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“THOUGH WE *MUST* SUFFER, WE MUST NOT REBEL:” THE CALVINIST FRAMEWORK OF SUSAN WARNER'S *THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD*

Many popular works of fiction by American women writers in the mid-Nineteenth century, such as Maria Susanna Cummins' *The Lamplighter* (1854), Augusta Jane Evans' *Beulah* (1859) and Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), focus on what Joanne Dobson deems to be the “principal theme” and the “greatest threat” in the sentimental universe – the “desire for bonding” and the “breaking of human connections” (267) – through the depiction and “commemoration of childhood innocence, suffering, and (sometimes) death” (Singley 2011, 90). These novels trace the way in which their orphaned or motherless protagonists pass through one or more surrogate families in which, enduring difficulties and often having to cope with absolute male authority, they make their way toward maturity. In the development of their plots, these novels also generally reflect the then-current ideology of the “separate spheres,” that is, the discrete social worlds, at the same time dissimilar and interdependent, to which females and males were supposed to belong. While men were destined to the freedom, excitement, and dangers of the outside world, women, according to the “cult of True Womanhood” presented by women's magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature, were destined to inhabit the sheltered and secure home realm. The domestic sphere became the place where they were supposed to cultivate the four cardinal attributes ascribed to (and expected of) their gender: “domesticity, piety, purity, and submissiveness” (Welter 152). Among these, piety was believed to be “the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength” (Welter 152). While the need to preserve women from the allegedly corrupting influences of business and politics justified their restriction to the home, their “ability to embody purity and resist sin enabled them to sacralize the domestic sphere and carry forward the Christian virtues necessary to a healthy society” (Alvarez Hayes 61).

Along with recourse to the adoption motif so common in the sentimental novel in general and adherence to, or critique of, the ideology of domesticity as codified by the cult of True Womanhood, these works were infused with theological zeal. Specifically, they tended to share a typically “Christian emphasis on salvation, charity, and moral action” and to ascribe a special prominence to Christ as “an edifying model and inspiration” (Singley 2002, 53-55). In this sense, they can be connected to the wave of religious evangelism known as the Second Great Awakening that spread throughout the country and triggered a strong ethical and religious upsurge in the antebellum decades – an age when “most ordinary Americans expected almost nothing from government institutions and almost everything from religious ones” (Hatch 14). This movement was particularly successful at converting women and at involving them in pastoral activities including preaching, and in this way laid the groundwork for the creation of a culture of female piety that unlocked the production of a literature infused with theology (Stokes 41). In reference to these women writers' association with the revivalist movement, Jane Tompkins has perceptively observed:

The highest function of any art, for Warner as for most of her contemporaries, was the bringing of souls to Christ. Like their counterparts among the evangelical clergy, the sentimental novelists wrote to educate their readers in Christian perfection and to move the nation as a whole closer to the city of God. (149)

1. The Calvinist perspective

The Wide, Wide World clearly epitomizes the most popular and practiced storyline of the era: the material and moral journey of a passionate young female character to spiritual and religious maturity. The protagonist

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is a feisty but well-meaning preteen girl, Ellen Montgomery, who is separated from her pious but sickly mother and her strict father – both of whom she eventually loses to untimely deaths – and must build a new life in a number of adoptive homes, where she learns – through a string of hardships and losses – about the proper conduct expected of a “true” Christian.

Yet, I contend, Warner develops and presents her subject matter in a manner that is unusual in the genre in terms of the magnitude and scope of the theological aspect of her narrative and, above all, the theological doctrines she espouses. Warner depicts the circumstances surrounding Ellen’s orphanhood and subsequent adoption exclusively through the lens of religion, relegating the major coeval ideologies, such as the cult of domesticity and sentimental discourse, to supporting roles. More importantly, her religious ideas are informed by a stern Calvinist aura, which is not normally found in adoption fiction of the 1800s, which was shaped by softer principles and an emphasis on nurture (Singley 2011, 16). These works were “predominantly non-Calvinist or anti-Calvinist” because they “originated among liberal and Unitarian writers who used (them) to undermine Calvinism and to promote their view” (Kim 2003, 785-86). The immense popularity of Warner’s novel offers ample evidence that Puritan influence persisted and even found an ideal soil in the revivalist movement.

To properly situate *The Wide, Wide World* in the context of religious thought in the United States, it is necessary to keep in mind that the mid-Nineteenth century was “the critical period for Protestant thought in America” (Hart 254-70). Up until the 1820s, the Calvinist theological tradition had been “the chief vehicle of intellectual and cultural activity in American life,” but during the 1840s and 1850s, the tradition underwent a process of redefinition, which involved a rethinking of fundamental issues such as identity and mission (Douglas 6, 110). The significance of the chain of internal disputes that swept over the major Calvinist theaters of the country at that time has been widely debated. Some historians have viewed it as symptomatic of a decline of the Calvinist ethos in America, while others have seen it as a sign of its residual vitality. In Douglas A. Sweeney’s opinion, for instance, at the core of the controversy was not the survival of Calvinism, but a power struggle at the top of the pyramid for who would control the future of the movement (111).

The reason why Susan Warner’s allegiance was “not with the typical sentimental religion but with the revivalist line of Puritan thought associated with the First Great Awakening” (Kim 2012, 50), is first of all connected to her upbringing. As noted by Anna Bartlett Warner in her biography of her famous sister, the Warner family prided itself on being descendants of the Pilgrims and professed a Puritan faith (200). Following her pastor Dr. Thomas Skinner’s suggestions, in her religious studies, Warner focused her attention on the essays of the Puritan Divine Jonathan Edwards and, despite the disastrous financial situation of her family caused by her father’s bankruptcy, she managed to buy at least two of his works, *A History of the Work of Redemption* and *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (A. Warner 232-33). Even though she never explicitly mentions Edwards in her writings, it is likely that his doctrines influenced her understanding of Calvinism and Christianity.

In addressing the literary achievement of Susan and in recalling her state of mind as she wrote her novel, Anna Bartlett Warner used a significantly religious language, describing *The Wide, Wide World* as a sacred text, as effective as the Bible in triggering conversions. Besides, Bartlett Warner stated that her sister wrote her masterpiece,

in closest reliance upon God: for thoughts, for power, and for words. Not the mere vague wish to write a book that should do service to her Master: but a vivid, constant, looking to him for guidance and help: the worker and her work laid humbly at the Lord’s feet. In that sense, the book was written upon her knees: and the Lord’s blessing has followed it. How many of whom I have heard, trace their heart conversion straight to that blessing on the pages of the *Wide, Wide World*. (264)

Warner’s affinity with Calvinism also transpires from her reported dissatisfaction with the term “novel” in relation to the publication of *The Wide, Wide World* because, in her opinion, it betrayed the homiletic intent that was at the basis of her narrative. The author once wrote in her journal “One thing I ought never to do, at least for some time, and that is, to read novels. I know they have done me mischief enough already” (quoted in A. Warner 155). In this light, it is no wonder that she much “preferred to call her work a ‘story’ – a term, in her mind, closely akin to ‘parable’” (Koch X).



Her stance reflects the original Puritan prohibition of “products of fancy,” of works of art for art’s sake and divorced from ethics, whereby only edifying narratives, such as journals, diaries, and doctrinal literature were permitted. Puritan religious and moral discourse made the general welfare dependent on the population’s Christian virtuousness, to the point that “bringing the whole world to Christ was conceived as a goal of existence” (Tompkins 120). The primary source of cultural, moral, and social authority was, of course, the Holy Bible, while novels were considered potentially dangerous, especially for female readers. They were deemed to be “poisonous to women’s blood, arousing uncontrollable sexual passion (...)” that would ruin not only the women themselves, but also the families and the communities to which they belonged (Fekete Trubey 60-61).

The parable-like configuration of *The Wide, Wide World* is so evident that the text was viewed as an excellent example of sermon writing by Susan Warner’s beloved Reverend Skinner who in 1851 wrote to the author: “The spirit in your book is the spirit of the Gospel. The teaching of it, (*sic*) is the teaching of the Evangelical Pulpit. In a legitimate way, you are preaching to the unreachable reader of Christ, and I would that you might become a preacher thereof to every creature under heaven” (quoted in Stokes 41). Skinner’s appreciative note goes so far as to depict Warner as a kind of lay minister, whose novel is particularly effective at spreading God’s word because, unlike traditional preaching from the pulpit, it is not bound to a physical space; in the guise of an itinerant preacher, the novelist can in fact achieve the maximum circulation of the Christian message by approaching the devotees directly (Stokes 42-43).

2. The homiletic narrative structure

Throughout her novel, Warner employs her heroine’s existential ordeal and spiritual growth exclusively for evangelical purposes, as an opportunity to teach the validity of her religious positions, so much so that the character’s path takes the shape of an actual conversion. In keeping with this intent, almost every dialogue is treated as an opportunity for preaching the Gospel. The first of the countless sermons in *The Wide, Wide World* occurs very early, when Mrs. Montgomery breaks the news to Ellen about their imminent separation. Following her doctors’ recommendation, the lady is forced to leave America with her husband to look for a warmer climate in Europe. Due to a financial crisis in the family caused by Mr. Montgomery’s loss of a vital lawsuit, the girl has to remain in the United States in the care of her paternal aunt, Miss Fortune. To soothe her daughter’s distress at the sad news, Mrs. Montgomery preaches that “God sends no trouble upon His children but in love; and though we cannot see how, He will no doubt make all this work for our good” (S. Warner 9). As a parting gift, she gives Ellen a copy of the Bible.

A new sermon follows very soon, when Ellen, in the aftermath of the painful separation from her mother, opens her heart to a kind reverend she meets during the boat trip up the Hudson river. While the friendly stranger, Mr. Marshman, tries to comfort the heartbroken girl, he reiterates, in a long sermonic conversation that continues for several pages, the exact doctrine covered by her mother in her previous homily:

Are you one of his children, Ellen?

No, Sir, said Ellen...

Mama said I could not love him at all if I did not love him best; and oh, sir, said Ellen weeping, I do love mamma a great deal better.

You love your mother better than you do the Savior?

Oh, yes, sir, said Ellen; how can I help it?...

Then Ellen, can you not see the love of your Heavenly Father in this trial? He saw that his little child was in danger of forgetting him, and he loved you, Ellen; and so he has taken your dear mother, and sent you away where you will have no one to look to but him; and now he says to you, My daughter, give me thy heart. Will you do it Ellen? (S. Warner 70)

The gentleman also gives Ellen a Hymn Book in which he has marked the passages he wants her to note in particular – an act of catechism, which emphasizes his role in the story as the first of her many spiritual guides and agents of God’s design who will lead the little girl on her path to grace.

Notably, every moment of the protagonist’s life, even the most trivial, is subject to a meticulous critical examination – which reflects the omniscient scrutiny of human souls by the heavenly Father – and, in so being, it becomes an opportunity to impart sermons and to receive catechism. In that respect, an incident



that occurs early in the novel is emblematic. Not long after leaving her home for good, Ellen is invited to a neighbor's home to play a children's game consisting in drawing odd scraps of fabric from a bag. As she takes her turn, she inadvertently catches sight of the most precious item, a square piece of blue morocco. Even though she diligently closes her eyes while fumbling in the bag, she ends up by picking out the coveted scrap. As the other children become increasingly upset, she feels an upsurge of guilt and eventually resolves to let the most vocally disappointed girl have the scrap. The adult guests start a long discussion about her kind gesture; although all praise her as "quite a noble little girl" (S. Warner 27) and a "beautiful example of honor and honesty" (S. Warner 28), Ellen perceives herself as an out-and-out fraud and, to the general surprise, bursts into an emotional confession of what she deems to be her "sin:"

I am not modest! I am not generous! You mustn't say so, cried Ellen. She struggled; the blood rushed to the surface, suffusing every particle of skin that could be seen; – then left it, as with eyes cast down she went on – I don't deserve to be praised – it was more Margaret's than mine. I oughtn't to have kept it at all – for I saw a little bit when I put my hand in. I didn't mean to, but I did!

Raising her eyes hastily to Alice's face, they met those of John, who was standing behind her. She had not counted upon him for one of his listeners; (...) this was one drop too much. Her head sunk; she covered her face a moment and made her escape out of the room. (S. Warner 27)

When Ellen has calmed down, she seeks out John Humphreys, who later in the novel becomes another mentor, in order to explain herself. The young gentleman, who is preparing to become a clergyman, takes her small moral lapse very seriously and, with the stern Calvinistic attitude that will always mark his conduct towards Ellen, seizes the opportunity to preach her a sermon focused on her moral weakness, by which he means the moral depravity that, in the Calvinistic view, characterized all children:

You are no worse than before; – it has only made you see that you are very, very weak and unable to keep yourself right without constant help. Sudden temptation was too much for you – so it has many a time been for me, and so it has happened to the best men on earth; (...) Then let it make you very humble, dear Ellie, and let it make you in future keep close to our dear Savior, without whose help we cannot stand a moment. (S. Warner 28)

The moral emphasis given to what boils down to an innocent incident in the daily life of a child exemplifies the magnitude of the author's religious agenda. In Warner's novel, the spiritual sphere completely overshadows the mundane one, so much so that the domestic milieu, which in her peculiar viewpoint is neither sacralized nor idealized, loses its ideological force and recedes into the background as the mere setting for the core theme of the narrative, the protagonist's path toward Christian conversion and salvation. Consistently, Warner portrays everyday life for the purpose of bringing home "the possibilities of religious faith: to show her audience how average people could be devout Christians and how their mundane actions, however petty or small, could have spiritual consequences" (Kim 2003, 791).

3. A question of heart

The Calvinistic framework and fervor of *The Wide, Wide World* also emerge in the morphology of the characters and in their interrelations. The protagonist comes from a birth family based on a hierarchical Calvinist structure, in which "securing the father's authority, both local and cosmic, was central" (Leverenz 46, quoted in Loercher Pazicky 5). In this family structure, the man, as the worldly surrogate of God's will, retained absolute power over women, who may be his equal spiritually but definitely not socially. In fact, it is Mr. Montgomery who decides to leave his only daughter behind on the unstable grounds that she would somewhat benefit from the experience. In that respect, he can be said to bear a figural affinity to the inscrutable Puritan God described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a capricious deity of "extreme inhumanity" (60) who chooses arbitrarily who goes to heaven and who does not, regardless of human action and/or initiative. This affinity is perceptible not only in his decision to sunder family bonds, but also in his obstinately protracted silence about his plans for Ellen, including the date of her



departure and the duration of her stay. The women in the family have no say whatsoever in the matter. Mrs. Montgomery, though heartbroken at the idea of abandoning the “little creature who was nearest her heart” (S. Warner 7), meekly submits to her husband’s will – which she equates with God’s – and resigns herself to the inevitable: “Remember, my darling” – she says to her devastated daughter – “who it is that brings this sorrow upon us; though we must sorrow, we must not rebel” (S. Warner 9). In this Calvinist family milieu, it goes without saying that a daughter cannot even dream of contradicting her father: Ellen does not nurture “the slightest hope of being able by any means” (S. Warner 21) to change his mind, and obeys him even at the hardest time of her life, when she is given less than one hour’s notice before being torn from her family for good.

The patriarchal system continues to exert its godlike authority on Ellen’s life even *in absentia* and, due to particular circumstances, even *post mortem*, thereby reinforcing the determinism that characterizes the Calvinist conception of the deity. Ellen is initially entrusted to Aunt Fortune, a character who represents continuity with “the masculine world of power” (White 33) epitomized by Mr. Montgomery. A single woman and the owner of a farm, she treats her niece with the same arbitrariness and cold pragmatism that had characterized her brother’s attitude to his daughter. Once Ellen, after much sorrow and heartache, has finally moved away from her aunt’s property and found security and stability in her elective adoptive family, the Humphreys, a letter from Mr. Montgomery – written shortly before his death but delivered to Ellen only some time after his demise – once more twists her existence, forcing her to abandon her new home and start over at her maternal relations’ mansion in Scotland.

All in all, Ellen’s life is structured into phases of closeness and forced, painful breaking of human relations, which, in Warner’s figural universe, infused with theology, are not meant to induce the sympathy that, as I mentioned before, is crucial to sentimental discourse, but are viewed as a part of a stern but supremely beneficial divine plan to sever the protagonist’s attachment to secular life, fortify her faith, and eventually bring her into a close relationship with her Heavenly Father.

Despite her submissiveness in the face of her father’s life-altering plan, Ellen’s personality is actually marked by a strong temperament which is made explicit very early in the novel: “she was a child of very high spirit and violent passions, untamed at all by sorrow’s discipline” (S. Warner 93). These traits are not uncommon within the realm of sentimental fiction, especially in relation to heroines who are destined to take an edifying path that will eventually lead them to the submissive condition prescribed for their gender in their society. Such is the case with *Little Women’s* feisty Jo March. Nevertheless, while Jo’s indomitable temper in that novel is chalked up to immaturity, Ellen’s spirit is once again viewed through the lens of religion and, accordingly, is trenchantly ascribed to her “hard heart” (S. Warner 110), a characteristic linked, in theological terms, to the natural depravity of human beings postulated by Calvinist doctrine. In that respect, Warner offered a far more pessimistic portrait of children’s sinfulness than any other sentimental writer of her generation (Brekus 53).

Even if Ellen is portrayed as a very pious little girl, who reads the Bible and says her prayers every day, her still-unregenerate condition is in fact openly addressed by no less than her own loving mother. Mrs. Montgomery is well aware of Ellen’s flawed nature, which she conceptualizes in terms of an essential ignorance of God: an inability to transcend the immediacy of mundane experience, which makes the girl blind to the Savior’s greatness and, according to Calvinist doctrine, incapable of loving Him in the manner of one of the elect. Their conversation about this doctrine of the heart is emblematic:

But is mine a heart of stone, then Mamma, because I cannot help loving you best?

Not to me dear Ellen, replied Mrs. Montgomery, pressing closer the little form that lay in her arms; I have never found it so. But yet I know that the Lord Jesus is far, far more worthy of your affection than I am; and if your heart were not hardened by sin, you would see him so; it is only because you do not know him that you love me better. Pray, pray, pray my dear child, that he would take away the power of sin, and show you himself; that is all that is wanting. (S. Warner 52)

The theme of infant depravity also alluded to here was another object of widespread debate in the late 1840s, especially given the still very high rates of child and infant mortality in the country. A rigid position in this regard held that many of them could and would die in an unredeemed state (Kim 2003, 786). Warner’s



view seems to reflect that of the New England Calvinists – who firmly believed in original sin – and might have been inspired by her readings of Jonathan Edwards. The core of Edwards's theological system is a natural depravity that is above all psychological – namely, the intrinsic human inability to read the language of God (Johnson 102). Such a position ran counter to that of most women writers of the era who generally supported the idea of the inherent goodness of human nature and of the human heart.

4. The spirit of adoption

The strongest Calvinistic influence in the novel is the author's interpretation of adoption as a spiritual route to ethical improvement, which eventually turns out to be a form of salvation. Adoption and salvation were, in fact, closely related concepts in Seventeenth-century Calvinism, where the faithful soul was construed as an orphan who, drawn to Christ and faith, would separate from both the natural family and the natural world in favor of spiritual adoption by the divine family. John Cotton, one of the most prominent Puritan ministers, defined divine intervention on the human soul as "the spirit of adoption" (3). For him, human beings are by nature "children of wrath and children of the devil" so their status is "one of alienation and condemnation" (Beeke 5-6). However, thanks to the "sin removing and heaven-meriting work of Christ," their human status changes and they become "children of God" (Beeke 6). This process precedes genuine regeneration, for even if the faithful souls receive the status of God's children, they do not automatically assume the nature of their adoptive parent but, as happens in worldly adoption practices, retain the nature of their birth family. In the necessary further step, God initiates the faithful soul's regeneration by emptying it of all things mundane in order to ready it to receive His grace. He then "sends forth the Spirit of his Son into the hearts of His people" (Cotton 98) and this Spirit "implants a new nature" (Beeke 6) within human beings. In this way, God achieves what "no human father and mother can do when they adopt a child – change the personality and the nature of the child they have adopted so that it is like theirs" (Beeke 5-6).

For the Puritans, divine adoption was invariably brought into being through a painful experience. Afflictions fulfill the purpose of "(...) education and instruction" in God's family (Owen 29, quoted in Beeke 27) and are "badges of (...) sonship and the Father's love" (Beeke 27) – clear signs of God's care for and involvement in the lives of His flock. From this perspective, the involuntary severance of earthly family bonds through death, desertion, and/or geographical separation was always construed as instrumental in God's providential plot (Loercher Pazicky XVI).

These theological principles play a major role in *The Wide, Wide World*. In the run-up to the definitive separation from her little daughter, Mrs. Montgomery acknowledges the need for divine intervention to redeem Ellen from her sinful condition, by which she means her innate depravity: "You cannot help it, I know, my dear," said Mrs. Montgomery, with a sigh, "except by His grace who has promised to change the hearts of his people – to take away the heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" (S. Warner 52). Quoting from *The Book of Job*, Mrs. Montgomery goes on to equate God's grace with the infliction of sorrow and envisions Ellen's imminent ordeal as part of a providential design conceived for her very own sake, to purify her from the taint of sin and lead her onto the path of true faith: "It will be all well, my precious child, I doubt not. I do not doubt it Ellen. Do you not doubt it either, love; He wounds that he may heal. He does not afflict willingly" (S. Warner 57).

Mrs. Montgomery's sermon this time stresses that the little girl is still spiritually tied to earthly matters such as family bonds and especially the fierce love that she feels for her mother, characteristics which, from a Calvinistic viewpoint, are an intolerable hindrance in her path toward union with Christ. Notably, the pious lady underscores the need for Ellen to sever connections with her worldly family and to become an orphan so that she can be spiritually adopted into the celestial family and thus achieve the coveted regeneration: "Perhaps he sees, Ellen, that you never would seek him while you had me to cling to" (S. Warner 57).

This doctrine is again proposed when Mr. Marshman reminds Ellen that the bond of love she has experienced in her relationship with her mother, and the happiness she has felt in their life together, are but a pale reflection of the First Cause's incommensurable love for His flock:

(...) In the first place, it is not your mother, but he, who has given you every good and pleasant thing you have enjoyed in your whole life. You love your mother, because she was so careful to provide for all your wants; but who gave her the materials to work with? She has only been, as it



were, the hand by which he supplied you (...). It is all God's doing, from the first to last (...). (S. Warner 108)

He further admonishes her on the grounds that God

Sometimes sees that if he lets them alone, his children will love some dear thing on earth better than himself, and he knows they will not be happy if they do so; and then, because he loves them, he takes it away, – perhaps it is a dear mother, or a dear daughter, – or else he hinders their enjoyment of it; that they may remember him, and give their whole hearts to him... that he may bless them. (S. Warner 104)

God's plot thus tears Ellen away from a sheltered domestic sphere, where she lives an almost symbiotic relationship of love, trust, and complicity with her mother, and catapults her into a "wide, wide world" where she is exposed to a set of external forces over which she has no control and which, more often than not, are strict and severe, if not downright hostile – the worldly reflection of a deterministic deity "who will punish and inflict pain – for one's own good" (Bauermeister 20).

5. The "little pilgrim"

In terms of the novel's plot, Ellen's progression toward spiritual maturity and salvation by way of adoption takes the shape of a "way of the cross" – which, in Calvin's view, coincides with the way of the Gospel (Pattison 261-62). Her existential path is indeed informed by a discipline of sorrow, fraught with major losses and hardships and with an unbroken series of stern warnings, humiliations, and punishments inflicted by external authorities who act as if they were surrogates of God's will.

One of her most inflexible authority figures is undoubtedly her aunt. As their relationship becomes increasingly strained, Miss Fortune, who clearly espouses the Calvinist view of children as evil creatures in need of strict discipline, makes a point of breaking her niece's strong will. To that end, she withdraws Mrs. Montgomery's letters, the little girl's only source of comfort for the deep grief she experiences in the first months of her stay on the isolated farm, a punitive and cruel strategy that leaves the girl increasingly frustrated and resentful.

Later on, Ellen befriends the sweet and pious Alice Humphreys, who becomes her mentor and confidante. But even Alice refuses to let Ellen give way to her rebellious feelings. When the girl reports her aunt's contemptuous and heartless ways to Alice, she does not find the sympathy she expected, but receives a sermon instead. On the grounds that "the heart must be set right before the life can be" (S. Warner 260), Miss Humphreys admonishes Ellen for her stubborn pride, a flaw that needs to be corrected because it stands in the way of her spiritual development. After pointing out Ellen's faults in her relationship with her aunt, Alice recommends that Ellen swallow her pride and hurt and take the first step by apologizing to Miss Fortune: "Ellen dear, if you cannot humble yourself (...) you must not count upon an answer to your prayer" (S. Warner 261). At a later time, when Alice realizes that Ellen is becoming seriously attached to her as a surrogate motherly figure, she warns the girl to shift her love, faith, and gratitude onto the Father, the One who really deserves them:

But oh! Miss Alice, what would have become of me without you!
Don't lean upon me, dear Ellen! Remember you have a better Friend than I always near you;
trust in Him; if I have done you any good, don't forget it was He who brought me to you
yesterday afternoon. (S. Warner 262)

Despite this clear warning, the loving protection bestowed on Ellen by this woman amplifies the little girl's "memory of her mother, extending the heroine's (...) capacity to defer submission to God (...)" (Stewart 63). Understood in theological terms, Ellen's affection for Alice, like her love for her mother, fills her heart to the point where there is no room left to embrace God's grace; such mundane love blocks transcendence and makes spiritual adoption, and subsequent regeneration, impossible. Rather than being a source of emotional enrichment for Ellen, Alice's role in her life is seen as an obstacle to achieving communion with God and, in line with God's design, it needs to be removed from the girl's life path in order to clear her way to salvation.



And so, not long after the sad news of Mrs. Montgomery's death reaches Ellen, Alice is stricken by a fatal illness that condemns her to an untimely death.

Another major agent of God's design for the path Ellen is to tread is Alice's brother John. During a summer break from divinity school, he becomes very fond of the little girl and decides to take her much needed spiritual education into his capable hands. In contrast to his sister's firm but gentle approach, he takes a stern and at times dictatorial line of conduct (which perhaps alludes to the Calvinist conception of the deity). For example, he sets Ellen at a series of tedious drawing lessons, paying no heed to her clear discontentment and to her preference for other activities. More importantly, he forbids her to read novels, fearing that such texts might have the potential for leading her astray in her path toward salvation, and allows her only edifying readings, the most influential of which, besides the Bible, is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, "the prose epic of English Puritanism" (Swaim 1).

With its narrative structure of the solitary pilgrim achieving the ultimate goal of salvation through a perilous journey, fraught with hardships, temptations, and tests of faith, Bunyan's allegory functions in Warner's book as a symbol of Ellen Montgomery's own path of conversion from the darkness of her sinful nature to the light of the coveted regeneration. The identification of Warner's heroine with Bunyan's Christian is shown above all by a set of explicit references and self-references to Ellen as a pilgrim. When the girl is forced to move temporarily out of the Humphreys' mansion to assist her sick Aunt Fortune, John openly addresses her as his "little pilgrim" and expresses the wish that she "will keep the straight road, and win the praise of the servant who was faithful over a few things" (S. Warner 125). During the long and hard days of this new trial, "Ellen remembered John's words, and often in the mist of her work, stopping short with a sort of pang of sorrow and weariness, and the difficulty of doing it right, she would press her hands together and say to herself, I will try to be a good pilgrim!" (S. Warner 135).

In line with his stern educational approach, John Humphreys carefully limits Ellen's access to the text. At first he reads to her from the book every day – but he won't let her have a copy. Only in view of his imminent departure does he give Ellen a copy but, as had been the case with Mr. Marshman's Hymn Book, it is a personally annotated edition of the narrative, indicating that he wants to be able to supervise her even when he is not with her: "(...) she found all through the book, on the margin, or at the bottom of the leaves, in John's beautiful handwriting, a great many notes; simple, short, plain, exactly what was needed to open the whole book to her" (S. Warner 152).

The Pilgrim's Progress is also significant in Ellen's relationship with Alice, who shares her reliance on it in her spiritual life. In an emotionally didactic scene, Alice, aware of her own imminent demise and worried that yet another loss, after the trauma of her mother's death, might block Ellen's spiritual evolution and derail her journey to salvation, chooses to embed the circumstances of her passing in terms drawn from Bunyan's narrative rather than inscribing it within a providential design that would probably have sounded too remote for Ellen, especially considering her already beleaguered faith.

You remember Ellie, in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Christian and her companions were sent to go over the river? I think the messenger has come for me. You mustn't cry, love; listen, this is the token he seems to bring me – I have loved thee with an everlasting love. I am sure of it, Ellie; I have no doubt of it; so don't cry for me. You have been my dear comfort, my blessing. We shall love each other in heaven, Ellie. (S. Warner 262)

In this way, Bunyan's allegory illuminates a supreme trial of Ellen's education and faith, a test that she passes with flying colors.

Toward the end of the novel, Ellen reluctantly moves to Edinburgh to live with her mother's brother, Mr. Lindsay. Upon his adoption of his orphaned niece, the Scottish gentleman demands what only God, in His divine spirit of adoption and subsequent regeneration of the faithful soul, can achieve: that his adoptee relinquish her original identity in order to be "born again" into the new family. He insists that she abandon the stern mores that she has acquired in the United States and adopt the more mundane customs of her new family. He tries to undermine her strenuously acquired moral strength and self-control by assaulting "her attachment to religion, her country, and her American friends" (Chantell 147); Ellen must hold "no nationality" but that of her new family and must neither mention the Humphreys "nor allude to them, especially in any way to show how much her heart was out of Scotland" (S. Warner 408). Since Ellen is "spoiling herself for life



and the world by a set of dull religious notions that were utterly unfit for a child” (S. Warner 432), the Lindsays forbid her to spend her “precious hour alone” reading her beloved “little Bible” every morning (S. Warner 427), and, on the same grounds, they confiscate her copy of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, which they consider an umbilical cord that connects her to her American background and with the memory of her elective family. The loss of her beloved book, her only comfort and guide at a time of great loneliness, shakes Ellen to the core, leaving her “surprised and half frightened at herself... to find the strength of the old temper suddenly roused” (S. Warner 449). As Feteke Trubey aptly puts it, “Ellen feels that by taking away the text her uncle is inexplicably and wickedly preventing her from attaining salvation; similarly, Christian must fight the monster Apollyon who blocks the path to heaven” (68).

Nevertheless, it turns out that the seeds of her spiritual education have finally born fruit: the girl demonstrates her achieved maturity by regaining full control of her temper. Ellen, who is expected to address Mr. Lindsay as father and treat him as such, finds herself bound to him by an obligation of daughterly obedience, which she determines to fulfill whatever the cost, even if it entails temporarily dispensing with the values that are closer to her heart. Given that she must ultimately live by her uncle’s rules, she again looks to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* to find a providential meaning in the many hardships that befall her on her way to regeneration. In so doing, she “imagines a new role for herself, one based in resistance and defense of her faith – the traits of a Christian hero” (Feteke Trubey 68).

Thanks to all of her experiences and the considerable emotional turmoil they have involved, Ellen has beaten her strong will and pride into submission and achieved what Calvin, in his commentary of Peter 3:1-4, praises as especially becoming to women, namely, “a placid and sedate temper of mind” (88) – the unmistakable sign that her heart is finally “right.” After enduring “three or four more years of Scottish discipline” which cause “her no ill” but serve “to temper and beautify her Christian character (...),” Ellen, having attained legal age, is finally free to move back to America to “spend her life with the friends and guardians she best loved” (S. Warner 476). There, as a reward, she is entrusted to the care of John Humphreys, the man she most admires and, presumably, will marry when the time is ripe. Summing up Ellen’s long and harsh journey towards salvation, Susan Warner concludes her story with these words:

The seed so early sown in little Ellen’s mind, and so carefully tended by sundry hands, grew in course of time to all the fair stature and comely perfection it had bid fair to reach – storms and winds that had visited it did but cause the root to take deeper hold; – and at the point of its young maturity it happily fell into those hands that had of all been most successful in its culture. (475)

Viewed in light of the Calvinist framework of the novel, the ending of *The Wide, Wide World* is surely a “happy” one because, with her husband-minister, Ellen will be able to live peacefully and obediently in this world, while fulfilling the stern dictates of heaven – in that respect, her religious *Bildung* is complete.

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