system that oppressed her, Jacobs proved her character’s sanity and ultimately undermines her readers’ sense of the natural order.

Nineteenth century society depended on certain social institutions to maintain order. Gender delineated different roles for men and women, marriage asserted their roles within a romantic union, the family established units wherein each member had a particular role and arguably represented the same economic class and race, and slavery created a system in which racial differences marked a very clear power disparity. *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the most popular 19th century American magazine, and “the first to represent the interests of women,” maintained the supremacy of order in society and within the institutions of gender, sexuality and married life (“To The Readers of Godey’s Lady’s Book;” see figure 1). The magazine was edited by Sarah Josepha Hale – the writer of “Mary Had A Little Lamb” – heavily staffed by women,
and included contributions by authors such as Stowe herself ("Godey’s Lady’s Book"). Godey’s reached a peak in its readership with 150,000 men and women subscribers in 1960 ("Godey’s Lady’s Book"). An especially revealing article from 1867 titled "Golden Maxims for Families" claims: "Where there is disorder there is no tranquillity [sic], no excellence, no happiness" ("Golden Maxims for Families"). It goes on to state that families must be ordered by “rules to direct and govern, from which there should be no deviation, unless necessity compel” ("Golden Maxims for Families"). Of course, order could be broken, but only in unusual circumstances that called for unorthodox action, as peace and contentedness depended on women warding off disorder in the home. The direct advice that women were receiving was that they were to maintain order within the social sphere.

Womanhood, wifehood and family were the bedrock of political and economic order in the United States and operated at a cost to women’s freedom to act in more public realms. Indeed, “[t]he Victorian family structure, being the smallest patriarchal unit, is a microcosm of the social structure” (Chi 10). The Married Women’s Property Act, for example, a collection of common law policies that started in Connecticut and were slowly adopted in most states around 1850, gave white, free women the right to possess real or personal property independently of their husbands (Law Library of Congress). This small political offering of financial power to women proves just how divided and ordered economics were until the 1850s, and most probably continued to be for well after. Influence in politics was inherently gendered until 1920, when all American women acquired the vote, though the disenfranchisement of African American women continued in both the North and
South. Higher education, too, was mostly unaccepting of women. Oberlin College was the first school to admit both men and women in 1833, and African American students in 1835. Most schools, however, accepted only men. The Seven Sisters – colleges in the Northeast that were originally solely for women, including Barnard College, Bryn Mawr College, Mount Holyoke College, Radcliffe College, Smith College, Vassar College and Wellesley College – were founded in the mid- to late-19th century, starting with Mount Holyoke in 1837 and ending with Barnard in 1889. The women who founded and attended these colleges, however, “were very unusual. Their social backgrounds and motivations must have been radically different from the norm of the majority of women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Kelly 5).

These institutions – gender, marriage, family, slavery, law, economics, and education – achieved order through a hierarchy that subjugated women. The rigid position society offered women and which *Godey’s Lady’s Book* described and disseminated stripped them of many powers and rights that men enjoyed.

Politics and religion worked together to maintain that natural roles for women were subordinate. Political policies, acts and laws were based on the Christian view that women were unequal and less important than men. When the New York State Legislature in 1854 denied a Women’s Rights Petition that asked for, among other rights, women’s suffrage by citing God-given roles of men and women, the legislative body declared: “A higher power than that from which emanates legislative enactments has given forth the mandate that man and woman shall not be equal… We can not obliterate it if we would, and legal inequalities must follow” (“Report of the
Select Committee”). The legislature maintained inequalities because it believed divine law sanctioned these differing existences of men and women.

Though scientific logic for the inferiority of women was long held – starting with the father of logic himself, Aristotle – in the 19th century a new, enlightened reasoning for this same belief arose. English naturalist Charles Darwin, the creator of the theory of natural selection, and the man who enacted “an almost immediate impact upon religion, science, and society at large,” argued that evolution led women to become biologically inferior to men (McNamara). In *The Descent of Man* Darwin claimed as obvious the superiority of men, writing that “[t]he chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn [sic] by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain” (Darwin 327). Without taking into account the barriers to women’s intellectual advancement of the time, Darwin pointed to their failure to achieve “higher eminence” in society as proof of their lack of “intellectual powers” – a phrase that perhaps alluded to their lack of wit or knowledge. In his explanation as to why this is, Darwin assumed that “sexual selection has played a very important part” (Darwin 326). Darwin thus used his theory of natural selection to argue that the seen difference between men and women’s has evolved naturally and was thus inherent. His theory of the biological justification of the inferiority of women was widely disseminated and most probably widely accepted.

The concept of the divinely sanctioned role of women also existed in 19th century literature. The cult of True Womanhood, a contemporary term used to describe 19th century views on ideal womanhood, abounds in Victorian literature.
Defined by scholar Barbara Welter as the concurrence of the “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” the cult of True Womanhood was “presented by the women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century” (Welter 21). Indeed, a writer of *Godey’s Lady’s Book* claims “that the man and the woman have each a work to do, for which they are specially qualified, and in which they are called to excel” (“The China Closet. No. 1”). Women’s work was domestic, and the fact that women were “specially qualified” for it suggests that their gender deemed this capability natural.

The 19th century’s power structures were even seen in the architecture of the era’s homes. Hsin Ying Chi in *Artist and Attic* claims “large houses and mansions characteristic of nineteenth century were designed with different stories for different classes of occupants” (Chi 1). While seemingly every room had a purpose and every story had an economic and social meaning, “the design and function of the attic in Victorian houses did not receive much attention from architects” (Chi 12). Many Victorian houses had attics and garrets, but their existence was simply a by-product of the resurgence of the classical style of architecture. The classical style included high-pitched roofs and many gables, which inherently created attic and garret spaces between the topmost floor and the roof (see figure 2; Chi 12). These spaces were considered dead space to architects, and “are virtually unmentioned in the histories of domestic architecture” (Chi 1). These spaces were thus left undecorated, often even unfinished, and used primarily for storage (Chi 12).

The smallness and unimportance of the garret and attic is all the more striking in opposition to the opulence and grandness of many plantation- and slave owning-
homes in the South and wealthy family’s homes in the North. Jacobs portrayed Linda’s garret as too small to have ever had a purpose, while her master lives in a large house in town and his son, whom Linda also worked for, lives on a plantation. Stowe suggested that Cassy’s garret was large enough to presumably have been meant as a storage space, but its size is insignificant when considered along with Legree’s entire plantation and home – which is so large that he is unable to maintain what “had been large and handsome” from becoming “desolate and uncomfortable” (Stowe 397). Fern depicted Ruth as fortunate in comparison because her attic is outfitted to be an apartment, albeit a small, dreary and unfashionable one. Meanwhile, her brother, still benefitting from their family’s wealth, lives in a large home with a piazza, a “velvet lawn,” “cliffs on the opposite side,” and “blue river which lavished their base” (Fern 176). The garrets these women occupy are truly the smallest, least comfortable and most forgotten spaces within these worlds of luxury.

The invisibility of the attic extends to its inhabitants and had positive effects. Both the architect and the homeowner paid little attention to the attic and garret, which as often the least accessible, least conductive and the least used part of the house. Chi notes that “[t]he invisible nature of the attic provides women with a place for refuge, an escape from any roles society circumscribes for her” (Chi 13). The attic or garret’s only function, apart from storage and “supporting the roof of a building,” was to be “a hiding or watching place, where one can be free from being seen or watched” (Chi 12). Because the attic was seen from neither the outside of the house or the inside, Chi finds a parallel between the role of the attic and that of the Victorian woman: “Like women in the era, the attic seems to be invisible” (Chi 13).
invisibility of the attic and garret also hid women from the judgmental eye and strict regulations of Victorian society. The inability to be seen, however, could be an advantage. Unlike the kitchen, the bedroom, the parlor and other more visible parts of the home, the attic or garret was “a place where women identify themselves as women and as artists rather than being identified as wives and mothers” (Chi 13). Indeed, the role of the attic and garret changed throughout American history. While the attic or garret “began to be associated with poverty in the eighteenth century; by the nineteenth century, as many literary references show, the association had expanded to include artists, especially writers” (Kearns 34). The woman as practicing and successful artist was incongruous with the view of women as only mothers and wives. In this way, the attic and garret began to become places of seclusion, invisibility, and freedom in the 19th century, which perhaps led these writers to employ these spaces in their texts.

Challenging these norms not only breached implicit and explicit social contracts, but also acted as a sign of mental illness. Indeed, deviance from the natural order is what most constituted mental illness in the 19th century. Psychiatrists of this period were beginning to unite; superintendents of thirteen out of the twenty-five public hospitals for the mentally ill convened in October 1844 to create the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, and their official journal, *The American Journal of Insanity*, published its first edition that year (“The 1840s”). These medical leaders were striving to agree on the manifestation and cause of insanity, though insanity was not fully defined in Victorian America. These experts were certain, however, that “insanity was a disease
of the brain and that the examination of tissues in an autopsy would reveal organic lesions, clear evidence of physical damage, in every insane person” (Rothman 110). Insanity could be found in the body, but the root was to be found elsewhere, and in the nineteenth century psychiatrists began to look at greater society as its root. The notion that mental illness was created by one’s social surroundings was accepted by professionals “[w]ith a regularity that quickly rendered the idea as much a cliché as an insight” (Rothman 112).

The era of Andrew Jackson’s presidency was one of significant political, economic and social change. The introduction of the Democrat Party, a Transportation Revolution and an increase in economic mobility led French writer Alexis de Tocqueville to note in Democracy in America (1835): “Among the new objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States, none struck me more vividly than the equality of conditions” (Tocqueville 4). This “equality of conditions” was in part to do with the rise in social mobility, which led to a “belief in social flux and in what Henry Clay called ‘self-made men,’” which was widely “subscribed to by publishers, ministers, businessmen, leaders in the professions and in politics” (Pessen 80). The belief that society was changing was widespread and legitimate. Historians Frank Otto Gatell and John M. McFaul claim that “the era can be validly linked with the emergence of a democratic spirit which ultimately displaced traditional forms of civility, decorum, and deference” (Gatell and McFaul 1).

Psychiatrists of the time found this social mobility, which brought about social change, to be problematic. Medical superintendents looking to the greater society for
answers about insanity “found chaos and disorder, a lack of fixity and stability. The community’s inherited traditions and procedures were dissolving, leaving incredible stresses and strains” (Rothman 114). Jacksonian America seemed to be a pit of insanity: social mobility was encouraged, women were given the right to own property and the ability to achieve higher education, and the traditional family unit was threatened. By their standards, society was moving at a fast pace and it was hurting the mental health of the population.

Psychiatrists decided that the lack of social order produced by the Jacksonian era’s social mobility was the root of madness, and the cure was to introduce order back into the lives of effected people. Psychiatrists would study the lives of patients, locate the areas of disorder, and in the asylum construct a model world that mimicked order in these areas. In effect, asylums “would re-create fixity and stability to compensate for the irregularities of the society” (Rothman 133). The imitation of hierarchical and ordered institutions of Victorian American – such as the family, which was “the one institution that psychiatrists believed might have calmed the frantic spirit at loose in the community” – was the cure and shield against insanity (Rothman 121).

Hospitals for the mentally ill of this time – then known as insane or lunatic asylums – were indeed ordered. The first public hospital solely for the mentally ill was the Eastern Lunatic Asylum in Williamsburg, Virginia, and its first patient was admitted in 1773. A female ward was added in 1821, creating the first distinct population of women in a hospital for the mentally ill, and with this the first distinct population of medically verified “mad women” (“Public Hospital”). By the end of the
1850s, the Eastern Lunatic Asylum was comprised of 7 buildings and housed 300 patients (“Public Hospital”). This number was nearly one tenth of the 3,212 people in the total free population of James County, the county in which Williamsburg is located (Historical Census Browser). The first public hospital for the mentally ill in New York was the New York State Lunatic Asylum, which was similarly grand. In addition to being wonderful in design – the building was “internationally recognized as a monumental example of the Greek Revival architecture tradition” – the facilities were state of the art (“Utica State Hospital”). By 1850, the hospital included “380 single rooms for patients, 24 for their attendants, 20 dormitories each accommodating from 5 to 12 persons, 16 parlors or day rooms, 12 dining rooms, 24 bathing rooms, 24 closets and 24 water closets” (“Utica State Hospital”). In addition to its impressive capacity, the hospital also boasted both hot and cold running water and ventilators (“Utica State Hospital”). Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane was both architecturally beautiful and rigorous in its adherence to order (see figure 6). Patients’ life was highly ordered:

They rose at five o’clock, received their medicines at six, and breakfast at 6:30; at eight o’clock they went for a physical examination, and then to work or to some other form of exercise. At 12:30 they ate their main meal and then resumed work or other activities until six, when everyone joined for tea. They passed the evening indoors, and all were in bed by 9:30. (Rothman, 145)
This regimented schedule not only kept patients busy and accounted for but also prepared them for a regimented life outside of the asylum.

Constricting views on the natural capabilities and roles of women limited their actions in the world as governed by these so-called natural norms. Thus the natural world – that of 19th century American political, economic, scientific and social norms – was not natural at all, but was created as a means of maintaining certain institutions that promote order. Stowe, Fern, and Jacobs portrayed their attic- and garret-confined women characters sidestepping these constricting 19th century institutions and establishing their relationships – either antagonistic or cooperative – with this world through their actions within these confined spaces. The pathway of action for these women is certainly qualified by the fact that it is often their only choice – forced slavery and financial burdens narrow their viable options. Linda in Incidents chooses to escape slavery to acquire her freedom and that of her children. She first finds refuge in her friend’s attic and under the floorboards beneath her kitchen, and then is moved to the garret above the shed on her grandmother’s property. Cassy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin also escapes slavery by hiding in her master’s garret. Ruth in Ruth Hall enters a male-dominated occupation by ensconcing herself in an attic apartment. While her decision is not motivated by the evils of slavery, the very real concern of her finances obliges her to move. The spaces into which these women move – garrets and attics – are small, confined, and extreme within the structure of the domestic home. These sites constitute the unnatural because they are not spaces that women
usually inhabit or are expected to inhabit and because there exists in these spaces no regulation or imposition of Victorian order.

The women Jacobs, Stowe, and Fern created within *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ruth Hall* are no strangers to oppressive social, political and economic institutions. The worlds of the women in these texts are virtual facsimiles of Victorian America. Jacobs, Stowe, and Fern did not create for their novels fantastical or utopian social backdrops; instead, they created worlds that housed the same institutions that most probably constricted them as authors: gender norms, motherhood, wifehood, slavery, education, politics and economics. The texts by these women writers were the product of the suffering and subjugation they either lived through or witnessed.

The authors of these texts created attic spaces that allowed the creation of a new natural, but at the expense of perceived madness. Stowe crafted such a space for Cassy in the plantation home of the man who enslaves her. Cassy begins her life under a seemingly kind and generous master, Henry, whom she loves and with whom she bears two children. His cousin soon convinces him, however, that his relationship with Cassy is beneath him and convinces him to sell her. Cassy’s next master – indeed, the cousin who plants the seed in Henry’s mind that breaks her heart – sells both of her children and soon sells her to Simon Legree, in whose hands the reader finds her. Legree, the slave owner who also purchases Uncle Tom and ultimately has him killed, is controlling and cruel to Cassy. Though born into enslavement, Cassy is unaware of slavery’s true cruelties until later in life, when Henry’s love for her is
nullified. In an effort to escape her current master, Legree, she hides herself in the garret of Legree’s own house. Unlike the garret Linda inhabits, the garret in Legree’s home is spacious, Cassy does not occupy it alone and indeed fashions the room into a comfortable space. She remains in the garret for a number of days before fleeing.

Though *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is technically a work of fiction – and indeed originally published June 1851 by the abolitionist journal *National Era* in serial form, with dramatic and curiosity-provoking chapter endings – Stowe was vocal about its historical accuracy. Stowe felt a responsibility to expose slavery’s evils, through she was born a free, white women into a religious family in Connecticut. Her ability to write, her religious morals, her past encounters with enslaved people and slave owners, and her free time allowed her to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The full book version of the novel was published in 1852, and the desire to convince the public of the storyline’s authenticity compelled Stowe to publish a book the very next year entitled *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin; Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story Is Founded. Together With Corroborative Statements Verifying The Truth Of The Work*. Stowe wrote *Key* because, as she explains within the text, “doubt has been expressed whether the representations of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ are a fair representation of slavery as it at present exists” (*A Key* 5). In order to quell controversy regarding her text’s verisimilitude, Stowe straightforwardly claimed that “[t]his work, more, perhaps, than any other work of fiction that ever was written, has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents,-- of actions really performed, or words and expressions really uttered” (*A Key* 5). Stowe admitted to omitting some of the truth, but only because “slavery, in some of its workings, is too dreadful for the
purposes of art. A work which should represent it strictly as it is would be a work which could not be read” (A Key 5).

The text as an amalgam of real life experiences allows the reader a glimpse into the way in which the plantation home itself dictated the life progression and political opportunities – or lack of political opportunities – for its women inhabitants. Stowe risked very little of her own personal status or political power by publishing the novel; she was a free, white, Northern woman exposing the evils of a society to which she did not belong. Yet through this novel the reader gains insight into the realities of slavery, plantation life and women’s domestic space and personal political power.

Stowe allowed Legree’s garret to create entities that the natural world of slavery, and, more specifically, Legree, does not allow Cassy: a home, a family and power (see figure 4). Cassy transforms the vacant garret into a cozy bedroom for her and Emmeline, and refers to it as such: ‘‘There,’’ said Cassy, as she fixed the lamp into a small hook, which she had driven into the side of the box for that purpose; ‘‘this is to be our home for the present’’ (Stowe 468). In this home she accepts Emmeline’s love – ‘‘The gentle, child-like spirit conquered’’– and thus allows her to become a surrogate daughter (Stowe 472). The garret itself is a space that scares the superstitious Legree. His fear is so great that ‘‘[g]radually, the staircase that led to the garret, and even the passage-way to the staircase, were avoided by every one in the house, from every one fearing to speak of it’’ (Stowe 459). Because she is hiding in the garret, Cassy is able to mimic a ghost, separating her self and body from her presence by covering herself in a white sheet and visiting Legree in his bedroom at
night (see figure 5). Her disembodiment in turn removes her gender – an entity that Legree had been able to dominate – from Cassy’s presence. No longer gendered, Cassy is able to frighten her master and maintain control over him. Furthermore, she does so in his bedroom, historically a place of male desire, power and domination. Indeed, the garret itself is symbolically positioned over Legree’s bedroom, assigning the small, forgotten space a position of superiority to Legree. In addition to being a place with inherent power over Legree, Cassy’s garret is comfortable to inhabit. The garret “was a great, desolate space, dusty, hung with cobwebs, and littered with cast-off lumber” (Stowe 458). Unattractive as this description may seem, the sheer size of the garret in Legree’s house allows for Cassy to make it quite home-like and comfortable. The garret becomes a safe hiding-spot for Cassy and Emmeline before their escape to the North without posing physical danger.

Stowe allowed Cassy to create new natural that is in direct opposition to the natural world whence she comes, but simultaneously marks her as insane for doing so. In the garret, Cassy acquires a home, family and power, all of which slavery had not previously given her. This creation of a new natural order deviates from the natural order Cassy is meant to uphold. Slavery contains an explicit contract that dictates action within the institution. Even if Cassy is not an active or benefiting member of the transaction, she is part of a legalized contractual system in which she has a defined role, which is indeed understood by Cassy, Stowe and the novel’s readers. Cassy’s self-removal from slavery breaks an explicit contract – albeit neither written nor approved by her – that outlines how she should behave. Cassy rejects the natural order of society in attics and garrets and is considered inherently mad because
Figure 1. The popular *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in 1892.


Figure 2. A “model residence” for the 19th century woman containing many attic spaces.


Figure 3. Linda’s garret.

Figure 5. Cassy visiting Legree’s bedroom.


Figure 6. A drawing and floor plan of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane.


of her decision. Stowe marked Cassy as mad because she claims the right and freedom to do with her own body and self as she wishes – she enters a space apart from and invisible to society and creates a new natural order within this space. Cassy’s “irritability, at times, broke out into raving insanity,” because she was “[s]tung to madness and despair by the crushing agonies of a life” (Stowe 426, 455). Stowe’s usage of animalistic and violent language – “raving,” “stung,” and “crushing” – portrays Cassy, her actions and mental capacity as unordered, uncivilized, and even inhuman.

Not all of these authors created a new natural and a coinciding deemed madness in a hiding place. Fern created an attic in Ruth Hall that is not, like in Stowe and Jacob’s works, transitional or a means to some end, but rather is a last-resort living space. The novel follows Fern’s protagonist, the free and white Ruth, as she happily marries her husband Harry only to watch him die after they have two children together. Ruth is left in poverty with no familial assistance to help her raise her two daughters. As newly widowed, her political and financial realities leave her no better option than to rent an attic apartment. The attic that Fern describes is the most comfortable of the three spaces inhabited by women in this chapter, as it is purposed for renting out. It is certainly not an ideal living space: it was a “room without board” situated “in the lower part of the city” (Fern 112). The apartment is subject to heat, when “not a breath of air played over the heated roofs of the great, swarming city;” and Ruth has a noisy neighbor who makes odd noises “all day long in the attic overhead” (Fern 122, 114). She turns to writing to support her self, and is met with
surprising literary success. The attic apartment is certainly not a place conducive to her writing. She can write only when her daughter is asleep and has to make do with highly regulated use of candlelight. Despite these difficulties, Ruth’s attic apartment offers her a reliable living space without risk of physical danger.

Fern’s novel is closely based on her own experiences. Fern, the white daughter of a Boston-based Calvinist publisher, whose given name was Sara Payson Willis, chose to create a character uncannily similar to herself. Ruth Hall, like Fern, was sent to a boarding school, where her compositions were published in the local newspaper. She, too, was widowed, treated with disdain by her family and obligated to write in order to support her children and herself. Fern crafted an attic apartment as a site for Ruth to escape subjugation by men and gain power as a successful writer of articles without male protection and in so doing create a new natural. While Ruth does not seek power, she does share Cassy’s desire for home and family, and hopes for a means of supporting both. In this attic, removed physically and socially from natural society, she is able to gain success as a writer. Fern would not write if she were still within natural society. When her daughter asks if she will be a writer when she grows up, Ruth replies, “‘God forbid,’” because “‘no happy woman ever writes. From Harry’s grave sprang ‘Floy’’” (Fern 175). If her husband were still alive and she were still supported financially and socially, she would then not be able to justify writing, even though she is highly talented and earns good money from the profession. In her present situation, however, she is acting against the tenets of the cult of True Womanhood. While earning money is not Ruth’s key to happiness, she is focused more on money than on upholding the roles and values of motherhood. She,
like Cassy, chose a path that was incompatible with Victorian America’s socially sanctioned avenue of action.

Fern’s decision to portray Ruth creating a new natural coincided with her portrayal of this character as a mad woman. Ruth’s advancement of a male-dominated career breaks an implicit contract between men and women – whether their relationship is that of marriage or family – determining that women ought to rely on men for their finances. Ruth thus breaks a social contract dictating her socially sanctioned actions. Ruth’s decisions are labeled “‘[p]erfect madness’” by her father (Fern 68). Fern thus denoted Ruth’s deviancy as a sign of mental illness and dis-ease.

Attic spaces could be home to a new natural that is not in opposition to Victorian order and thus not denoting perceived madness for their inhabitants. This is the case for the garret in which Jacobs described her character Linda living. The memoir follows Linda through her childhood as a slave with a kind master, to her young adulthood as a slave with a tyrannical master who attempts to defile her, to her experiences as a woman and mother attempting to escape slavery by hiding herself in her grandmother’s garret for seven years. When Dr. Flint threatens to sully her virtue she has two children by his white neighbor, Mr. Sands, in an effort to save herself from Flint’s whim. This act of defiance and disloyalty angers Dr. Flint, who banishes her off to his son’s plantation and threatens the freedom of her children. In order to save herself and her children, Linda flees to the garret on her grandmother’s property. The space she inhabits is emotionally and physically damaging, yet she resides within it for seven years in an attempt to achieve freedom for herself and her children.
Jacobs was an enslaved African American woman who, because of her physical attractiveness and unprotected status, experienced special cruelty by her master. Unfortunately, she escaped enslavement only to find more tribulation in the North. In New York and Massachusetts Jacobs found herself still in hiding from the oppressive society and institutions from which she fled, having only the good will of a few white Northerners for protection. She is later employed by Nathaniel Parker Willis as his children’s caretaker, and it is when she is living with the Willis’ that her sense of responsibility to those enslaved led to her to write a memoir about her trials.

Jacobs allowed Linda to take advantage of the seclusion, invisibility and freedom of her extreme, confined space within the domestic sphere by creating a new natural out of the unnatural. Jacobs symbolically marked Linda’s entrance into the garret as her exit from the system of slavery. Linda no longer exists as a slave, no longer taking orders from Dr. Flint or his son, and no longer living – as much as she was allowed to previously “live” – on the plantation. This new natural offers her freedom, but is also dangerous in its extreme confinement and discomfort (see figure 3). The space is “only nine feet long and seven feet wide,” and the highest part of the sloped ceiling is only three feet, leaving Linda so little space that she “could sleep comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that [she] could not turn in the other without hitting the roof” (Jacobs 114). Perhaps worse than the extreme confinement is the lack of contact with the outside world: the garret allows “no admission of either light or air” (Jacobs 114). The lack of windows gives her no sense of when the sun was out, and Linda differentiates between day and night “only by the noises I heard” (Jacobs 114). While the benefits of light and air is denied her, she also
has to reckon with the disadvantages of unfortunate weather. The rain fills up her living space so much at times that she says, “I was likely to be drowned out of my den, if I remained much longer” (Jacobs 148). The garret is also the root of physical damage. She is “tormented” by red insects that “produced an intolerable burning,” but was also subject to more long-term damage (Jacobs 115). The lack of space with which to move, and in the winter her legs are “benumbed my inaction, and the cold filled them with cramp” (Jacobs 122). She is so damaged by the enduring inaction that she says “[i]t seemed as if I could never use my limbs again” (Jacobs 125).

By this measure, Jacobs’ decision to portray Linda as upholding natural society’s norms within her garret had political significance. While all three of these authors allowed their protagonists to create a new natural in their respective unnatural spaces, Jacobs was the only one who allowed her protagonist to create a new natural is not in direct opposition to the Victorian natural world. Linda’s adherence to the old natural order works in tandem with the 19th century view of madness to mark her as sane, and ultimately to support her case for abolition. Her move to the garret displaces her from the outside world and her role as slave within that world, but it does not, as Cassy or Ruth’s do, create a different natural order. The way Linda acts within the garret is not in opposition with the world from which she escapes. In fact, Linda’s actions suggest that she can only act within the natural order of the world she knows. Though her confinement lacks a window, she is able, by the meager light that came through gimlet-bored holes, “to read and sew” (Jacobs 116). These activities, Georgia Kreiger explains in Playing Dead: Harriet Jacobs’s Survival Strategy in ‘Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,’ “are coincidentally among the activities approved for pure,
pious ladies who reside over domestic spaces, northern and southern” (Kreiger 617). She is acting within the realm of socially sanctioned activities for “free women privileged with leisure time to read, do needlework, and engage in written correspondence” (Kreiger 617). While these are not actions that she as an enslaved woman is necessarily allowed, they are actions that are allowed for women of a different class within the slave-owning society. Indeed, the same world that houses slavery also houses women of leisure. Linda, then, is acting within the confines of and thus existing in the same spectrum of social order from which she escaped, even if she is operating on the polar end of this spectrum.

Linda’s adherence to the social order is also seen through her commitment to motherhood. Unlike Cassy, who swears to never love again and Ruth, who sends one of her daughters away, Linda never relents in her dedication as a mother: “Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children’s faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, ‘Your mother is here’” (Jacobs 148). Indeed, her prayers express the desire to uphold her socially sanctioned and seemingly “righteous” role as woman and mother: “How earnestly I prayed to him to restore me to my children, and enable me to be a useful woman and a good mother” (Jacobs 133). Linda’s conceptions of a “useful woman” and a “good mother” are certainly affected by her internalization of the cult of True Womanhood. The pinnacle of womanhood is seen as being able to uphold her role as “mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman.” For Linda, this manifests only as mother, daughter and woman (Welter 21). Her desires and actions are in keeping with the role of woman and mother in natural society.
Jacobs also allowed the garret to be a place for a woman’s disembodiment, a strategy that disassociates her from the natural world while also allowing her a connection to and even power over its inhabitants. This strategy manifests in Linda as a set of ghostly behaviors. In relation to her children, she takes on the physical position of a ghost or angel figure. She is lying prostrate above her children, watching them from above, which is how angels and ghosts are often depicted, making her devotion to her children is “superhuman” (Kreiger 616). While in the garret, she makes clothes for her children, so that “even when she is dead to the world, she is still a living force for her son and daughter;” her sentiment and the fruit of her actions are communicated to the outside world, disembodied from her, the actor (Kreiger 616). Unlike Cassy, who capitalizes on her ghostly position to Legree in order to scare him, Linda utilizes her ghostliness to express love and care for her children. This same disembodied communication is employed in her correspondence with Dr. Flint, though her intentions in relation to him are less altruistic. While her absence from the living world makes her practically dead to her community, her actions affecting the lives still present – writing letters to Dr. Flint and making clothes for her children – render her ghostly. It is clear that Linda is not content to occupy the same position in society as she did before; she does not, however, reject the entirety of the natural world from which she flees. She attempts to escape slavery, and she does not act like an enslaved woman while in the garret. She does, however, still accept the norms of the society from which she flees in her reading, sewing and adherence to motherhood. Her status as practically dead to her community and her ghostly behavior render her outside of any society. Linda, through her ghostliness and functioning death thus
removes herself from both natural order and any social order. She therefore either exists within the spectrum of the natural order she grew up in, or removes herself from society altogether. While she certainly allows herself to inhabit disparate points on the spectrum of the natural order, she acts on the belief that there is no other way to live than the way in which she knows – which includes living in slavery, motherhood, and womanhood.

While the other authors portrayed their women characters acting in ways that break out of the natural world they know and create a new natural that marks them as mad, Jacobs portrayed Linda adhering to the social order, which marks her as sane in comparison. This sanity translates into her expressing contentedness with her dismal situation. Linda rarely expresses negative feelings about her cramped confinement in the garret, and when she does, she complains not about her general situation in life but rather about the more immediate and less emotional aspect of physical discomfort. She does not complain that the society from which she flees is oppressive, but rather that within the garret the “continued darkness was oppressive” (Jacobs 114). While she certainly laments that “[t]he air was stifling; the darkness total,” Linda never criticizes the outside world (Jacobs 114). Indeed, it is the natural world outside her garret that gives her some bit of relief: “I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children” (Jacobs 114). In fact, her proximity to the natural world leads her to cherish even her hiding-spot. Linda makes known her gratefulness for the garret, noting that despite how “uncomfortable [my] situation was, I had glimpses of things out of doors, which made me thankful for my wretched hiding-place” (Jacobs 121-122). Linda certainly
does make known the discomforts of her hiding-place, yet she seems loath to dwell on them. She often complains of physical discomforts and follows them with the conjunction “but” in order to quickly offer contrasting information, that of her few comforts. These few comforts arise out of the natural world: the voices of her children and the view of the outside world. This contentedness with her place within the natural order is a marker of her sanity for 19th century readers.

Stowe, Fern, and Jacobs created their characters – an unmarried, seemingly childless woman escaping slavery, a widowed mother trying to support her two daughters, and an enslaved woman attempting to bring herself and her children out of slavery – as not simply singular characters in novels, but representatives of women for whom the natural world allows them few opportunities. Cassy is an enslaved woman who sees both the paternalistic, obscured style of enslavement and a form of slavery in which she has been legally, personally and sexually exploited. Ruth is a Northern, white and freed woman who is nevertheless legally dependent on men and parental figures’ good will for her personal financial wellbeing. Linda is an enslaved woman who, like Cassy, has been exploited in numerous ways but still has the mental and physical courage to defy the system that oppresses her, attempting to achieve her and her children’s freedom. With this in mind, how each woman inhabits their garret or attic – a space, perhaps the first of their life, that is entirely theirs – is telling of not only their personal character but of how their respective authors chose to portray the types of women they represent.
What seems counterintuitive about an enslaved, would-be emancipated woman’s propensity to adhere to the natural world is that she has just as much of an impetus, if not a greater one, as a widowed white woman and an unmarried enslaved woman with no known children have to denounce the world from which she is escaping. Not only is her own freedom at stake, but her children’s freedom, too. This is distinct from all of the other non-slave women characters, as well as Cassy, who believes her children are already lost. It is odd that a woman who has so much to gain by creating a new natural refuses to reject the natural order when given a site ideal for doing so. Why, then, does she recreate the natural order of the world from which she escapes in the unnatural place where she finds safe haven?

There are at least two reasons that Jacobs would desire to have the pseudo-fictional character of Linda adhere to the natural social order, and both reflect an influential relationship between writer and reader. Firstly, Jacobs wanted to create a positive image of herself. *Incidents* is the only text out of the three explored in this chapter that claims to be a memoir; the first line of the preface reads: “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction” (Jacobs 1). This being the case, Jacobs must have been aware that her audience viewed her the way that they viewed Linda. A fiction writer can portray their characters however they choose without any assumption on the part of the reader that the author condones the character’s beliefs or actions. The sole technique a memoirist can employ to situate their present self as distinct from the literary version of themself is by emphasizing the passage of time and the experiences that have changed them. While Jacobs could not change the fact that she had an extramarital affair – her children and her lack of marriage were sure indicators that
were impossible to hide in her narrative – she could manipulate how Linda reacts with her actions in the garret – a space in which there are no witnesses. Linda had already admitted to breaching the norms of the natural order while in the natural world; she did this by entering an extramarital affair. While marriages between enslaved people were not legitimized by the state – and a record from the Freedmen’s Bureau states that 32 percent of marriage between slaves were broken up by masters selling one or more spouses – the practice was common, if only because masters “believed that married men was less likely to be rebellious… favoured marriage for religious reasons” and others wanted “women to have children” (Simkin). Linda herself fell in love with a free man “will all the ardor of a young girl’s first love” (Jacobs 37). Though her affection was mutual and the man proposed to marry her, Linda knew that the possibility of marriage was futile, saying, “when I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me” (Jacobs 37). Indeed, Dr. Flint denies her the right to marry and threatens both her and her lover with violence and death if they are seen together. Within this marriage sex and pregnancy would not have diminished her respectability, but marriage was impossible for her to attain. Jacobs, in order to be seen as a reputable writer and woman, had to “separate the actions of a pregnant fifteen-year-old of the past, whose struggle in bondage may had inspired desperate acts, from the present self she wishes to portray to her audience: that of a mature woman and a responsible mother” (Kreiger 609). Jacobs had to present Linda, who would consequently represent not only Jacobs, but also all formerly and currently enslaved women, in a way that was appealing to Victorian morals while still staying true to her life story.
Jacobs thus wanted to defend her honor and that of women with similar stories through the same schema that compromised it – that of Victorian American values. It was her master who took away her right to marry, slavery that made it impossible for her to protect herself without having children by another man, and the cult of True Womanhood that stigmatized sex and pregnancy out of wedlock. Yet Jacobs asserted her willingness and fearlessness to be judged through her audience’s Victorian values by portraying Linda being judged by her family and female elders. Her grandmother, with her strict sensibilities works as a stand-in within the novel for its Victorian readership. When Linda admits to her that she is pregnant with a single man’s child, she makes painfully clear her disappointment and disgust: “‘Go away!’ she exclaimed, ‘and never come to my house, again’” (Jacobs 57). Her grandmother does eventually forgive her, and this ultimate forgiveness is perhaps what Jacobs hoped would transpire between her readership and the narrative.

It is of great importance to Jacobs that she appeared to her readers as deserving credibility, respect and understanding. In her preface, Jacobs introduced three claims she has on credibility: she claimed she was portraying only the truth, apologized for her caliber of writing and insisted on the high priority womanhood holds in her life. Jacobs made clear in her preface that her story was true to life: “I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true” (Jacobs 1). At the same time, Jacobs insistently justified and apologized for what she considered her subpar writing: “I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances” (Jacobs 1). The circumstance that has hindered her writing ability, of
course, is slavery, which depends in part on illiteracy, and thus the inability of enslaved people to self-educate. While Jacobs was taught to read and write, her education did not extend beyond these rudimentary fundamentals. Jacobs claimed that it is not only her lack of education, but also her current busy life that inhibited her from writing her memoir very well. She could only “write these pages at irregular intervals,” when, she stated, “I could snatch an hour from household duties” (Jacobs 1). Her statement only offered another explanation for any shortcomings of the memoir while also asserting the priority “household duties” have over her writing. This reaffirmed her role as homemaker, as well as her adherence to Victorian values.

Jacobs’ devotion to the Victorian values of honesty, hard work and the importance of motherhood was strategic on another front: proving her respect for the prevalent social order would convince readers of her and other enslaved women’s deserving of respect and freedom. Jacobs herself did not desire to publish her life story, in part out of shame for her affair with Mr. Sands. Jacobs’ friend Amy Post, an abolitionist and feminist from New York who advocated for Frederick Douglass and was involved in the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Fall, remembered Jacobs responding to her encouragements to write a memoir by saying, “‘You know a woman can whisper her cruel wrongs in the ear of a dear friend much easier than she can record them for the world to read’” (“Post, Amy Kirby and Isaac Post;” Jacobs 203-204). Indeed, Post wrote in the appendix of Jacob’s memoir that she “repeatedly urged her to consent to the publication of her narrative,” because she felt that “it would arouse people to a more earnest work for the disenthralment [sic] of millions still remaining in that soul-crushing condition, which was so unendurable to her”
It was because of this noble cause that Jacobs finally consented to write the memoir. Jacobs stated in her preface, “I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is” (Jacobs 1-2). *Incidents* existed only to expose slavery as an evil and publically denounce the practice.

The stakes of the memoir were not simply her reputation, credibility and deservingness to be free, but the respectability and deservingness of all women in slavery. Indeed, Jacobs makes clear that she does not consider herself the sole figure of importance in her memoir: “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself” (Jacobs 1). While the memoir chronicles her life story, the goal of the text was to shed light and attention on all enslaved women. Jacobs wrote in her preface, “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (Jacobs 1). Jacobs believed her experience was not one of slavery’s worst tales, and used not herself but the many other enslaved women as a reason to oppose slavery. Jacobs’ endeavor to appeal to her readers for abolition took on the added consequence of the future of all enslaved women. Her memoir is, in effect, a project of racial uplift. Jacobs attempted to persuade her readers of a cause that implicated the lives of two million women – the abolition of slavery – that depended on the gaining the confidence of her readers.

It is indeed ironic that Jacobs attempted to change Victorian sensibilities – specifically, to change Victorian women’s complacency with slavery – through adherence to the very same code of reasoning and conduct that subjugated her.
However odd it may seem, Jacobs’ strategy was a smart one. She could not change her audience’s total moral, social and religious system in the course of a memoir. She could, however, like a Socratic philosopher, find the ways in which her audience’s logic was inconsistent with slavery. She presented Linda as a woman and mother that is willing to adhere to Victorian morals and norms even when they work to oppress her and even when she was totally invisible to the outside world. Jacobs painted a portrait of a woman acting within the parameters of natural Victorian behaviors in order to eviscerate any possible justification for her enslavement.

Jacobs was not the only writer to plead to her audience and to call on their Victorian sensibilities in order to reject slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe did this in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. *Incidents* is unique, however, in its highly personal, thus accountable, use of Victorian morals in attics and garrets. Indeed, the garret emphasized Linda’s morality. The fact that she adopted natural values and behaviors even when alone, with no supervision, seems to prove that Jacobs sincerely believed in the correctness of the natural order, no matter how wrongly it treated her.

A formerly enslaved author’s decision to portray an enslaved woman acting within the confines of the society that oppresses her even when alone points to Jacobs’ limited freedom to tell her story. As a memoirist, she did not, like Stowe did, have the freedom to represent her characters as mad. Doing so would have diminished her own credibility, and representing other characters as mad would either be untrue or be received as unfairly critical. As a formerly enslaved woman, Jacobs also did not, like Fern did, have the luxury to brush off social norms. If she did, she would have seemed anti-social, unworthy of joining society, and perhaps even dangerous.
Furthermore, while Linda and Jacobs wanted slavery abolished, neither expressed a desire to otherwise change society – both wished to be free and live in peace. Jacobs’ decision to present Linda as law-of-society-abiding was a testament to the obstacles and hurdles she had to and successfully did overcome in order to prove the validity of abolitionism. While the garret could be a place of dissent and deviancy for white, free authors, Jacobs strategically portrayed her garret as an apolitical space from which its inhabitants could advocate for a highly political cause.
Chapter 2

The Space of Citizenship:
How Private Spaces Inhibit the Progression and Politics of
Women’s Life

*There is air in plenty here;
Air alone sustains not life;
This garret is wide and drear—
Long delayed is the parting strife.*

Ida Clare, 1859

19th century law, religion, and literature were in agreement that the idealized home was woman’s domain. This venerated and romanticized domestic space depended on a similarly idealized notion of womanhood and family, which itself assumed that homes and their residents were single family, white, free, and economically dependent. This notion of the idealistic home, as perpetuated by legal, religious and social institutions, was complicated by the reality of class, race and slavery. Despite the fact that many homes did not fit into this definition of ideal, many 19th century Americans were convinced through laws, religious doctrine and both fictional and nonfictional texts that the home was a woman’s proper place and the keeper and stabilizer of milestones for the natural progression of a woman’s life. Young girls who were not subject to enslavement or dire economic realities were brought up and educated in the home, as they grew and married they became
homemakers themselves, and when they had children they raised them in the home. Yet, while the home was the theater for women, the stage for their life’s duties, it was not under their control. Women worked to maintain the home but a complex hierarchy existed in regards to the home’s true control and ownership, headed often by the men of the household and, in households with African American enslaved people or domestic servants, white slave owners or employers. Because the home’s powerful relationship in the progression of a woman’s life, these heads of households could use their power to alter women’s opportunities, choices, and life.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Wilson’s *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* (1859), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) feature women whose life progressions are inhibited because the purposes of the unseen and private sites in which these women inhabit are manipulated by those who held power over their homes. These women characters – Prue, Frado, and the narrator, respectively – exist in the same American Victorian society of their authors, a society that valued, indeed relied on, the progression from girl to woman to mother that occurred within the home. Yet husbands and slave owners inhibit these women figures’ ability to fulfill their life progression by changing the intended purposes of certain spaces in the home, making these very spaces hinder the natural life progression that they are meant to facilitate and promote. These authors manipulated space and its purposes in an effort to stunt the natural development of the inhabitant’s progression from girl and child to woman
and mother, which not only strips women of their sole role in society but also removes their only political power.

The life of the ideal woman in 19th century America was meant to flow naturally from a girl to a woman and, through marriage and a stable economic life, mother. Just as prevalent as the cult of True Womanhood during the 19th century was what Frances B. Cogan calls in her 1989 book *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* the “Ideal of the Real Woman or Real Womanhood” (Cogan 4). Real Womanhood is the concept of women so prevalent in literature of the time that stressed the importance of capability and survival through childhood, womanhood and motherhood. Cogan argues that Real Womanhood “advocated intelligence, physical fitness and health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance, and careful marriage: it was, in other words, a survival ethic” (Cogan 4). While the cult of True Womanhood stressed the “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” Real Womanhood was a tougher ideal that recognized the hard work that it took to survive and raise children in Victorian America (Welter 21). The women who could be defined as Real Women, however, might be pious, pure, submissive and domestic, but would never feign weakness for the sake of femininity. Rather, these women believed that “woman’s duty to herself and her loved ones was not, as True Womanhood seems to suggest, to die, but rather to live; not to sacrifice herself, but to survive” (Cogan 5). This is not to say that the Real Woman was not feminine, but rather that she “tried to deal with those ugly realities in what it saw as a ‘female’ way” (Cogan 4). Both Real Womanhood and the
cult of True Womanhood, however, applied only to free, white, and married or eligible women with economically independent families. Enslaved women, non-white women and women of economic dependence were once again ignored in the definition of the ideal woman – and, though they did certainly exist, were given neither the label of “Real” or “True.”

The pinnacle of Real Womanhood, however, was motherhood. Real Women dedicated themselves to their families, and chose to survive “because in their own eyes they were important to family and to society; they did not survive merely because they owed it to themselves alone to do so” (Cogan 5). Women of both the cult of True Womanhood and Real Womanhood defined motherhood “as the most fulfilling and essential of all women's duties” (Cruea 188-189). In addition, it was the role that God had meant for her, and the average Middle-class Victorian woman accepted that “motherhood was the answer to her higher calling” (Plante 70). Motherhood was the solution to her personal, social and religious callings, the role she started working towards from her girlhood. Once a mother, a woman “had arrived at her final destination; the journey through her own childhood, young womanhood, courtship and marriage having laid the groundwork for this daunting event” (Plante 70). Motherhood was the expected culminating stage of a woman’s life, part of her duty and her natural progression through life.

The sites featured in this chapter – the mistress’s bedroom, garret, cellar, the L-Chamber, and the nursery – are spaces often compatible, if not synonymous, with motherhood in the 19th century. Adult women mother lived in master bedrooms; oversaw garrets, cellars, and L-Chambers; and spent much time in nurseries taking
care of their own or other women’s children. In the texts studied, however, authors manipulated these spaces so that they became the very entities that distanced girls and women from their motherhood by physically removing them from their children or restricting their ability to grow into mothers. Authors thus transformed the sites that historically fostered the growth of girl to woman and mother into sites that did the very opposite.

The manipulation of space in these texts leads to the detriment of the women characters’ ability to progress from child to woman and mother. Stowe connected space, power and the development of woman in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* most visibly with Prue, an enslaved woman on a Louisiana plantation who once bore children for the slave market, rather than for herself and the father of her children, and now, in her older age, sells her master’s rusks and hot rolls (see figure 7). One of her master’s customers is St. Clare, and Prue walks to his plantation often to complete the transaction with Dinah in the kitchen. Her life woes weigh heavily on her; the first words she utters in the novel are “’O Lord! I wish’t I’s dead!’” (Stowe 247). She takes to drinking to relieve herself of some of the emotional pain her maltreatment gave her. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Prue is known to exist in four spaces: the St. Clare plantation kitchen, her mistress’s bedroom, her master’s plantation garret and his cellar. Of these four spaces, the bedroom, garret, and cellar are small, private, and are manipulated such to remove from Prue her ability to mature as a woman.

Stowe insisted on the truth of Prue’s dreadful story in her *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe based Prue’s life on a real woman who was “related by a brother
and sister of the writer” (“A Key” 48-49). Stowe explained in the Key that the woman who her brother and sister met was the inspiration for Prue, and that “[h]er manners, appearance and character, were just as described [in the novel]” (“A Key” 49). After the enslaved woman did not come to sell rusk one day, Stowe’s sister later learned that “they had taken her into the cellar and beaten her, and that the flies had got at her, and she was dead!” (“A Key” 49). Prue’s character finds precedent, then, in this real woman – her narrative doppelganger – and, unfortunately, probably in many others.

Stowe gave Prue a sad history within her mistress’s bedroom, a place heavily entrenched in master-slave hierarchy and was a space meant for the full comfort of the mistress. Mistresses, who were presumably the mother of the household, were taken care of and comforted in their chambers by enslaved women. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Prue is this enslaved woman caretaker. In this role Prue does not occupy the stereotype of the Mammy figure, as she is not content to devote her life to her mistress’s family at the expense of her own as a Mammy figure would. Through Prue holds onto her independence more than a Mammy figure would, her caring for the dominant mother in the household turns her into a mothering figure. In the mistress’ bedroom, Prue might care for her mistress in the most intimate of ways: the maintenance of her wardrobe and dressing, meals, and matters of physical health. Enslaved lady’s maids like Prue “might easily be obliged to sleep in their charges’ rooms,” and often “[m]istresses liked to have a young servant sleep on the floor of their rooms” (Fox-Genovese 152). The mistress’s room became a space where one mother figure would take care of another, enabling comfort and care for the white mistress at the expense of the enslaved woman and her family.
Stowe transformed the plantation mistress’s bedroom from a place of motherhood – where, indeed, the free white mother is cared for by an enslaved woman who is often a mother herself – into a motherless place. The connection between Prue, her mistress, and her mistress’s room began as conventional. Prue relates to Uncle Tom that “Missis tuck sick, and I tended her” (Stowe 250). Soon, however, Prue caught her mistress’s sickness, and she loses the ability to breastfeed her young child. Her mistress refuses to support the child’s health by buying it milk, claiming that Prue could “‘feed it on what other folks eat’” (Stowe 250). Prue cannot, however. Prue relates that her baby “‘got all gone to skin and bones’” (Stowe 250). The child cries and cries, and Prue spends her nights taking care of him. Her mistress objects to this, as Prue would be tired during the day from tending to her sick child at night and, as she claims, “good for nothing” (Stowe 250). Prue’s mistress then demands that Prue sleeps in her room with her. While this demand was not uncommon, in Prue’s case it also means that she has to give up the one time she has available to take care of her child. Prue is unable to nurse her child back to health or to spend any time with her at all. Stowe used the mistress’s bedroom as a vehicle to distance Prue from her child in the garret and block Prue from her ability to be a mother.

The garrets in plantation houses did not offer any comforts. Though history has painted them otherwise, plantation houses were often not grand. Most houses were simple and modest, with most of the available land used for farming and housing the enslaved. A typical plantation home “was built low to forestall the worst effects of the heavy gales to which the South was prey” and “the roof was so shabbily
laid” (Fox-Genovese 106). These low, often clapboard houses were far from the extravagant mansions associated with plantation life. In fact, “[o]nly the very wealthiest slaveholding households remotely approximated the physical luxury and ease attributed to them in the romantic legend that was strong even then but would grow stronger in the days of ‘the Lost Cause’” (Fox-Genovese 105). Not all plantation houses looked like Tara. This meant that every available space was used, leaving garret space to a minimum. Garrets would be used for storage or were too small for use.

Stowe portrayed the garret in this plantation house as far from an inconsequential empty space in house; rather, she painted it as a murder weapon and a living grave (see Figure 10). The fact that a home – a place of birth, dwelling, growth, and the general purpose of supporting life – could contain within it a site so deadly proves that, despite popular sentiment, the home was not a nurturing space. Even more deceiving is the plantation house, which is a candidate for idealization, assuming that the money and tradition that comes with a plantation owner’s lifestyle would make the family eligible for the trappings of an ideal family: a married couple and their children living under the same roof with economic independence and traditional family roles. Yet a plantation home contains sites that can support the murder and burial of a child. When Prue’s mistress forces Prue to sleep in her bedroom, she also forces her to leave her child in “‘a little kind o’ garret’” within the house (Stowe 250). This small, presumably unused and peripheral space presages the demise of her child. Without the care of a mother, without milk, and probably without even sunlight or proper air circulation, the child “cried itself to death, one night”
The garret had all the markers of a living grave: it was solitary, dark, far-off, without the comforts of care or contact. Knowing this about the space, the mistress uses the garret as a means to silence, and kill, Prue’s child. While Prue’s mistress ultimately orchestrates the act of murder, the garret and bedroom are the most physically accountable entities in Prue and Prue’s child’s deaths.

Stowe repeatedly removed Prue’s children from her, and when she is finally allowed to enjoy motherhood it is only minimally and for a short time. For most of her life, Prue is employed to birth children for the slave market. When recounting her past inabilities to keep a child to Uncle Tom, she says that her old master “sold ‘em as fast as they got big enough” (Stowe 250). Never is she allowed to raise her own children until just before the reader meets her, when she was under the impression that she could keep and raise her last baby. Prue’s mistress takes from Prue even this less-than-ideal form of motherhood by exiling her child to the garret for his untimely death.

Cellars were as comfortless as garrets but more purposeful. The Louisiana plantation in which Prue lived would probably have not have included a cellar due to the marshy landscape. This was a fact that Stowe herself knew, yet she included the site in her novel because, as she write in her A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, “[t]he slave who used the word had probably been imported from some state where cellars were in use, and applied the term to the place which was used for the ordinary purposes of a cellar” (Key 49). The usage of the word cellar, then, is historically accurate in that it was what the enslaved woman who divulged the enslaved woman’s death said, if not because she actually died in one. While underground rooms for food
were unfeasible, food storage was still paramount to the upkeep of a plantation home. The 1800s were a time of varying experiences in the purchase and storing of food: “[a]t a time when many Northern women could increasingly rely on store-bought goods, the Southern mistress was constantly working to provide and replenish the food supply” (Plante 143). Without store-bought goods accessible and in a warmer climate, Southern plantations relied on storage rooms to preserve enough food for the white family and all of the enslaved people living on the plantation. Prue’s mistress’s room and the garret act as hindrances to Prue’s motherhood, yet the cellar hinders her life itself.

The cellar is traditionally a place to store food. Yet Stowe fashioned it as a deathbed, a place to become food (see figure 11). When a replacement is sent in lieu of Prue as a tradesman to the St. Clare household, the replacement tells Dinah that Prue “‘got drunk again’” and that either as a punishment or a way to keep her out of sight – she does not specify – her masters “‘had her down cellar,—and thar they left her all day’” (Stowe 252). The woman explains that she “‘hearn ‘em saying that the flies had got her,—and she’s dead!’” (Stowe 252). Prue may have died from alcohol poisoning or from being eaten alive by flies, and certainly died prematurely because her slave-owner’s maltreatment, but having her “down cellar” is the only expressed violence inflicted on her. Thus the cellar becomes the means to kill Prue, the vehicle through which to take her life and the enactor of her murder.

Small and hidden spaces in these texts can inhibit a girl’s ability to grow into a woman able to give birth and become a mother. Wilson used a domestic space to
hinder a child’s natural life progression in her 1859 novel *Our Nig* – the first text known to be published by an African American woman the and first published by an African American man or woman in the United States (Ellis 1). Wilson forced her young protagonist, Frado, to inhabit and become stunted within a small attic space, called an “L-Chamber” on account of its odd shape. Frado’s mother, a free white woman, experiences a fall from grace when she is impregnated out of wedlock and subsequently marries a free African American man. When faced with economic hardship, Mag abandons her young daughter Frado by leaving her with the white Bellmont family, presumably for the day, and never returning. The Bellmonts take Frado in, but instead of treating her as an adopted daughter, they treat her as if she were enslaved. The Bellmonts give her what they call the L-Chamber – a small attic space requiring a ladder for entrance – for her bedroom and, although she is allowed to go to school with the young Mary Bellmont, she also must do house chores and Mrs. Bellmont’s general bidding.

Frado’s story is similar to, perhaps inspired by, Harriet Wilson’s own life. Margaretta Thorn, who claimed that she had “known the writer of this book for a number of years” wrote a letter for the appendix of *Our Nig* that supported the claims that Frado is based on Wilson’s experiences (Wilson 138). How she knows Wilson, Thorn never revealed. Still, Thorn supported Wilson by writing, “knowing the many privations and mortifications she has had to pass through, I the more willingly add my testimony to the truth of her assertions” (Wilson 138). She claimed “[e]arly in life she was deprived of her parents” and that “those very people calling themselves Christians, (the good Lord deliver me from such,) and they likewise ruined her health
by hard work, both in the field and in the house” (Wilson 139). Thorn brought to light the hypocrisy of a Christian family taking in an abandoned child, only to replace love and nurturing with cruelty and enslavement. If Thorn’s is a true account, *Our Nig* is a barely disguised memoir.

The value of *Our Nig* as a thinly veiled memoir about a space that is complex for its inhabitant to navigate lies in its ability to relay to the reader the historical dynamic between unseen domestic sites and legal power without necessitating social repercussions for the author. Slave narratives were not the only way for African Americans to disseminate their personal experiences to a larger audience, but they were the dominant and politicized method for doing so. Though Wilson was not enslaved, the text can fit into the convention of the slave narrative because Frado is practically enslaved by the Bellmont family. It is a slave narrative without the risk of re-enslavement for the author. While Wilson did not jeopardize her freedom with the publication of her book, her brutally honest retelling of her previous employers’ maltreatment did risk her employment in the future and her social standing among those she lived with throughout the time documented in the text. Probably for this reason did the initial publication of the text simply state that the author was “Our Nig,” maintaining Wilson’s anonymity. Perhaps, for Wilson, these risks were outweighed by the importance of sharing her story, which gives the reader, over 150 years later, the ability to navigate the home she lived in and the power that it held over her political destiny.

As Wilson based *Our Nig* on her own life, the house in which the Bellmont’s existed as well. The full title of the text – *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 – gives the reader a fuller description of the house. The house itself is in the North, two stories, and was occupied by a white family. Later, in the text, Wilson divulged that the house is “environed by fruitful acres, and embellished by shrubbery and shade trees” (Wilson 21). All evidence points to a house of wealthy white family who lived in a state that, through legally free, was nevertheless home to slavery (see figure 8). Though Wilson’s life is only documented from 1850 to 1860, census information shows that in 1850 Wilson lived with the Boyles, a white family in Milford, New Hampshire, who could in fact be the inspiration for the Bellmonts (Wilson xv). Indeed, the house in which Frado was enslaved was probably in New Hampshire.

The mothers and women of a household in free states in the North often were in more control of and were the makers of the home, and African American domestic servants were not common. Jacksonian America was a period of social and financial mobility, and “[a]s the growing middle class saw their financial resources increase, women in the North were able to hire one or more domestic servants to assume responsibility for mundane (and rigorous) chores throughout the house” (Plante 40). The ability for more white families to hire help, however, did not mean that most families had an African American house servant. Indeed, the number of African Americans was quite low in most Northern cities and towns; the number “hovered below 5 percent” before the Civil War, while the number in the South “seldom fell below 30 percent, and often topped 40 or even 60 percent” (Rael 19). The relatively
small number of African Americans in the North implies the rarity of an average white family to employ – or own – an African American domestic servant.

Northern middle class houses were ornate enough to create odd attic spaces under their many gables and asymmetrical forms. Wilson described the Bellmont house as a “large, old-fashioned, two-story white house,” yet “old-fashioned” at this time did not imply simple (Wilson 21). Greek Revival-style homes were popular in the beginning of the 19th century, but this classical style was often mixed with what became known as the Queen Anne-house, with its many gables and embellishments. The Queen Anne-house “took full advantage of all that modern machinery had to offer” and was “[h]eavily ornamented with decorative porches, leaded or art-glass windows, gables and turrets” (Plante 45). In fact, the combination of the two architectural styles was somewhat indicative of the state of the Union at time. Classical architecture “embodied subtle beauty and the spirit of democracy that patriotic Americans identified with,” and the Queen Anne-house was a product of “romance associated with the Victorian era and advances in industry” (Plante 43). Homes that combined these two styles had many gables and turrets that created much empty, oddly shaped garret space – such as the Bellmont’s L-Chamber. These spaces were the byproduct of a decorative infrastructure, and not intended for any particular use besides, perhaps, storage.

A Northern, white-inhabited home should have offered a young, technically free African American child more freedom than a plantation offered an enslaved woman, yet Wilson described Frado’s experience in the Bellmont’s home as similar to slavery and certainly physically stunting. The L-Chamber in the Bellmont’s home
transforms from a place of nothingness to a bedroom, servants quarters, safe haven and church. She is given the small, oddly shaped room as her dwelling. It is a fitting space for uncelebrated guests as it is small and difficult to enter. One of the few Bellmonts who shows Frado any kindness, Jack, shows concern when Frado is assigned the room that she will “be afraid to go through that dark passage, and she can’t climb the ladder safely” (Wilson 26). Despite its shortcomings, the space is a respite for young Frado, because it was the “one little spot seldom penetrated by her mistress’ watchful eye,” and for this reason, the room, though “uninviting and comfortless” was to Frado “a safe retreat” (Wilson 87). She uses whatever time she has in her little room to study and look for hope in religion, “and try to penetrate the veil of doubt and sin which clouded her soul, and long to cast off the fetters of sin, and rise to the communion of saints” (Wilson 87). Though the Bellmonts treat her with less than Christian kindness, Frado finds solace in her little room through Christianity.

Despite what good Frado attempts to achieve in her L-Chamber, Wilson did not allow her to grow past childhood in the room. Jack brings Frado to her new bedroom, and as they enter the L-Chamber he warns: “‘Don’t bump your head’” (Wilson 27). The low doorway led to a low ceiling: the room, which was “an unfinished chamber over the kitchen,” was essentially the underbelly of a gable. The structure is comprised of a “roof slanting nearly to the floor, so that the bed could stand only in the middle of the room” (Wilson 27). Frado has barely enough room to stand up straight, and she is only a young girl. Jack remarks to his mother that Frado “would soon outgrow those quarters” (Wilson 27). Jack is surely implying that the
child would soon need larger quarters, but Mrs. Bellmont retorts, “‘When she does, she’ll outgrow the house’” (Wilson 28). Her comment indicates that when – or, as Mrs. Bellmont might put it, if Frado outgrows her room, she will no longer be welcome in their home. Thus, in order to stay in the home – which is, of course, Frado’s only option – Frado’s physical growth, which goes hand in hand with her emotional growth, must not continue. The L-Chamber necessitates Frado to maintain the body of a child, which inhibits her ability to grow into a woman and mother.

Even after marrying and giving birth to children, a woman and mother’s ability to act as an adult and care for her child can be manipulated by the space she inhabits, as Gilman proved with the Narrator in the nursery in her 1892 story “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The Narrator, the unnamed figure using first-person voice to relate her experience, spends the summer with her husband in what the she calls an “ancestral hall” and “colonial mansion” (Gilman 1). The stay is an attempt to bring the Narrator, the mother of small child, back to good health with the “rest cure” popularized by Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell in the mid-1800s. The narrator divulges that her husband John “said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get” (Gilman 2). The Narrator wants to live in a room downstairs that she describes as “opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings!” (Gilman 2). John “would not hear of it,” however, as “there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another” (Gilman 2). The Narrator complies and
sleeps in “the nursery at the top of the house” that is decorated by the horrid yellow wallpaper that haunts her throughout her stay (Gilman 2).

Gilman, like Wilson, portrayed the Narrator’s experience in the converted nursery as similar to her own life. Gilman married her first husband, Charles Walter Stetson, in Rhode Island in 1884. After a bout of mental illness in 1887 went to physician and writer Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell to follow his popular “rest cure,” a program that attempted to cure mental illness not through drugs but rather through behavioral changes “such as rest, isolation, overfeeding, and massage” (Gagnon; Bailey 339). The treatment was essentially bed rest and orders to not work at all until one felt totally well. During her time in treatment, “Gilman was fed, bathed, and massaged” (Gagnon). According to Mitchell, the rest cure did Gilman good, and she was discharged with the directions “to ‘live as domestic a life as far as possible,’ to ‘have but two hours' intellectual life a day,’ and ‘never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again’” (“Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper”). In a powerful act of rebellion against the doctor’s strict and debilitating orders, Gilman continued to write. Gilman wrote a piece entitled “Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper” for the October 1913 edition of The Forerunner, the magazine she produced from 1909 to 1916, which places her inspiration for the story entirely with her experience with Dr. Mitchell. Gilman explained in this revealing essay that she underwent Mitchell’s “rest cure” because she “suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia--and beyond” (“Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper”). When she returned home, she wrote that she “obeyed those directions for some three months, and came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over” (“Why I
Figure 7. An illustration of Prue in an 1853 edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.


Figure 8. The house belonging to the family assumed to be the inspiration for the Bellmonts.


Figure 9. A mansion built in 1786-88 by a wealthy merchant in Providence, RI.

Figure 10. An illustration of Prue and her dying infant in the garret from an 1853 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.


Figure 11. An illustration of Prue dying in the cellar from an 1853 edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper”). She ultimately disregarded Mitchell’s advice and began writing again, and regained her mental wellness. Gilman, “[b]eing naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape,” wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper” “to carry out the ideal” (“Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper). Gilman sent Mitchell a copy of the story and, unsurprisingly, “[h]e never acknowledged it” (“Why I Wrote the Yellow Wallpaper).

*The Yellow Wallpaper* brings to public view the relationship between private rooms in domestic spaces, women’s mental health and their political opportunities. Gilman’s depiction of mental illness, so similar to her own experiences, came with high stakes: Gilman was risking her social standing to write a story about mental illness that so mimicked her own life. Gilman even mentioned her doctor by name in the piece: “John says if I don’t pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall” (Gilman 6). Gilman gave the Narrator her same disdain for Dr. Mitchell and his “cure.” Gilman’s risk rewards the modern reader with a clear view as to how the converted nursery in the attic was manipulated to thwart the Narrator’s life progression and political opportunities.

The “ancestral hall” in which the Narrator and John stay, then, is similar to the type of house that Gilman and Stetson would have rented for the summer in their home state of Rhode Island. Stetson was a relatively successful landscape painter who belonged to a group called the Barbizon School (Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project 153). His work was “allegorical, contrasting sharply with the work of his Rhode Island contemporaries in its imaginative quality and greater richness of color” (Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project 153). Compared with his contemporaries in
Rhode Island, “Charles Walter Stetson achieved more recognition outside the State than any other of his group” (Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project 153). Though Stetson was successful, being a young painter their personal fortunes were probably such that Gilman felt just as lucky in real life as the Narrator did in *The Yellow Wallpaper* to rent such a nice home.

“Colonial mansions” in Rhode Island were indeed grand. Colonial Rhode Islanders made fortunes through farming, whaling, ship making and the slave trade (see figure 9). One of the earliest settlers was Chad Brown, whose ancestors were “daring adventurers, sailors, and merchants,” and after whom the Rhode Island College was renamed in 1804 (Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project 67, 125-6).

Shipping as a means to gain fortune became popular at this time, and many flocked to Rhode Island to try their luck – the population of Rhode Island spiked from an estimated 300 in 1640 to 52,900 in 1780 (“Estimated Population”). The rise in fortune and population led to a dramatic increase in the construction large homes (Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project 139). These houses were heavily influenced by classical architecture; they began to include “the more elaborate decoration of doorways with pediments, transoms, and pilasters” (Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project 139). It was surely a house in keeping with the embellished classical form of these colonial Rhode Island mansions that the Narrator and John would have rented for the summer.

The nurseries in such houses were places in which children could learn, play, and be active within the home. The Victorian era was the first time that Americans allotted specific spaces within the house for children. At this time, childhood was becoming a right, and free families were expected to educate children and not force
them to enter the workforce, though the United States was behind the United Kingdom in this regard. Beginning in 1867 in the United Kingdom, children under the age of eight were not legally permitted to work and children between eight and thirteen were required to go to school for a certain number of hours (“Child Labour”). In the United States, it was not until 1938 Congress passed, the Supreme Court upheld, and the states ratified comparable legislature entitled the Fair Labor Standards Act (“A History of Child Labor”). The illegality of child labor implies sanctity to childhood and the right for children to play and be educated. This change was due to both religious and economic factors: “Not only had stern religious views been altered to bring about such change, but the family unit itself, decreasingly dependent upon child labor for economical survival, saw motherhood and childhood in a whole new light” (Plante 79). Stern religious views that children were inherently immoral and had to be corrected began to wane, and the Jacksonian era brought about a wealthier average household that could afford to make ends meet without depending on their children to generate income. The mother-child relationship became more sentimental and children were treated more kindly and afforded more comforts. Babies and children were given their own spaces within the house with furnishings crafted especially for them (Plante 81). The furniture might include “a crib, a miniature chair or two and a small number of educational toys that helped prepare children for adult life” (Plante 81). These nurseries were “typically located on the upper floor of the house, were a safe, protected environment for the little ones in the family” (Plante 81). Nurseries were modeled to give children a space suitable for their life and play.
Though the Narrator has been more fortunate than Frado in that she has grown from a girl to woman and given birth to a healthy baby, Gilman dismantled her ability to act like a woman and a mother in her stay in the ancestral hall’s nursery. While the advantage of renting such a large home is having the ability to choose what rooms in which to stay, the Narrator has no control over her room choice. While the Narrator “wanted one downstairs” her husband would not allow her because John claims that the room downstairs that the Narrator desires has “not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another” (Gilman 2). He instead insisted that she occupy the nursery by herself. The nursery is thus converted from a place for children to play to a room for a woman to reject activity in order to reconstruct her sanity.

Gilman’s decision to situate the Narrator in a nursery simultaneously placed her in a physical and emotional position of a child. The narrator herself expresses how she took the physical place of not only children in general, but her own child: “If we had not used it, that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape!” (Gilman 8). Instead of her baby occupying the nursery, the Narrator herself does and in this way, takes on the role of her own child, living as if she were her own child. John reinforces the Narrator’s performance of childhood by treating her like a child. He does not allow her to make her own decision as to where in the house she lives, and instead makes the decision himself based on his ability to watch after her without sleeping in the same bed or room. The implication of John’s decision is that though John might not want to sleep with her – as he would if he treated her as wife – he must be near the Narrator in order to keep a watchful eye on her – as he would a child. This treatment perhaps intensifies the Narrator’s growing sense of being
infantilized. The Narrator claims to be adult when she explains that she took the nursery in the place of her child. Though she hates the room, she explains, “it is lucky that John kept me here after all, I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see” (Gilman 8). She may think that she is emotionally past childhood, yet her experience in the nursery is similar to her experiences in her bedroom as a child. In the nursery, the Narrator begins to see character and life in the yellow wallpaper, not unlike how she used to see character and life in the elements of her childhood bedroom. The Narrator explains that she “used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store” (Gilman 5). Her imagination runs just as wild as a mother as it did when she was a child, leaving her in much the same mental state as a girl.

The Narrator’s regression to a childish emotional state also hinders her ability to perform as an able, fit mother. Instead of living with and taking care of her baby, the Narrator transfers that responsibility to a woman named Mary. The Narrator loves her child – she exclaims, “Such a dear baby!” when she remembers him and is happy that “Mary is so good” with him – but acknowledges that her mental state inhibits her from providing for him (Gilman 3). She explains that she “cannot be with him,” because, as she says, “it makes me so nervous” (Gilman 4). This nervousness to perform an act considered to be natural and instinctive to women proves that though she has given birth, she has not fully matured into a woman and mother, but remains stunted as a child.
The authors of each of these texts featured their women protagonists – an enslaved woman on a Louisiana plantation, a young and free African American girl practically enslaved in a Northern home, and a white and free Northern woman of means – acting in unexpected ways within hidden and private domestic sites. Prue’s mistress’s room, garret and cellar; Frado’s L-Chamber; and the Narrator’s ancestral hall’s nursery are all manipulated so that their intended purposes are substituted and they are used differently than they would be traditionally. This is not to suggest that these spaces are manipulated uniformly; indeed, each space that these women inhabit is inherently gendered and racial, making each of these relationships between these women and their spaces unique. Historically and in these texts, the spaces these women inhabit are each different in their connections to gender, race and freedom.

Stowe portrayed Prue’s actions within her mistress’s bedroom as defined first and foremost by her gender, race and status as slave. Though Prue may partake in the activities one does in one’s own room, her mistress’s bedroom is not her own; and yet her mistress demands she sleeps there. Stowe portrayed Prue’s actions in the garret as gendered and racial in the same way Wilson portrayed Frado’s in her L-Chamber. Both the garret and the L-Chamber are spaces meant to only house unwanted and unseen entities. In both of these white homes, Prue, her child, and Frado are such entities – as enslaved women, or women who are practically enslaved, Prue, Prue’s child, and Frado are hidden from sight in these spaces. Stowe’s portrayal of Prue’s death with the cellar and Gilman’s portrayal of the Narrator’s life to the top floor nursery differ from Stowe’s depiction of Prue’s child’s death with the garret and Wilson’s depiction of Frado’s life in the L-Chamber: both the cellar and the top floor
nursery are places traditionally meant for human use. Enslaved Southern women like Prue would commonly use cellars to store and retrieve food, and white Northern women would inhabit nurseries to care for their children. Cellars were not, however, meant to act as living graves and nurseries were similarly not bedrooms for mothers to inhabit without their children. While these domestic sites have different cultural connections, these spaces are similar in that their traditional purposes are corrupted in these texts so that the same effect of stunting applies to Prue, Frado and the Narrator, despite their differences. The corruption of the purposes of these spaces affects the inhabitants negatively by not only restricting the freedoms of the women inside but also by removing from them the ability to progress from child to woman and mother in the way society otherwise would have required of them.

These women characters are not simply individual cases of maltreated enslaved workers and wives; rather, they are figures through which the authors portrayed the way in which 19th century society at large could and did control and subjugate women by stripping them of their sole route to political power: motherhood. Women of the 19th century were political only in that they could give birth to and mold the next generation of males who could then become voters and leaders. A woman’s body was only political if it could create male life that could then vote and become involved in politics, which meant that a woman’s only political power was vested in her ability to be a mother to a free male. Additionally, one could only be a proper mother if she were a woman and had become a wife. The ability to give birth to and raise a free male born to a free husband was not available to all, and
depended largely on race, economic status and social standing. Enslaved, poor and socially disenfranchised women could rarely reach the prerequisite rank to have sons with any political potential. It was only the 19th century free, married woman with children who had even the opportunity to be “a great civilizer of man” – the closest a woman could get to reaching her own political autonomy (Plante 32).

_Godey’s Lady’s Book_ published many articles regarding the importance of motherhood not only to the next generation of citizens, but also to America as the country that the next generation would lead. An anonymous 1870 article entitled “Mothers of Men,” reminded mothers that “children are not their sole property, but that they are citizens of the State as well as sons” (“Mothers of Men”). Sons will be of utmost importance to the future of America, and thus “they should be educated for their own future well being and for the good of the State” (“Mothers of Men”). The article implores women to look to a higher calling when educating their sons, “and not only according to the crazes and follies of the maternal fancy” (“Mothers of Men”). While “the crazes and follies of the maternal fancy” are not sufficient practices to create good citizens, neither are the normal routes of education in the home, which involve “merely instructing and repressing” (“Mothers of Men”). _Godey’s Lady’s Book_ explains that women “who were able to elevate and ennoble” their sons participated in and encouraged “action… of a larger kind than simply to keep them innocent and give them domestic tastes and habits” (“Mothers of Men”). Not only must women give birth to and instruct young men, also they must find a way to teach general good morals and citizenship. Though the task is large, _Godey’s Lady’s Book_ stresses the consequence of strong moral motherhood.
In fine, we cannot speak too strongly of the importance of a mother's influence over her son, nor the need there is of a nobler, a larger, and less personal ideal of the duty than exists. ("Mothers of Men")

Women who become mothers can find within this important role a way to shape the future leaders of their country. This action marks their sole relationship with the political world.

Even the limited political power is permitted for women through their sons' opportunities, however, was not available to all women. Enslaved women like Prue were not guaranteed the right to raise their children and their children were not considered citizens of the state. The legal principle *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, first seen in Virginia in 1662, made it so the slave status of a child was inherited from his or her mother, making every child born to an enslaved woman also enslaved (Moore 185;“Partus Sequitur Ventrem”). Sons of enslaved women, then, only had political power as potential liberators. This form of power was not common and came at the risk of one’s own life. An enslaved person also held no relationship legitimate in the eyes of the state besides that of slave to his or her owner. Enslaved women, then, have no political power compared to their free counterparts unless their sons are legally citizens and they are guaranteed the right to raise them. Prue therefore does have the potential of political power, but it is even smaller than that of Frado and the Narrator.
Stowe, Wilson, and Gilman all created scenarios in which women are inhibited from maturing through the stages of girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood – which in turn inhibits their potential for political sway – in small, confined, and hidden rooms within homes. The home is the stage for woman’s politicization, as it is the place she gives birth to and raises the next generation of citizens. The homes these authors portrayed, however, are mutilated in such ways that they no longer offer them the ability to act as women and mothers and thereby take full control over their political destiny. In this way, the Victorian home enabled a flawed democracy, one in which women were given only a narrow route to political power – giving birth to and raising sons who would become citizens – which was rooted in domestic sites that could be, and were, manipulated to hinder the life progression necessary for growing into and performing the role of motherhood that would offer them their sole semblance of power. These authors looked to the world around them – and often towards their own lives – for inspiration for these works, and thus their decisions to portray women physically and emotionally stunted and losing political power in these unseen domestic sites is telling. Perhaps they, too, experienced these spaces within the home as inhibiting.
Chapter 3

The Lawful Home:
The Treatment of Women Within and Without Domestic Space

Then I awoke, and the light was sweet,
Each familiar thing that my eyes did greet
Sent a thrill of relief and joy to my heart,
Though I could not refrain from a frightened start
When my casement shook to the morning’s breath,
For it seemed to me like the step of death.
Ida Clare, 1859

The idealized 19th century home could wreak havoc on the mental health and political opportunities of its inhabitants if not properly ordered. Women authors of the 19th century often expressed this unfortunate fact through their portrayals of domestic sites that create or imply madness in women characters who do not uphold the natural order of society and stunt women characters’ political opportunity if they or their keepers subvert the sites’ intended purposes. Stowe created a mistress’s bedroom, a garret and a cellar that become murder weapons for the hopeless character Prue and her child, thereby stripping Prue of motherhood and her political power; Harriet Wilson did not allow her true-life inspired Frado physically room to grow in an L-Chamber, leaving her perpetually a girl and without the political power of motherhood; Charlotte Perkins Gilman forced the Narrator to inhabit a nursery which
becomes a room for an adult and hinders her ability to act like a woman and mother, taking away from her a political opportunity.

Authors created characters or, unfortunately, recounted the true lives of women who, in domestic sites, both subvert the natural order of society and whose life progression is stunted, resulting in the removal of their proclaimed sanity and political opportunities. Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) include women who both follow this path, though they come from different social worlds: Edna is a high-society wife in Louisiana who moves out of her family home, leaving her husband and children, in order to live more independently, while Mag is scorned from white society because of her first child out of wedlock and later marriages to two African American men, and must live in a hovel and give away her children in order to make ends meet, respectively. Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1854), however, includes a woman outside of the domestic sphere who holds onto the natural order and attempts to maintain her natural progression from girl to woman and mother, yet is still considered mad and has her motherhood and political opportunities taken from her. Fern’s unfortunate foil is Mary Leon, a high society wife who acts within the parameters of natural Victorian norms and yet is sent by her husband to an insane asylum. Outside the domestic sphere, Mary no longer has the sanctuary and rights bestowed on those who maintain the natural order of society and matures into a woman and mother. Mary’s case proves that domestic spaces in these texts can be dangerous for women, and that these spaces have the potential to undo their hold on sanity, their very life progression and their political opportunities. Yet the home, unlike other sites women can inhabit, has patterns and
rules that can be navigated, while non-domestic sites are lawless in their treatment of women.

Within the home, the creation of a new natural and the stunting of the natural life progression can exist simultaneously, and indeed can depend on each other. The natural order of Victorian society in many ways included a smooth progression from girl to woman and mother. As discussed in the earlier chapters, both literature and the law upheld the notion and policy that once women became wives and mothers they were forever bound to their duties as such. Thus an author’s decision to portray her protagonist’s choice to remain married or to leave her children was not only an impediment to her life progression but could also be a deviation from the natural order.

Kate Chopin created such a scenario in the life of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. Edna is a society woman from the south who grew up “in the old Kentucky blue-grass country” with the money from “her father’s Mississippi plantation” (Chopin 5). She is the wife of a successful husband, to whom she is “the sole object of his existence,” with two children, a house in New Orleans and a rented summer cottage in the coastal town of Grand Isle (Chopin 6). Despite her fortune in life, she is often brought to tears by a feeling of “indescribable oppression” (Chopin 8). It is this general sadness and emotional weight that drives Edna to create a new natural in which she eschews motherhood. Chopin allowed Edna to create a site in which her actions and decisions are in opposition with the natural order, which Edna affectionately called her “pigeon-house.” Edna describes her “pigeon-house” as ““a
little four-room house around the corner’” from her family’s grand house on Esplanade Street (Chopin 107). Edna is drawn to the house because, as she says, “‘[i]t looks so cozy, so inviting and restful, whenever I pass by; and it’s for rent’” (Chopin 107). The intimacy that the small house offers is a welcome departure from Edna’s family’s home. She is “‘tired looking after that big house’” for which she has “‘to keep too many servants’” whom she is “‘tired of bothering with’” (Chopin 107). Edna confides in Mademoiselle Reisz, a friend she knows from Grande Isle and who similarly desires independence and solitude, that she desires “‘the feeling of freedom and independence,’” and is repelled by her family’s home because, “‘[t]he house, the money that provides for it, are not mine’” (Chopin 107). Her need for independence and a simpler lifestyle finds a seemingly perfect solution with the nearby cottage.

Chopin herself created a new natural, and surely found inspiration for Edna though her own life experience and drive for independence. Chopin, like Edna, was a free thinker: her biography details that she “she dressed unconventionally, took long un-chaperoned walks, and smoked cigarettes,” which were progressive and free-spirited actions for a 19th century lady of leisure (Chopin). Chopin, like Edna, lived in New Orleans with her husband and also spent her summers at a place called Grand Isle, “a Creole resort in the Gulf of Mexico” (see figure 12; “Biography”). These details suggest that Chopin looked to her own life for the inspiration and content of her novel.

Chopin depicted Edna forging a new natural through independence from her family duties and her husband’s finances – a lofty choice considering women in Louisiana had received the right to engage in trade without their husbands only five
years prior to the publication of her book (Khan 363). A woman’s family, and her role within it as wife and mother, was the apex of a woman’s life, and for her to voluntarily leave her family was almost incomprehensible. An anonymously written 1858 article in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* entitled “Woman in Adversity” claims that, while “[m]an often flies from home and family to avoid impending poverty or ruin,” women are too dedicated to the family to act similarly: “Woman seldom, if ever, forsook home thus. Woman never evaded mere temporal calamity by suicide or desertion” (“Woman in Adversity”). Women such as Edna who left families could be divorced by their husbands, and thus be stripped of protection from the family unit and robbed of social standing. Edna, however, does not entirely desert her family. After making the decision to move into her “pigeon-house,” she “wrote a charming letter to her husband, telling him of her intention to move for a while into the little house around the block” (Chopin 111). By including Edna writing to her husband, Chopin lessened the radical nature of Edna’s move and implies that she is not fully abandoning her family. Chopin still ensured, however, that Edna’s actions are portrayed as rebellious, as Edna does not ask permission from her husband before making her decision. Indeed, she begins the move “[w]ithout even waiting for an answer from her husband regarding his opinions or wishes in the matter” (Chopin 113).

Edna clearly chooses to circumvent patriarchal domination in order to take full control over her own life, which includes abandoning all worldly goods acquired by her husband. Her desire to be independent drives her not only to leave the house her husband owns, but also all items that were bought with his money. Edna took
from her family’s house “everything which she had acquired aside from her husband’s bounty,” nothing more (Chopin 114). Edna is aware that she is acting outside of the parameters of natural society because once she moved into her “pigeon-house,” “[t]here was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale” (Chopin 127). This feeling did not, however, inhibit Edna, as it was accompanied by “a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual” (Chopin 127). Edna is content with the fact that her independence from the presence of her family, her husband’s patriarchal power and his financial support marks her as outside the natural order of 19th century womanly dependency.

Chopin placed Edna in this affectionately named “pigeon-house” but simultaneously allowed Edna’s contemporaries to label her as mad when within the cottage she creates a new natural, just as Stowe did when placing Cassy in a garret and Fern did when placing Ruth in an attic apartment. Perhaps these authors accompanied creation of a new natural in private sites with perceived madness because these rooms were located in the home, which was in turn the proper location of the all-important entity of family. The ordered family was the mooring of Victorian life, and indeed the basis by which sanity and insanity were defined. Hospitals for the mentally ill attempted rehabilitation by mimicking the schedule of ordered family life, and mental imbalances or criminal activity were believed to have their origins in unbalanced family lives. In the mid-19th century, officials “were certain that children lacking discipline quickly fell victim to the influence of vice at loose in the community” because they were “[i]nadequately prepared to withstand the temptations, they descended into crime” (Rothman 66). Officials attempted to cure
insanity by mimicking the order of family life in asylums and attempted to end delinquency by “inform[ing] state legislators of the crucial role of the family and community in causing deviant behavior” (Rothman 72). Edna’s self-removal from her family breaks the most central unit of national and mental solidity, damaging her own and her children’s chances of mental and behavioral stability and normalcy.

Chopin allowed this same desire for independence not only to lead Edna to take her own life, but perhaps to be realized only through an act of self-murder. A woman’s life lived will forever be controlled by the men and family it belongs to, Chopin seems to have said, making a woman’s decision to end her life her greatest form of self-possession. Returning to Grande Isle alone, Edna swims out to sea farther than her strength can support, and as she does so “[s]he thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (Chopin 156). Though Chopin left unclear her intent for the ending, Sean Heuston in his essay “Chopin’s THE AWAKENING” in Explicator writes, “most critics have interpreted the ending of Kate Chopin’s novel The Awakening as indicating protagonist Edna Pontellier’s death by suicide” (Heuston 224). Chopin alleviated Edna’s desire for independence from her husband and children, by allowing her to drown herself, an act that often was considered a marker or product of insanity. Suicide was condemned by the Church and law, making insanity often the least socially damaging excuse for self-murder. Writing about a suicide by hanging in 1799 England, Helen Small writes in her 1996 book Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity 1800-1865 that the authorities avoided harsh treatment for the deceased’s family by claiming she was insane, as “the
insanity verdict allowed some suspension of judgement [sic]” by the law or church (Small 4). Insisting that a person who committed suicide was insane “removed the case from the category of felony, allowing the relatives to give the body a Christian burial,” which, though denouncing their mental stability, protected their reputation and the legal and religious rights of their family (Small 4). Suicide was thus called the act of an insane person for their very own and their family’s benefit.

Chopin created the “pigeon-house” not only as a site for Edna’s new natural but also as the perfect getaway spot from her natural life progression. Though Edna is never particularly attached to motherhood – she is early in the novel described as “not a mother-woman” and later tells her friend, “I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” – her move to the “pigeon-house” marks her true separation from her family (Chopin 10, 64). Her move does not signify a total emotional detachment from her children: she visits her two sons at her husband’s mother’s home in Iberville and felt “a wretch and a pang” when she left, as “their presence lingered with her like the memory of a delicious song” (Chopin 128). Yet the feelings are not strong enough to propel her to live with them, and “by the time she had regained the city the song no longer echoed in her soul” (Chopin 128). Edna ultimately is content to live alone without her children or husband. Although she is married and has two sons, Edna’s self-removal from her husband and children eliminates her ability to act as a wife and mother. She stunts herself from completing a woman’s final task and fulfilling her natural life progression. Her final suicide later solidifies her decision to leave her children and any hope to raise her two young sons. Edna is wealthy, free married woman with two
sons, yet she abandons her own political opportunity to raise and mold two future citizens of the state.

The new natural could exist not only in tandem with, but also because of the eschewal of wifehood and motherhood, as Harriet Wilson illustrated with Mag Smith in her thinly veiled 1859 memoir *Our Nig*. Mag, “[e]arly deprived of parental guardianship, far removed from relatives,” is seduced and impregnated by a man who soon leaves her to raise their child alone (Wilson 1). The child does not survive past infancy, yet because Mag is already a cast-off of society because of her extramarital affair, she moves into a small, far-off hovel, where she later meets and marries Jim, “a kind-hearted African, who often called to inquire after her health” (Wilson 9). Though “they married” and Jim “furnished her with a more comfortable dwelling,” others look down upon their interracial union and Mag becomes even more ostracized from her former society (Wilson 13, 14). When Jim dies, Mag returns to her hovel and is accompanied by Seth, Jim’s business partner. The two never legally marry, but their lives intertwine and “[h]er will made her the wife of Seth” (Wilson 16). Mag and Seth have little money, however, and soon decide to give away the two children Mag had by Jim. The two leave Mag’s daughter Frado, then six years old, with the Bellmont family and never return.

Wilson created the hovel and the “more comfortable dwelling” as domestic sites ripe for creating a new natural in opposition to the Victorian norms of marriage and racial separation. Mag’s romantic partnerships with both Jim and Seth not only cross racial lines but also are both, most probably, illegitimate in the eyes of the state.
When Jim proposes to Mag, he “knew well what were her objections” (Wilson 12). Despite the social taboo of an interracial union, Mag agrees, citing it as the best of her current options: “‘I can do but two things,’ said she, ‘beg my living, or get it from you’” (Wilson 13). While the two move in together and bear two children, the narrator does not disclose a legal or ecclesiastic element to their union. The text most likely takes place in New Hampshire, a state that never imposed anti-miscegenation laws. White communities looked down upon mixed raced marriages, however, and “[e]ven among the free population before and after emancipation, long-term interracial unions frequently occurred outside of legally defined marriage” (Gullickson 292). While general negative attitudes towards romantic unions between people of different races may have diminished the amount who engaged in them – in 1850, a 1% sample of the free male population between 20 and 30 years old included 9,559 same-race marriages and only 5 between members of different races – these attitudes did not stop “many mixed-race couples simply lived as husband and wife without the consent of the state” (Gullickson 295, 292). Mag and Jim, then, most probably do not marry by law, and that fact coupled with the interracial element of the marriage ensures that Mag “sundered another bond which held her to her fellows” and “descended another step down the ladder of infamy” (Wilson 13). Mag creates a similar union with Seth, who is also African American and with whom Mag’s “will” was the most legitimate tie in their union (Wilson 16). Mag’s relationships – with the man by whom she bears her first child, Jim and Seth – are not legitimate or reputable by Victorian standards.
Figure 12. Kate Chopin’s last home in New Orleans with her husband, 1413 Louisiana Avenue.

Wilson crafted domestic sites where a spurned, defiled and impoverished white woman can live and love outside of white society, and yet the author did not protect her would-be protagonist from white society deeming her mad. Mag’s creation of a new “normal” – romantic unions not sanctioned by the state or approved by white Victorian society – in her home with Jim and her hovel lead her to mental states considered mad by 19th century standards. Once living in her hovel again with Seth, the suffering she endures leads her to “fits of desperation, bursts of anger, and uttering curses too fearful to repeat” (Wilson 16). These emotions and actions fit under the umbrella of the oft-diagnosed disease hysteria, which in the 19th century was known for the “extraordinary flexibility of its symptomatology” (Small 17). Describing the many symptoms of hysteria, historian Helen Small in her 1996 book *Love’s Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity 1800-1865* includes:

…a nervous temperament, violent and unstable emotions, depression, excitement, poor attention span, disturbed intellect, disturbed will, deficient judgement, dependency, immaturity, egocentricity, attention-seeking, deceitfulness, theatricality, stimulation, jealousy, fearfulness, and irritability. (Small 17-18)

Most of these symptoms describe Wilson’s thinly veiled memoir’s mother character Mag. It is not only Mag’s more active symptoms that suggested insanity to Victorian
sensibilities, but also her lack of interest in civilized society. After living on the outskirts of white society and in shame of her actions for years, Mag

had ceased to feel the gushings of penitence; she had crushed the sharp agonies of an awakened conscious. She had no longings for an awakened heart, a better life… She asked not the rite of civilization or Christianity. (Wilson 16)

Wilson’s description of Mag’s dismissal of white, Victorian society suggests the scorned character also dismisses the order and stability essential for the mental sanity of its inhabitants. While, as discussed in Chapter 1, the “startlingly fluid social order” of Jacksonian American led to “unlimited and grandiose ambitions” which had “pernicious effects” and was “one principal reason why Americans were especially prone to mental illness,” organized society did not cause insanity (Rothman 115). Employing the “powers and privileges” of society – especially Jacksonian society – wrongly, as Edward Jarvis, a 19th century United States’ physician, explains in an address at a Massachusetts hospital for the mentally ill, can be incredibly harmful: “These powers and privileges, when rightly employed, build man up and make him strong and successful and happy. But when they are misapplied, or unfitted to the circumstances of life, they overthrow and distress him” (Jarvis 5). The fluid and mobile elements of Jacksonian America could propel a man into insanity, but proper, ordered society with fewer social options for its inhabitants was indeed insanity’s
only cure. Mag’s dismissal of civilization is thus a reason for and a symptom of her madness.

Wilson manipulated the domestic site to make it inhospitable for domestic life. The author created the financial and personal need for Mag to give away her children, hindering Mag’s ability to act as mother and thereby stunting her life’s progression. Though Mag openly denounces her children’s worth – when Seth initially suggests they give the children away, Mag replies, “‘Who’ll take the black devils?’” – she is also deeply attached to them, and, when Frado runs away just before her parents leave her at the Bellmonts, Mag “felt sure her fears were realized, and that she might never see her again” (Wilson 16, 20). Mag’s “fears” that she will never see Frado again, however, do not end her and Seth’s plan to “relieve themselves of her” (Wilson 20). Mag’s financial need to remove herself of dependents, first with Frado, most probably soon with her other child, and surely not raising any subsequent children, also removes herself of her role of mother, so paramount to a woman’s political life.

_Our Nig_, a barely disguised memoir of Harriet Jacobs life, is set in New Hampshire before its publication date of 1859, a time and place where African Americans were free citizens. Justice Curtis’ dissent of the 1857 Supreme Court case _Scott v. Sandford_ ruled that African Americans both free and enslaved were not American citizens:

At the time of the ratification of the Articles of Confederation, all free native-born inhabitants of the
States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina, though descended from African slaves, were not only citizens of those States, but such of them as had the other necessary qualifications possessed the franchise of electors, on equal terms with other citizens. ("Scott v. Sandford")

Mag’s male children, then, would have – at least until 1857 – the right to vote, and thereby to make political decisions. Mag, as their mother, has the right and privilege of molding the minds of her male children, who, as far as she knew, would soon become citizens, and her female children, who would become the mothers of citizens themselves. By giving up her children, Mag not only stunts her life progression from child to woman and mother, but also gives up her political opportunities to mold the minds of her children.

While creating a new natural and eschewing one’s own role of mother could deem a woman mad, stunt her life progression, and strip her of her political opportunities, adhering to the natural order and attempting to progress through woman’s natural life progression did not guarantee better results. Authors that created negative outcomes for characters that act outside of natural order and life progression were perhaps reflecting an order and code they see in their everyday lives, while authors that created negative outcomes for characters that act within the natural order could be reflecting a seeming lack of order in the world around them. The latter could
have been Fanny Fern’s thinking in her treatment of Mary Leon in her 1854 novel *Ruth Hall*.

Fern created Ruth Hall’s introduction to Mary at the Beach Cliff, a hotel for the upper echelons of society to relax and socialize, and an institution in which both women feel out of place and “despise these air bubbles” (Fern 51). Mary, “upon whose queenly figure all eyes were bent as she passed,” is the beautiful wife of the perfectionist and controlling Mr. Leon, “a tall, prim, proper-looking person,” who was “very particular in his stated enquiries as to his wife’s and his horse’s health,” and maintains always the “same rigidity of feature, the same immobility of the cold, stony, gray eye, the same studied, stereotyped, conventionalism of manner” (Fern 50, 51). Though Mary has a “faultless, marble exterior,” she is more feeling than her husband and confides in Ruth the lack of love in her marriage, lamenting that she “too could love” (Ruth 51). After leaving Beach Cliff, Ruth does not encounter Mary again until she is passing by an insane asylum with her daughter and discovers that Mary’s husband sent her there when he traveled to Europe and that she recently died in the institution.

Fern created the asylum to which her erstwhile central character is sent as structurally similar to the quintessentially 19th century asylums discussed in Chapter 1. The New York State Insane Asylum at Utica was of “the most influential state hospitals of this period, which set the pattern for similar institutions elsewhere” (Scull 113). This famous asylum featured Greek Revival architecture, and though the asylum in which Mary was a patient was most probably set not in New York, but in Massachusetts, the state of Ruth’s father’s home, the asylum also features
architectural details common to Greek Revivalism. Ruth points out “the iron fence at the terraced banks, smoothly-rolled gravel walks” and how “[f]air rose the building in its architectural proportions” (Fern 109). Once inside the building, “Ruth followed the gate-keeper up the ample steps into a wide hall, and from thence into a small parlor,” and later travels “through one corridor, then another” and “descending a flight of stone steps, into a dark passage-way” on her way to see Mary’s body (Fern 110, 111). This impressive building seems to be in the new tradition of grand, Greek Revivalist state insane asylums like that in Utica.

Fern depicted a young, white, and upper class married woman as adhering to the natural order of Victorian society without and within the asylum’s walls. Before Mary’s husband sends her to the asylum, Fern did not disclose a trace of this upstanding lady acting outside the parameters of natural Victorian behavior. Though Mary finds many of Beach Cliff’s inhabitants vapid and she does not love her husband, she nevertheless lives outwardly as Mr. Leon’s faithful wife, living and socializing in the hotel as other society women admire, as Ruth says to her, “‘envying your beauty and your jewels, and the magnificence of your wardrobe’” (Fern 51). Her husband no doubt feels excused in sending Mary to an asylum because “Mrs. Leon was often subject to severe and prostrating attacks of nervous headache” (Fern 51). Mary’s “nervous headache” could be a sub-symptom of “a nervous temperament,” which, as already understood thanks to Small, was itself a symptom of hysteria in Victorian America. Yet Small also points out that hysteria was “pathological by-product of Victorian gender roles, to be found especially in idealized young middle- and upper-class womanhood” such as Mary (Small 17). Indeed, these sorts of
“delicate women,” as Dr. William Henry Day explains in “Clinical Lecture on some Varieties of Nervous Headache Delivered at the Samaritan Hospital” published in 1880, were “the common subjects of nervous headache,” and “Ovarian irritation,” which was “a not uncommon cause of nervous headache” affected especially women “who lead indolent and purposeless lives” (Day 118). The nervous headache that Fern portrayed as inflicting the well-behaved Mary, then, could have indeed been a symptom not of insanity but rather of her position as upper class Victorian woman.

Fern also gave little reason for the 19th century author to assume that Mary is insane through her actions once admitted to the asylum. Mr. Tibbetts, the superintendent of the asylum, claims Mary “was hopelessly crazy” citing that she “refused food entirely, so that we were obliged to force it” (Fern 51). Refusing food for a Victorian lady, however, was far from outside the norm, as Anna Krugovoy Silver explains in her 2004 book, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*. Silver argues that Victorian “culture itself manifested an anorexic logic,” that included “an understanding of the body as an entity that must be subordinated to the will” and “the related, gendered, belief that the perfect women is the one who submits her physical appetites (including, but not limited to, her hunger for food and, relatedly, her sexuality) to her will” (Silver 27). As Silver understands it, the Victorian sensibility of control over emotions and actions includes an ability to subdue appetite and consumption. Mary, though called “hopeless crazy” by Mr. Tibbetts for refusing food, is indeed “the perfect woman” for her ability to do so, as Silver explicates. Mary holds strong to her Victorian sensibilities despite her surroundings, the administrators of which use any excuse to label her as insane. Mrs. Bunce, “the
matron of the establishment,” finds a note written by Mary that proves her dedication to her natural Victorian sensibilities – and the asylum administration’s disregard for hints of her sanity (Fern 110):

‘I am not crazy, Ruth, no, no—but I shall be; the air of this place stifles me; I grow weaker—weaker. I cannot die here; for the love of heaven, dear Ruth, come and take me away.’ (Fern 112)

The note at once shows Mary’s insistence on her own sanity, her desire to reenter the natural society out of the asylums walls, and, perhaps, the beginning of her descent into madness. It is unclear when Mary writes the note in relation to when she died, or whether she did in fact succumb to madness amongst the pressures of the asylum, yet clear from this note and “that emaciated form” of her corpse that Mary did indeed die by growing weaker – surely an incredibly calm, ladylike and naturally Victorian way to pass (Fern 111).

Fern stunted this young woman’s ability to progress from woman to mother through the same means that she strips the woman of her social and political rights. Wilson did not allow Frado to grow past childhood in Our Nig. Stowe and Gilman took Prue and the Narrator’s children from them in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Chopin and, again, Wilson, have Edna and Mag eschew motherhood in The Awakening and Our Nig. Fern, however, allowed Mary to successfully progress from girl to married woman who is perhaps capable of bearing
a child. Her husband does not leave her permanently, through total abandonment or
divorce, but rather, as the gatekeeper to the asylum explains, “‘left her here for her
health, while he went to Europe’” (Fern 109). Though one cannot know Mr. Leon’s
ture intentions, his trip to Europe is not explicitly permanent, and indeed it was not
uncommon in this time for Americans to make long trips to Europe for business or
pleasure. While he is away, however, it is impossible for Mary to bear children within
matrimony, and thereby within the confines of Victorian morality. Even if Mary did
bear a child out of matrimony, the administrators of the asylum would surely not have
allowed her to keep and raise him or her. As discussed earlier in this chapter,
Victorian physicians and lawmakers agreed that insanity or social deviancy within the
home led to insanity or social deviancy in children, and would separate the mentally
ill from children. Alternately, the first step in bringing a mentally ill patient back to
good health “was the prompt removal of the insane from the community” (Rothman
137). Parents with mental illness were dangerous for children, families were
dangerous for people with mental illness, and thus physicians and lawmakers
removed the two entities from each other when possible. There is no chance, then,
that Mary can bear male children that will have political opportunities, and have
herself the political opportunity of raising them. Mary is thus a married woman and a
potential mother who, because she is committed to an insane asylum, cannot realize
her only political opportunity through motherhood.

If a white, free, married, upper class and healthy young woman outside the
home can act within the confines of natural Victorian society and progress from
girlhood to womanhood and reach potential motherhood successfully, yet still be considered mad and have her political opportunities stripped of her, then it is clear that the protections offered by maintaining the natural order and progressing through life fully only apply to women in domestic spaces. Three authors depicted three white and free women reaching the same fate of deemed madness and political disqualification, whether or not they act outside the confines of natural Victorian society and purposefully defy their progression into motherhood. While these women differ in their socio-economic status, their main difference is their setting: the former two reside in the domestic home, while the latter is taken out of her home and placed in an insane asylum.

The idealized 19th century home is a complex arena for women in Victorian texts. At the time, laws, science, religious doctrine and literature produced for women stressed that the home required a woman’s participation and was the sole setting suitable for a female audience. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Wilson’s *Our Nig* proved that the home could have dire consequences for women’s supposed sanity and political opportunities if its purposes were at all subverted. Yet Fern also subverted this notion with her unexpected and powerful figure Mary. Mary’s experience suggests that the home is perhaps the most navigable for women: while the road of natural Victorian sensibilities and life progression is narrow, it can indeed be followed. If a woman stays within the confines of a society’s intended actions and the home’s intended purposes, then she can be considered sane and hold some sway over the nation’s political realm. While the 19th
century asylum appropriated the idealized home to reproduce its structure and order, the institution is definitely outside of the domestic sphere. The rules, and thus the lawfulness, within the home do not exist without, and thus non-domestic places, like the asylum, can and do maltreat women despite their actions. Outside the home, women can lose their sanity and political power quickly. If a woman creates a new natural or somehow subverts the intended purpose of a domestic site, the home can cause insanity, perceived insanity, inhibited life progression or the removal of her already scant political opportunities. Yet if a women acts within the confines of Victorian natural order, including the delegated purposes of rooms within the home, the home is both the only the suitable place for women, but, as these authors proved, also the only lawful place in which women may exist.
The Haunted Garret
Published in Cosmopolitan Art Journal, March 1859

I stood in a garret bare and old,
The sun poured in a flood of gold;
In my hand I held a slab of wood,
And I gazed on the place where a spectre had stood.
For a space I gazed, then I turned away,
And I watched the sunbeam’s quivering play
On a rafter and sleeper and plank and band,
Then I look at the slab I held in my hand.
It was old and gray, but a trace it bore,
From a hand that had held it long before.
I could not read the words that were there,
But they seemed to be floating about in the air,
And to lie as plain on my very soul
As I read them now on the written scroll:

Alone—alone—alone!
They are merrily feasting below;
Me?—I have tasted none
Since—how many days ago?

How many I cannot tell;
A blight has seized my brain,
I but know—and I know too well—
I never shall eat again.

This garret is haunted, they say;
And aye, when I call aloud
I can hear them running away
As if I were a ghost in a shroud.

This garret is haunted, I know;
My shoulder I tried to gnaw
And could not, it was wasted so:
I looked up, and a spectre I saw!

Its horrible, hungry eyes,
Were hungrily glaring on me;
I sprang, on its shoulder to seize
—Then nothing more I could see.

I rose with a sudden strength;
With famishing strength I sought
Through the garret’s breadth and length,
But my search was all for naught.

Oh, the passion of pain I felt
When I found there was nothing there!
I screamed aloud,—then I knelt—  
Then I fainted in my despair.

I do not remember, now,  
How I came here, or when, or for what;  
But I feel, as I beat my brow,  
By the world I am all forgot.

I have no friends;—Not one  
To make any search for me:  
All that I loved are gone;  
There is none to care where I be.

I can hear them all below;—  
How slight is the wall between  
I can hear them come and go;  
I can tell what their words oft mean.

—Yet I am dying here!  
I am now too weak to call;  
And my passing life to cheer  
There is no one among them all!

But I know that when I am gone,  
—It may be a long time, first  
There may not be a bone  
Left, of my being accurst;—

Another will curious be  
To know what this garret contains;  
And then, they will hear of me,—  
If this, my record, remains.

Another shall come,—not as I,—  
(The memory now rushes back,—)  
The sun will shine bright in the sky:—  
I came when the heavens were black.

I came in the night, and alone,  
And the door it closed fast on me;  
I heard a shriek from one  
Who fancied a ghost she should see.

When the lid of the chest fell down,  
Ginevra was smothered soon.  
I can see when the heavens frowned;  
I can see the sun, at noon.

There is air in plenty here;  
Air alone sustains not life;  
This garret is wide and drear—
Long delayed is the parting strife.

Another will come, not alone,—
If the door should chance to close.
There will be more than one
To batter it down with blows,

If it open not without.
But there’s no more strength in my arm;
I have dealt my blows about,
And heard many shrieks in alarm.

—But all is over now;
The last of my strength is spent;
To the spectre’s master I bow;
The light—how sudden it went!

It is dark—but I hear a sound—
This record must be found—
How my dizzy head goes round—
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Then I awoke, and the light was sweet,
Each familiar thing that my eyes did greet
Sent a thrill of relief and joy to my heart,
Though I could not refrain from a frightened start
When my casement shook to the morning’s breath,
For it seemed to me like the step of death.
And all of that day, a shadow fell
On every object I knew so well;
And that fearful spectre seemed to rise
Before me, whenever I lifted my eyes.

Ida Clare
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