Before realism: the great American novel and the forms of nationhood, 1851-1882

Naoto Kojima

University at Albany, State University of New York, nkojima@albany.edu

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation


This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive.

Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
Before Realism: The Great American Novel and the Forms of Nationhood, 1851–1882

By

Naoto Kojima

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts & Sciences
Department of English
Fall 2022
Abstract

This dissertation uses the concept of the Great American Novel as a strategic framework for understanding the cultural ascendance of realism. Much more than a naïve expression of literary chauvinism, the rise of the idea of the Great American Novel marks a transformative moment in the decades before realism becomes institutionalized as a “new school” in the 1880s. Examining how Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Dean Howells, and Henry James anticipate or respond to the call for the national novel which mediates among regions, Before Realism demonstrates that American literary realism emerged out of its engagement and negotiation with the Great American Novel.

Before Realism seeks to make an intervention into debates on transnational and transbellum American literature. Examining a largely unexplored link between the international novels of realist authors and the political project of national reconciliation in postbellum U.S., this study tells a broader story of the rise of literary realism situated in a transatlantic context. At the same time, highlighting the mediating potential of the idea of pan-national novel, I bring the discussion of literary nationalism back to recent academic transnational studies in which the question of nationhood tends to be regarded as problematic. Furthermore, this dissertation is also an attempt at a reperiodization of nineteenth-century American literature which reconsiders the dichotomous understanding of antebellum romance and postbellum realism. Employing a timeline across the Civil War, I trace the story of a divided nation and its reunification manifested both at the thematic and formal levels in the novels from Uncle Tom's Cabin to The Portrait of a Lady, along with the historical course of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the end of Reconstruction.
The first chapter examines the notions which constitute the concept of the Great American Novel—the romance of reunion and the soul-nation allegory—and offers a reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a transbellum master text of that emergent idea. In chapter two, I elucidate how Stowe’s later New England novels stage dialectical relationships between competing arts of nation formation and how the issue of slavery works as the catalyst of the novel’s nationalizing process. The third chapter focuses on Howells’s early career and excavates the development of Howells’s South-mediated realism characterized by both dependence on and departure from the romance of reunion. The last chapter is devoted to an extensive analysis of James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* as a novel about the Great American Novel that dramatizes and unsettles the metanarratives of the idea itself.
Contents

Abstract ...........................................................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................v

Chapter One / Introduction: The Great American Novel and the Forms of Nationhood.............1
  1. Nation, Region, and the Romance of Reunion
  2. Modernity, the Soul-Nation Allegory, and the American Bildungsroman
  3. Uncle Tom’s Cabin as the Transbellum Master Text of the North-South Divide

Chapter Two / Nationalizing Processes and Modes of Telling in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s
Regional Novels..................................................................................................................................18
  1. “Two Worlds Must Mingle”: Realities and Idealities in The Minister’s Wooing
  2. The Unfinished Self-formation and Nation Formation in Oldtown Folks

Chapter Three / The Romance of Reunion and Howells’s South-mediated Realism.................64
  1. Realism as the Self-consciousness of the Romance of Reunion in A Foregone Conclusion
  2. The Nationwide Accumulation of Localism and the Return of Inter-sectional Romance in A
     Modern Instance

Chapter Four / The Portrait of a Lady as the Novel about the Great American Novel..............103
  1. Where is Gilbert Osmond from? The Portrait of a Lady and Reconstruction
  2. “History of an Americana”: Reconstructing Ralph’s Dream in a Female Bildungsroman

Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................147
Acknowledgements

I am enormously indebted to my committee members for their generous support, inspiration, critical attention, and much patience. Since my first semester at UAlbany in 2012, James Lilley has helped me to navigate my way through graduate school and provided me with invaluable guidance. Without his intellectual and moral support through countless emails and insightful comments on my multiple drafts, I might have given up long ago. He gave me the warmest support one could ever wish for. In addition to her inspiring comments, Jennifer Greiman’s unwavering enthusiasm and interest in my project from its earliest stage enabled me to have trust and confidence in what I have been doing. Even though she was technically the third reader, Erica Fretwell generously read all versions of the drafts and always gave careful and incisive commentary with suggestions on how to improve them. I also benefited from marvelous courses that they offered at UAlbany. I am honored and lucky to have had such superb teachers.

This project would have been unthinkable without rigorous guidance and immeasurable support by Patricia Chu, who helped me to transform my scattered thoughts and fragmented ideas into a coherent project. Full of intellectual vigor, affectionate humor, and generosity of spirit, she is one of my role models as a scholar and a teacher.

I would also like to thank my fellow graduate students at UAlbany, who let me feel connected and grounded in an unfamiliar land by sharing time and talking with me inside and outside the classroom: Evan Chen, Kate Cove, Alice Hofmann, Josh Keller, Aimee Vincent, Jessy Poole, Jessica Manry, Zayed Sarker Hasan Al, Jonah Richards, Ingrid Szu-Ying Chen, Rumi Coller-Takahashi, Kenji Kihara, and Daisuke Kiriyama.
My first two years at UAlbany was funded by Fulbright, and I am indebted to the Institute of International Education for opening the gate of my academic pursuit in the United States. I am also grateful to Michiyo Kaya Wojnovich, Kyoko Mano Ullrich, Kayoko Meyerer, and the Department of East Asian Studies in UAlbany in which I had an opportunity to work as a part-time lecturer teaching Japanese language courses.

Since a large portion of my writing process has been done after I was back in Japan, my gratitude also goes to my current colleagues at Hosei University. They have provided me with an excellent working environment and been patient with this seemingly interminable process. A portion of an earlier version of chapter 4 appeared as “Girubäoto Ozumondo ha doko shusshin ka: The Portrait of a Lady to nanboku wakai no narathivu,” Eibungakushi (no. 60, 2018, pp. 39–56), published by the English Literary Society of Hosei University. My friend and colleague Ikuko Endo read portions of chapter 4 and gave invaluable feedback.

I remain ever grateful to my mentors at the University of Tokyo: Fumiyo Hayashi, Takaki Hiraishi, and Koichi Suwabe. They introduced me to American literature and taught me the pleasures and challenges of a close reading of literary texts. I cannot express enough gratitude for their instruction and encouragement. I will never forget the day when Professor Hayashi passionately pushed me to pursue my graduate studies in the United States.

Last but not least, I thank my family for waiting patiently and being confident that I would finish this: my parents Asato and Junko Kojima, my brothers Fumito and Takuto, and their partners Saori and Miwa. And most of all, thank you, Yoshiko, for spending life with me and always believing in me even in difficult times. This dissertation is dedicated to you and our singular road trip.
Chapter One

Introduction: The Great American Novel and the Forms of Nationhood

The idea of the “Great American Novel” began circulating with the publication of John De Forest’s short essay of January 1868, which is now regarded as a manifesto of literary realism and nationalism in the postbellum period. Presented only three years after the end of the Civil War, De Forest’s critical concept was closely interwoven with the project of reunification of the nation. Defining it as “a national service,” he declares that the task of the Great American Novel is “to grasp this whole people” by painting “the picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence” and “the American soul” in “the framework of a novel,” which “has seldom been attempted, and has never been accomplished further than very partially” (27–28). As Lawrence Buell argues in his The Dream of the Great American Novel (2014), this idea thereafter became one of the important “reference points for imagining U.S. national identity” (1). The New York Times Book Review recently published a feature article “Why Are We Obsessed with the Great American Novel?,” in which two columnists discuss the question of “whether that dream is still alive” (Strayed and Kirsch). For almost a century and a half since its birth, then, this idea has been galvanizing publishers and writers.

My dissertation uses the concept of the Great American Novel as a strategic framework for understanding the cultural ascendance of realism. Much more than a naïve expression of literary chauvinism, the rise of the idea of the Great American Novel marks a transformative moment in the decades before realism becomes institutionalized as a “new school” in the 1880s. Examining how Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Dean Howells, and Henry James anticipate or
respond to the call for the national novel which mediates among regions, Before Realism demonstrates that American literary realism emerged out of its engagement and negotiation with the Great American Novel.

This project is directed also more broadly at theoretical and disciplinary questions of temporal and spatial boundaries in literary studies: transbellum and transnational perspectives on American literature. First, aimed as a contribution to the current conversation in American literary studies about the reperiodization of literary history proposed by Christopher Hager and Cody Marrs, Before Realism focuses on the thirty years between the 1850s and the early 1880s—“an empty crater in the afternoon of the century” between American Renaissance and the Age of Realism—and explores what they call “realism’s motley genealogies” (260). Rather than seeing a shift from one literary mode to another—from antebellum romance to postbellum realism—by presupposing the break between them, I would like to resituate it as a continuous process of transformation of the register of the novel, taking a cue from Hager and Marrs’s way of situating the Civil War as “both a rupture and an occasion for extension” (260). In this way, my study builds on and offers a response to what Marrs calls “transbellum” literary studies of nineteenth century Americanists.

Second, by focusing on the mediating and integrative functions inherent in the idea of the Great American Novel, my study intervenes in recent scholarship on the relation of the local to the global. Scholars such as Tom Lutz, Bill Brown, Brad Evans, and Hsuan Hsu have opened up broader perspectives on regionalism, developing their arguments on local color’s transnational scope. In their emphases on the “conception of the local as the global” (Evans 778), however, they tend to bypass or bracket the question of nation and, as a result, understate how transnational scopes themselves are mediated through the rearrangement of the idea of
nationhood. In this respect, rather than undercutting the questions of nation, I would like to take a cue from Stephanie Foote’s focus on “regional writing’s role in transforming cultural variation into national identity” (8) and Jennifer Greeson’s analysis of the transnational scope of local color fiction in relation to the conceptualization of the Reconstruction South as “the domestic site upon which the United States would take up the mantle of global empire” (241). By putting the concept of the Great American Novel in conversation with the rich body of scholarship on local color and regionalism, I hope to show how American literary nationalism transforms itself through the process of searching for the form of the novel that mediates between regions, especially the North-South divide.

Designed to be a contribution and response to transnational and transbellum literary studies, Before Realism consists of four chapters focusing on the following themes: a contextualization of the ideological and aesthetic core which constitutes the concept of the Great American Novel, combined with a reading of Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) as a transbellum master text of that emergent idea (Chapter 1); Stowe’s later career and the intersection of regional and national tendencies in her New England novels (Chapter 2); the rearrangement of American nationhood and self-formation as a realist writer in Howells’s early career, before he starts to promote the American “new school” of fiction in the 1880s (Chapter 3); and an extensive analysis of James’s The Portrait of a Lady (1881) as a novel about the Great American Novel that dramatizes and unsettles the metanarratives of the idea itself (Chapter 4). In this way, my project tracks a largely unexplored literary trajectory from Stowe’s appeal to “feel right” to Isabel Archer’s discovery of “a very straight path” interwoven with the historical course of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the Compromise of 1877.
To define two key terms that are used throughout my analysis, the following two sections examine and contextualize what I call the twin ideological cores of the idea of the Great American Novel: the romance of reunion and the soul-nation allegory. Although these two interrelated concepts become even more relevant in the wake of the Civil War, they should be regarded as an extension of the nation’s concerns in the antebellum period when the sectional divide and conflict between the North and the South becomes an urgent problem.

I. Nation, Region, and the Romance of Reunion

As a Union war veteran working for the Freedmen’s Bureau in South Carolina after the war, De Forest fully recognizes the need for what Paul Giles calls “a program of unification that sought not only to reconstruct the South but also to integrate the United States within a new nationalist framework” (111). When he writes in his essay that he “shall perform a national service, and be hailed as a national benefactor” if he can write a Great American Novel (27), De Forest is highly aware that his literary idea is inseparable from the postwar political project of reunifying the nation. “As a result of disunion,” writes Kenneth Warren, “citizenship emerged in outline not as something already there, but as something that needed to be worked out” and therefore “the question of what made these diverse regions and societies a nation . . . became a key problem for the American novel.” Then, “[h]ow was one to write ‘the great American novel’?” (79). This is exactly the question that De Forest wants to articulate through his conception of the novel to be written.

De Forest’s interest in a national novel that integrates regional and sectional divide allows us to see the reason why he situates the concept of the Great American Novel in contrast to what he calls “localisms.” Criticizing the New England tales of Oliver Wendell Holmes and
others, he claims that they are “not American novels; they are only New England novels; they
are localisms” (28). For De Forest, provincial concern is exactly what the Great American Novel
must surmount. Although the term “local color” itself had not come into widespread use at that
time,¹ the idea of the Great American Novel thus stages the fraught relationship between region
and nation and anticipates the debate over regionalism.

Instead of retreating into what he calls “localisms,” which display “a peaceable array of
regions whose distinctive histories and ways of life could be sampled without controversy” as
Nancy Glazener puts it (“The Novel” 348), De Forest advocates the pan-national novel which
sticks to the still-controversial question of sectional opposition between North and South with
the purpose of reunifying the nation. His idea speaks for the sentiments of a nation aspiring to
reconcile: this is why many of the attempts to write a novel in the postwar period, including De
Forest’s, tend to rely on the marriage plot, the narrative pattern of what Nina Silber calls “the
romance of reunion.” She defines this concept as “the love between a northern, often Union, man
and an initially resistant, but ultimately submissive, rebel woman.” According to Silber, “most
dramas of reunion” told in the postbellum period “revolved around the story of a northern man’s
conquest of a rebel belle,” and this type of tale was “repeated over and over in the culture of

¹ The term “local color” had already been used occasionally in American literary periodicals, but
its reference was limited to travel writings and essays such as Richard Burton’s works. The first
application of the term to European fiction in the Atlantic Monthly appeared in December 1864
in a review of George Eliot’s Romola, in which the reviewer writes that “[t]he couleur locale is
marvelous;—nothing could be more delightfully real, for example, than the scenes which
transpire in Nello’s barber’s-shop” (Field, “English” 666). “Local color” as a description of an
American fiction first appeared in a 1869 review of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Oldtown Folks. The
reviewer praises Stowe’s novel, writing that “[e]verything that is tinged with local color becomes
a reality to us, and we get so charmed with the company of the country folks that we are loath to
leave them for more distinguished society” (“Oldtown” 455). Two years before, in the same year
of De Forest’s essay, Bret Harte published “The Luck of Roaring Camp” in his Overland
Monthly, which initiated the nationwide recognition of local color as a mode of fiction writing
and marked its emergence as a periodical genre.
conciliation” (110). As Silber persuasively argues, this “romance of reunion” is highly problematic both in terms of sexism and racism, because it advocates paternalistic control of the “feminine” South by the “masculine” North and, at the same time, suppresses the suffering of emancipated people by promoting “the culture of conciliation” between Northern and Southern whites. De Forest’s *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), his own attempt to write a postbellum national novel, perfectly follows this ideology. Whereas De Forest has often been praised as “a realist before realism was named” (Howells’s word [qtd. in Sundquist 511]) especially for “the realism of his battle-scenes” (Martin 31), the story of *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* is based on a highly conventional heteronormative marriage-plot between Captain Colburne, a New Englander and Union officer, and Lillie Ravenel, a Louisiana beauty and rebel. In order to incorporate his realist representations of the scenes and characters into a novel form, De Forest has to rely on a narrative template deeply problematic as a form of nationhood.

By pointing out De Forest’s complicity with the romance of reunion, however, I do not intend to claim that the idea of the Great American Novel is nothing but a mouthpiece of that dominant ideology of the postbellum period. I suggest instead that it stages the problems embedded in the culture of conciliation as well as the tensions between region and nation precisely through its aspiration toward reunification by way of pan-national fiction. Concluding his essay by expressing a negative prospect concerning the “immediate chances of a ‘great American novel’” that “the wonder will not soon be wrought” (29), De Forest is gesturing toward something beyond the romance of reunion, a literary form of nationhood not yet realized. In this sense, the Great American Novel is a concept that informs both its dependence on and departure from—or an aspiration to find an alternative to—the romance of reunion.
My dissertation reconsiders the concept of the romance of reunion by exploring its broader potential in a transatlantic and transbellum scale. Scholars such as Sara Blair, Nina Silber, and Jennifer Greeson have examined various travel writings in postbellum America and demonstrated the overlapping of images between the American South and the European South, particularly through their tropical climate and the presence of ruins. For instance, analyzing Sarah Putnam’s travel writing on Charleston in the Reconstruction period, Silber argues that “the sight of decay and ruination in the South frequently encouraged northern travelers to compare those sites with the fashionable tourist vistas for Europe” (77). In her reading of Henry James’s Italian essays “on the enchants of Venice,” by way of contrast, Blair contends that “[b]y the 1870s that ‘Siren of the South’—in an idiom of degeneracy and feminization that chimes with Reconstructionist narratives about the American South—had become a monitory icon of erotic transgression, of racial and sexual masquerade” (131). Moreover, as Don Doyle demonstrates, there is a “peculiar relationship of the South to the nation in America and Italy,” since “The Brigands War coincides with the American Civil War in which the Confederacy’s bid for nationhood was defeated after a bloody conflict” and “[i]n each setting the Southern Question eventually found its remedy in various efforts to reconstruct the South” (66). Resituating the “international” novels of European settings written by Howells and James in this context of contemporary social discourses, we can see how their early literary careers as international novelists also engage with the cultural and political milieu of post-Civil War America. In fact, as I will demonstrate in later chapters, both use the narrative template of the romance of reunion with a transatlantic scope and trouble it by twisting the North-South marriage plot.

Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which I discuss more closely in the last section of this chapter, plays a pivotal role in considering the transbellum origin of the romance of reunion as
well as the idea of the Great American Novel. Indeed, it is worth noting that De Forest nominates *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the only possible candidate for the Great American Novel, praising it as the “nearest approach to the desired phenomenon” due to its “national breadth.” Then he continues: “Such Northerners as Mrs. Stowe painted we have seen; and we have seen such Southerners, no matter what the people south of Mason and Dixon’s line may protest . . . It was a picture of American life, drawn with a few strong and passionate strokes, not filled in thoroughly, but still a portrait” (28). According to De Forest, what makes *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* “a picture of American life” and the candidate for the Great American Novel is its national representativeness, which was made visible by its realistic depiction of both Northern and Southern whites. He shows almost no interest in the inseparable relationship between the novel’s pan-national scope and Stowe’s political intention to make the reader feel that “slavery [is] a national, as well as an individual, sin” (Walters 184). Still, his way of positing *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the earliest and only candidate for the Great American Novel allows us to recognize that the romance of divide and reunion as an urgent project of national literature was reactivated before the war itself: it started in the wake of the Compromise of 1850, particularly through the popularity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* both within and outside the United States.²

---

² As Lawrence Buell explains, the earliest reference to the term appeared not in the U.S., but in Britain: an advertisement for a London penny edition reprint of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which entitled “Uncle Tom’s Cabin: The Great American Novel, to be Completed in Six Weekly Numbers, Price One Penny Each Saturday, August 7, 1852” (qtd. in Buell 150n8). Audrey Fisch states that “Stowe’s success in America were relatively small compared with what she achieved in England where sales of the novel are estimated to have reached a million and a half by the end of the first year of publication” (96). In other words, the idea of the Great American Novel is not solely “American” or “exceptionalist” a concept as it appears to be. Rather, the idea itself was, as it were, imported from the British literary marketplace in the wake of the tremendous international success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Transporting it to the domestic cultural scene, American publishers and writers had used the term only occasionally until De Forest took it seriously and rewrote it as a manifesto for a national literary project. Thus, the idea of the Great
2. Modernity, the Soul-Nation Allegory, and the American Bildungsroman

Modernity is another major concern for De Forest when he discusses the difficulties of writing the Great American Novel. For him, depicting modern American society in totality and exploring the meaning of modernity are what the Great American Novel should do and what authors like “Hawthorne, the greatest of American imaginations,” could not do. While praising “acute spiritual analysis” in Hawthorne’s romances, he complains that they have “only a vague consciousness of this life.” The characters in them, continues De Forest, “are what Yankees might come to be who should shut themselves up for life to mediate in old manses. They have no sympathy with this eager and laborious people, which takes so many newspapers, builds so many railroads, does the most business on a given capital, wages the biggest war in proportion to its population, believes in the physically impossible and does some of it” (28). Worth noting here is his vocabulary. He makes a typical list of things that characterize the industrial revolution and capitalist modernization in mid-nineteenth century American society: newspapers, railroads, business, and the war. In other words, he suggests that what is absent in Hawthorne and what should be a requisite for the Great American Novel is a story of modernity.

At the same time, however, he acknowledges that writing a story of modernity is extremely difficult if not impossible in the post-Civil War United States, where the society “is changing every year not only in physical attributes, but in the characteristics of his soul.” He laments: “Fifteen years ago it was morality to return fugitive slaves to their owners—and now? Five years ago everybody swore to pay the national debt in specie—and now? . . . Can a society

American Novel as the picture of “the American soul” is a product of a transnational network of circulation first mobilized by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*
which is changing so rapidly be painted except in the daily newspaper? Has any one photographed fireworks or the shooting-stars?” (29). In this way, he explains that what makes writing a pan-national novel difficult is an increasingly unstable condition of American people and society. What he invests in the idea of the Great American Novel as the “task of painting the American soul within the framework of a novel” (27), then, is his desire to give a national form and meaning to the formless and constantly changing force of modernization.

In The Way of the World, his now-classic account of bildungsroman, Franco Moretti defines the central genre of the European novel as a synthetic form managing the tension between the trope of youth—“modernity’s ‘essence,’ the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future, rather than in the past” (5)—and the counter-trope of adulthood. Embodying modernity’s unbounded process of development and becoming, youth signifies the impulse toward the open-ended process of narrativity, which needs to be bounded by a teleological narrative closure of “the conclusive synthesis of maturity” (19) as social reconciliation in order to give meaning to itself. Jed Esty develops Moretti’s provocative thesis by foregrounding “the allegorical co-implication of nationhood and adulthood in the biographical novel” (39), which constitutes “the core ideology of the classic bildungsroman” (52). Combining Moretti’s account with Benedict Anderson’s one of the nation-building function of the novel, and also with reference to M. M. Bakhtin’s definition of bildungsroman as “the image of man growing in national-historical time” (25), Esty argues: “What Moretti’s model leaves unexplored is the crucial symbolic function of nationhood, which gives a finished form to modern societies in the same way that adulthood gives a finished form to the modern subject” (4). His book traces how the modernist fiction by Kipling, Conrad, Woolf, and others brings the “disruption of the soul-
nation allegory” (13) particularly through its “intertwined tropes of frozen youth and uneven
development” (7) in increasingly globalized conditions in the age of empire.

In light of theories of bildungsroman explored by Moretti, Bahktin, and Esty, we can
have a closer understanding of De Forest’s aspiration and dilemma. For De Forest, the difficulty
of writing the Great American Novel as the narrative of modernity resides in a the formless and
constantly changing force of modernization increasingly rampant in the Gilded Age America.
What he wants is a form of national closure represented by self-development of a character “who
is integrated with and reproduces the spirit of his nation” (Lloyd 70). In other words, he is
searching for the way to give shape to a form of nationhood working as a cultural container
which manages unreconciled social contradictions between North and South. The soul-nation
allegory, or “an interlocking alignment between soul and nation” at “both thematic and symbolic
levels” (Esty 50), is exactly what he wanted in his idea of “painting the American soul within the
framework of a novel” (De Forest, “Great” 27).

Furthermore, Esty’s account of nationhood and adulthood as the “inherited doublet of
closural motifs” (50) from German idealism’s conception of Bildung also helps us see the reason
why the romance of reunion becomes a dominant social discourse in the aftermath of the Civil
War. Just as Moretti poses “the novel of marriage” as one typical format in which marriage is
“seen as the definitive and classifying act par excellence . . . at the end of the Bildungsroman’s
development” (7) as “the subjective symptom of an objectively completed socialization” (24),
Esty states that “[i]n the classic bildungsroman or realist novel, the marriage plot is the narrative
and social convention par excellence for embedding subjects into the fixed state of adulthood”
(121). As a representative cross-sectional marriage plot in the United States, the romance of
reunion is predicated on what Esty calls “the twin plot of nationhood-adulthood” (52–53).
Dramatizing a Southern belle’s “conversion from secession to loyalty” as a story of development ending with her happy marriage to an ex-Union officer, De Forest’s own attempt at the Great American Novel is a perfect example of how “the formal stasis implied . . . by nationhood and adulthood” (Esty 44) works as a culture of reconciliation in the wake of the divide of the nation.

Even though De Forest does not clearly declare in his essay that the Great American Novel should take a form of bildungsroman, the two of them are closely interwoven at their ideological and aesthetic basis, because a coming-of-age story of a soul-nation allegory is an exemplary way to give form and meaning to modernity’s endless capitalist transformation. In this way, my dissertation aims to make a connection between two major scripts of the literary candidates of the Great American Novel which Buell discusses separately—the “American dream” story and the romance of the divide—and explore their relation by focusing on the specific period in which they are conceived as collaborative entities. The Great American Novel is a project of literary nationalism searching for the American bildungsroman and its soul-nation allegory that mediates between regions, especially the North-South divide, before and after the Civil War.

3. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the Transbellum Master Text of the North-South Divide

The previous sections examine and contextualize the romance of reunion and the soul-nation allegory as the twin ideological cores which constitute the idea of the Great American Novel. As I noted earlier, these two interrelated concepts are transbellum products, both of which becomes increasingly urgent and relevant in the aftermath of the Compromise of 1850. In the following, I demonstrate that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* stages these concepts and anticipates the issues eventually crystallized in the idea of the Great American Novel in three interrelated ways. First, it portrays
the nationwide complicity with slavery—“[b]oth North and South have been guilty before God,” as the narrator says in her concluding remarks (408)—precisely through its intention to be a regional novel. Second, by juxtaposing two spatially distant slave stories using national temporality of “meanwhile,” the novel inscribes both racial inclusion and exclusion at formal level. Third, by employing the figure of cabin as the point of origin of national temporality and as an allegory of divided nation rather than of reunion, it calls for the need of the soul-nation allegory of national unification.

Some scholars have pointed out that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* can be read as regional fiction. For instance, Stephen Nissenbaum provocatively states that even though “New England never actually appears,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is also “the great New England regional novel” (54). To make this point clear, he calls attention to the way Stowe represents Simon Legree, “the one slave owner in the book who truly is vicious” and argues: “Legree is as much a Yankee capitalist as he is a Southern slave owner. Stowe tells us that he was actually born in New England . . . Legree runs his plantation like a factory, for maximum short-term profit. He is obsessed with money, even to the point of writing financial calculations on the walls of his own parlor. In terms of regional stereotypes, he is a Yankee, not a Cavalier” (55). Based on this observation and on his analysis of the contrast between Shelby’s happy farm in Kentucky and Legree’s hellish plantation, he goes on to argue that “one can read Uncle Tom’s tragic journey ‘down the river’ . . . as a *spatial* representation of Stowe’s own journey through *time*, from early-nineteenth-century small-town New England to the mid-nineteenth-century industrial landscape” (57). This novel thus “explicitly blurs the easy distinction between North and South, between slavery and industrial capitalism” (57) and becomes a critique of contemporary New England that “had betrayed its identity” (58). In this way, Stowe attempts to delineate the Northern and
nationwide complicity with the peculiar institution of slavery—which at that time was largely regarded as “local” in the South—precisely by making it a regional novel. In this sense, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is designed to be both national and regional at once, whose effect is a “national breadth” that De Forest praises (“Great” 28).

The pan-national scope of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is also inscribed in its form. The most distinctive formal structure of this novel is that it narrates two different stories simultaneously. It portrays Eliza’s escape to Canada as well as Uncle Tom’s fate in Louisiana. This juxtaposition of two stories is made possible by the use of third-person omniscient narrator. Especially in the first half of the novel, the narrator constantly switches the focus back and forth so that the reader can look at the two stories in a bird’s-eye view. Since Eliza’s story follows her northbound move and Tom’s story goes south, the novel’s spatial scope gets larger and larger as the narrator switches her viewpoint.

This constant switching between two spatially distant stories is predicated on what Benedict Anderson calls (borrowing Walter Benjamin’s phrase) an “essential modern conception . . . of ‘meanwhile’” (24n34). According to Anderson, the novel and the newspaper, both based on the temporality of meanwhile which is “marked . . . by temporal coincidence” and “measured by clock and calendar,” provided “the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (24–25). In fact, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is full of this kind of “meanwhile” moments insinuated by the narrator: “Here we must take our leave of her for the present, to follow the course of her pursuers” (49); “While this scene was going on at the tavern, Sam and Andy, in a state of high felicitation, pursued their way home” (65); “Our readers may not be unwilling to glance back, for brief interval, at Uncle Tom’s Cabin, on the Kentucky farm” (230); “A while we must leave Tom in the hand of his persecutors, while we turn to pursue the
fortunes of George and his wife” (348). In this respect, this use of “meanwhile” moments also effectively contributes the novel’s “national breadth”: by juxtaposing two spatially distant slave stories using national temporality of “meanwhile,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* becomes a “comprehensive national narrative” (Arac 853). And more important, if Stowe’s political intention in this novel is to make the reader feels that “slavery [is] a national, as well as an individual, sin” (Walters 184), she accomplishes her aim by using the novel form’s national temporality. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in other words, slavery is represented as a formal problem as well as a thematic problem. The juxtaposition of two distant stories can be seen as Stowe’s strategy of racial inclusion by way of a literary form.

Yet the “meanwhile” moments in this novel actually begin before Eliza’s escape and Tom’s sale. The first moment of “meanwhile” temporality appears when the narrator switches her point of view between the two separate spaces within the Shelby plantation. After describing a prayer meeting of slaves in Uncle Tom’s cabin, the narrator writes: “While this scene was passing in the cabin of the man, one quite otherwise passed in the halls of the master” (27). The slaves and George are gathering and singing hymns; *in the meanwhile*, the contract of sale is concluded. Thus, if the juxtaposition of two distant stories of Eliza and Tom is made possible by the temporality of “meanwhile,” then that sort of national-novelistic temporality itself is first initiated by spatial separation between white master and black slaves. In this way, we can see the “meanwhile” temporality marks both racial inclusion and exclusion in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. On the one hand, it allows the third-person narrator to manipulate the point of views to include two distant slave stories in one novel and make the reader feel its national scope. On the other hand, that temporality inscribes the reality of slavery as its origin. In the origin of national temporality, we find Uncle Tom’s cabin.
In this way, at both thematic and formal levels, the cabin in this novel works as the central allegory of the divided nation. But it is not fully charged with integrative functions that characterizes a soul-nation allegory: it is more about the problematization of the divide than about the prospect of reunion. Of course, it is true that Uncle Tom’s cabin does provide the opportunity for Cassy to “unite again” (391) with her long-lost daughter Eliza, for it is Tom in his cabin at Legree plantation who dissuades her from murdering Legree and advises instead that she should run away (361–63). However, as many critics have pointed out, their leave from the continent off to Africa as missionaries to Liberia suggests that Stowe “fails to imagine African American as full participant citizens in an American democracy” (Merish 163). Similarly, although young George Shelby’s development into “the liberator” (396) of his own slaves might symbolically represent the triumph of abolitionist cause, Uncle Tom’s cabin remains as the material remainder of the divide and the fact that “he’s gone to a better country” (398) outside the present world. Thus, instead of working as the soul-nation allegory of national unification, the cabin becomes “a memorial” (400) of the consequence of the divide, allegorizing the need of the soul-nation allegory.

Reading Stowe’s groundbreaking novel in this way, we can understand how Uncle Tom’s Cabin proleptically engages with the idea of the Great American Novel through its reflection on the romance of reunion and the soul-nation allegory mediating divided sections both at thematic and formal levels. As a transbellum master text which is always gesturing toward the possibility of pan-national novel of “the American soul,” Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s dream is transcribed into postbellum writers’ conception of the Great American Novel. Furthermore, my reading of Uncle Tom’s Cabin also suggests the possibility to see Stowe’s later works as continuous with her earlier career. By no means a mythical space to which we can nostalgically retreat, as I hope to
demonstrate in the next chapter, the past in Stowe’s New England novels in the two decades after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a critical reference point to which she harkens back in order to historicize the present political projects of the reunification of nation.

As I have outlined in this chapter, *Before Realism* seeks to make an intervention into debates on transnational and transbellum American literature. Examining a largely unexplored link between the international novels of realist authors and the political project of national reconciliation in postbellum U.S., this study tells a broader story of the rise of literary realism situated in a transatlantic context. At the same time, highlighting the mediating potential of the idea of pan-national novel, I bring the discussion of literary nationalism back to recent academic translational studies in which the question of nationhood tends to be regarded as problematic. Furthermore, this dissertation is also an attempt at a reperiodization of nineteenth-century American literature which reconsiders the dichotomous understanding of antebellum romance and postbellum realism. Employing a timeline across the Civil War, I trace the story of a divided nation and its reunification manifested both at the thematic and formal levels in the novels from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *The Portrait of a Lady*, along with the historical course of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the end of Reconstruction. Before realism, the forms of nationhood are conceived, developed, and revised through the idea of the Great American Novel.
Chapter Two

Nationalizing Processes and Modes of Telling in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Regional Novels

In February 1867, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to her editor, James T. Fields:

I am so constituted that it is absolutely fatal to me to agree to have any literary work done at certain dates. I mean to have this story done by the 1st of September. It would be greatly for my pecuniary interest to get it done before that, because I have the offer of eight thousand dollars for the newspaper use of the story I am planning to write after it. But I am bound by the laws of art. Sermons, essays, lives of distinguished people, I can write to order at times and seasons. A story comes, grows like a flower, sometimes will and sometimes won’t, like a pretty woman. When the spirits will help, I can write. When they jeer, flout, make faces, and otherwise maltreat me, I can only wait humbly at their gates, watch at the posts of their doors. (Fields 315)

As Joan Hedrick points out in her biography, this talk of “the laws of art” was a “new note in her business correspondence” (332). “[B]ound by the laws of art,” Stowe described her experience of writing a story as essentially distinct from writing other genres such as “sermons, essays, lives of distinguished people.” In preparing for her next novel, Oldtown Folks, she was clearly determined to produce a work of art and struggling with her aesthetic concerns.

My intention in citing this letter is to reconsider a prevailing notion that Stowe was essentially a religious writer rather than a literary author. Taking a famous anecdote of “Stowe’s claims about the divine authorship of Uncle Tom’s Cabin” (Reynolds xiv) that “God wrote it” (Fields 377), critics and readers have underestimated Stowe’s literary endeavors as a novel writer
and the way she was interested in the novel as an aesthetic form. For instance, discussing the
cultural milieu in which Sarah Orne Jewett produced her regional writings, Richard Brodhead
argues that the secular world of Jewett’s work “shows fundamental differences from” “the
domestic novelists of the 1850s” such as Stowe and Susan Warner, for “the literary world of the
earlier domestic novelists is always insistently religious” (Cultures 159). In Brodhead’s account,
“[b]ooks like Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Wide, Wide World are written on the understandings
that literary discourse is continuous with, not differentiated from, the discourses of piety and
domestic instruction and that the work of literary writing forms part of a larger project of
promoting domestic morality and Christian belief” (160–61). Although it is true that “literary
discourse” and “the discourses of piety and domestic instruction” are closely intertwined in
Stowe, it does not necessarily mean the two modes of authorship are “continuous” or
harmonious. On the contrary, as I will show in this chapter, it was the conflict between them that
she had to deal with after the publication of her first novel. Increasingly “bound by the laws of
art,” the New England novels of Stowe’s later career demonstrate her growing awareness of
questions of literary form and its ideologies.

This chapter examines Stowe’s growing literary ambitions through the ways she uses
history in The Minister’s Wooing (1859) and Oldtown Folks (1869), “Stowe’s two great local-
color novels” (Donovan 233) set in New England communities in the post-Revolutionary period.
Written on the eve and in the wake of the Civil War, The Minister’s Wooing and Oldtown Folks
both address political and moral issues crucial to contemporary politics. Through its critique of
slavery in eighteenth-century Newport and the story of a Calvinist minister’s courageous act
against it, The Minister’s Wooing attempts to make abolitionism a national cause inherited from
its Puritan legacy. Describing diverse populations and heterogeneous communities in an old New
England village, in which black servants as well as whites of various classes and religious beliefs are included as “our folks,” *Oldtown Folks* historicizes the present political project of reunifying the nation in its juxtaposition of the post-Revolutionary past and the Reconstruction present. In this sense, the past in Stowe’s New England novels in the 1850s and 1860s is not a mythical space to which we can retreat; rather, it is a reference point to which she harks back in order to historicize the present political projects of the nation. In reading these two novels, this chapter explores the ways in which Stowe deals with the tensions between the novel form and political and moral issues.

In context of larger argument in my dissertation, this chapter is designed to be an examination of the ways in which Stowe explores the problematics excluded from John De Forest’s formulation of the idea of the Great American Novel, namely, the relation between the local and the national, and the place of race and slavery in it. As I will argue through the reading of the texts, the nationalizing moments in Stowe’s novels are much more inclusive gestures than in De Forest’s conception, since De Forest’s idea of the Great American Novel is characterized by its racial exclusion. It is symptomatic that he drops the anti-slavery element from his appreciation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the “nearest approach to” the Great American Novel, making the issue of race irrelevant to the novel’s “national breadth.” Instead, he attributes the Americanness of the novel to the “picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling” of both Northerners and Southerners (28). His inclusive project of painting “the American soul” in “the framework of a novel” (27) thus turns out to be predicated on racial exclusion. In this regard, Stowe’s later novels can be seen as her exploration of an alternative, more inclusive way to conceive the national novel, which in turn broadens the idea of the Great American Novel itself. The novelist Stowe, I hope to show in the following, poses the
problem of slavery and of her abolitionist cause as both thematic and formal problems through which the novel genre becomes national in the mid-nineteenth century America.

1. “Two Worlds Must Mingle”: Realities and Idealities in The Minister’s Wooing

Stowe’s first New England novel was also the first novel serialized in the Atlantic.\(^{3}\) Founded by a group of New England Brahmins, this new literary periodical was designed “to guide the age,” as Emerson put it in his journal (qtd. in Sedgwick 25). In May 1857, about half a year before the publication of the inaugural issue, Calvin Stowe wrote that they “all say ‘Mrs. Stowe must begin with a serial and give us her wings for the first year, and Hawthorne shall follow in the second’” (qtd. in Hedrick 289). In October, James Russel Lowell and Francis Henry Underwood, the first editor and the associate editor of the magazine, visited Stowe in Andover “and asked for a serial for the magazine they were establishing” (Foster 86), counting on her international popularity as the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Agreeing to contribute, Stowe sent her first installment of The Minister’s Wooing, which was published in December 1858. Her novel “fueled much of the magazine’s initial circulation success” and, along with Oliver Wendell Holmes, she became one of the “most popular” and “most prolific” contributors of the Atlantic in its first decade (Sedgwick 50).

---

\(^{3}\) More precisely, it was one of the first two novels both of which started in the same issue of December 1858. The other one was Francis Henry Underwood’s Bulls and Bears, which ran through June 1859 but was never brought out in book-form. Before these novels, the Atlantic had serialized two long works (running more than three months), but neither of them was a novel. The first was Oliver Wendell Holmes’s series of essays, The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table, which ran from November 1857 through October 1858. The second was The Catacombs of Rome, Charles Eliot Norton’s travel writing, which consisted of five installments (March 1858–July 1858).
Given this context, it is no wonder that the serial she gave them was a New England novel, for as Nancy Glazener states, the “main significance of the Atlantic’s sectional identity turned out to be that New England . . . became specially entitled to stand for the rest of the United States”; its cultural mission was to render the “Boston model . . . a national standard” (Reading 36; 32). Without doubt, The Minister’s Wooing “participated in the mythification of New England” (Hedrick 289) at least to some degree. But we cannot neglect the fact that the Atlantic’s editorial mission would have demanded such an approach. I wish to uncover the ways in which Stowe did not simply adopt their mission as her own. As I demonstrate in the following, it is her critical negotiation and dialogue with the Atlantic’s cultural project that makes The Minister’s Wooing a powerful work of fiction which shows possibilities of the novel genre in this period before the postbellum consolidation of realism.

1-1. From “New England Ministers” to The Minister’s Wooing

The significance of Stowe’s use of the novel genre can be better understood through the examination of revisions Stowe made when developing her essay “New England Ministers” into a full-fledged novel The Minister’s Wooing. The essay, which served as a sort of prospectus for her upcoming installments, was published in the Atlantic ten months prior to her serial. Writing it as a review of William B. Sprague’s Annals of the American Pulpit (1857), she argues against the “doctrine that a minister is to maintain some ethereal, unearthly station, where, wrapt in divine contemplation, he is to regard with indifference the actual struggles and realities of life” (489-90), and she contends instead that New England ministers were “so intensely practical . . . at the same time intensely speculative” (486). In demonstrating some aspects of the “practical” concerns of New England ministers, Stowe poses a thesis germane to her work in progress: “The
pastors of New England were always in their sphere moral reformers.” The Edwardsian theologian Samuel Hopkins is thus introduced as a representative minister standing against “profitable and popular sins” of the slave-trade. Of this renowned eighteenth-century Puritan theologian whom she was going to portray in her upcoming novel, she writes:

No sight could be more impressive than that of Dr. Hopkins—who with all his power of mind was never a popular preacher, and who knew he was not popular—rising up in Newport pulpits to testify against the slave-trade, then as reputable and profitable a sin as slave-holding now. He knew that Newport was the stronghold of the practice, and that the probable consequence of his faithfulness would be the loss of his pulpit and of his temporal support; but none the less plainly and faithfully did he testify. Fond as he was of doctrinal subtilties, keen as was his analysis of disinterested benevolence, he did not, like some in our day, confine himself to analyzing virtue in the abstract, but took upon himself the duty of practising it in the concrete without fear of consequences,—well knowing that there is no logic like that of consistent action. (490)

This passage clearly shows that Stowe’s account of the tradition of New England clergy is motivated not so much by a nostalgic desire to idealize the past as by her present political and moral concern about the issue of slavery. Her point that New England ministers were both speculative and practical should be understood as a criticism of contemporary ministers (“some in our day”) who “confine” themselves merely “to analyzing virtue in the abstract” and cannot act against a “reputable and profitable” sin of slave-holding on a practical level. In this sense, as Dorothy Baker points out, “The Minister’s Wooing does not abandon the abolitionist platform of Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Dred.” Rather, “such concerns are at the center of the novel” (30). If Stowe’s political intention in Uncle Tom’s Cabin is to make the reader feel that “slavery
[is] a national, as well as an individual, sin” (Walters 184), her original project of *The Minister’s Wooing* is to make abolitionism a national cause and a narrative of national identity inherited from its Puritan legacy.

Through her actual experience of novelizing the essay, however, her clear-cut proposal as articulated in the essay is largely relativized. Her portrayal of Doctor Hopkins and his theology in the novel is so often ambivalent that some critics claim that the novel “presents a trenchant critique of Calvinism” (Cassuto 115) rather than the defense of it outlined in the essay. One scholar goes so far as to assert that Hopkins in the novel is “the main target of attack” by Stowe (Adams 45). While we should not ignore critical and ironic remarks on Hopkins and his Calvinism presented in the novel, it is also true that he is still a hero and revered by the people in fictionalized Newport. Thus, Stowe’s treatment of the minister in the novel is much more nuanced than in her essay and consequently made the moral of the story ambiguous. As Charles Foster states, “[t]he distinction of *The Minister’s Wooing* rests on the fact that Harriet did not, in fact could not, either demolish Calvinism or accept it completely, but was forced by her circumstances and her religious history to recognize both its positive and negative aspects” (104). I extend Foster’s view to the question of literary form and authorship and argue that Stowe’s revision of the portrayal of Hopkins should be interpreted as a product of her understanding of what the novel should do, which is developed through her critical response to the editorial policies of the *Atlantic*. As Ellery Sedgwick demonstrates in his extensive study on the history of the journal and its editors, Lowell strongly opposed moral didacticism in literature. In the inaugural issue, he published a poem entitled “The Origin of Didactic Poetry,” “a satire on those who used literature as a vehicle for moral uplift” (Sedgwick 54-55). He also disparages the role of sentiment in the novel. In his anonymous review of *The Minister’s Wooing*, he
sarcastically refers to the tendency of American readers who “account for the unexampled popularity of *Uncle Tom* by attributing it to a cheap sympathy with sentimental philanthropy” instead of appreciating “her mere creative power . . . in keeping with the requirements of art” (5). It thus becomes clear that Lowell’s notion of literature is predicated on the realist aesthetic as we conventionally understand it: he promotes his literary taste by opposing it to sentimentalism on the one hand, and to religious or moral didacticism on the other.

Owing to his prestigious position as the editor of the *Atlantic*, as Sedgwick remarks, Lowell’s views on literature “influenced many contemporaries through his reviews, editorial advice, and selections in the *Atlantic*” (55) and Stowe was no exception. In the middle of the serialization of *The Minister’s Wooing*, Lowell offered editorial advice to Stowe in his private letter. “What especially charmed me in the new story,” he writes, “was that you had taken your stand on New England ground. . . . As for ‘theology,’ it is as much a part of daily life in New England as in Scotland, and all I should have to say about it is this: let it crop out when it naturally comes to the surface, only don’t dig down to it. A moral aim is a fine thing, but in making a story, an artist is a traitor who does not sacrifice everything to art” (qtd. in “Introductory Note” ix-x). Then, he declares:

> Let your moral take care of itself, and remember that an author’s writing-desk is something infinitely higher than a pulpit. . . . I am sure that ‘The Minister’s Wooing’ is going to be the best of your products hitherto, and I am sure of it because you show so thorough a mastery of your material, so true to a perception of realities, without which the ideality is impossible. (Fields 250)

Lowell thus instructs Stowe to stick to the description of realities of New England town rather than caring about a “moral aim,” because the “ideality” of theology is made possible by realistic
representation of the local. His guidance, in other words, is predicated on the bifurcation of the literary ("an author’s writing desk") and the moral ("a pulpit"), as well as the valorization of the former over the latter.

This idea of the literary and the religious as separate was shared also by female authors in the 1850s. For instance, in the preface to her last novel *Married or Single?* (1857), Catharine Maria Sedgwick discusses the meaning of being a novel writer.

If we do not specify Mrs. Stowe, it is that she writes for all humanity. Her books cannot be restricted to any class of readers, nor claimed exclusively by any department of literature. . . . It might seem natural and decorous, that one approaching the limit of human life should—if writing at all—write a book, strictly religious, but the novel (and to that guild we belong) does not seem to us the legitimate vehicle of strictly religious teaching. Secular affairs should be permeated by the spirit of the altar and the temple, but not brought within the temple’s holy precincts. (v-vi).

This passage clearly shows that writers of her own time already saw Stowe as doing something different with the novel, for Sedgwick delineates the task of the novel by contrasting it to Stowe’s writing. According to Sedgwick, the novel is basically a secular form ultimately incompatible with religious books. But Stowe, implies Sedgwick, writes a novel “for all humanity” as if it can be “the legitimate vehicle of strictly religious teaching.” Therefore, when Sedgwick describes the “guild” of novelists to which she believes she belongs, she excludes Stowe from the group. In context of the present discussion, Sedgwick’s observation is accurate insofar as it captures Stowe’s design of conflating the secular and the religious. For the author of *The Minister’s Wooing*, however, that design is precisely the task of the novel. This passage
succinctly reveals where Stowe’s understanding of what the novel should do is departing from that of her predecessors.

When put in dialogue with Lowell’s and Sedgwick’s views on literature, Stowe’s strategy in *The Minister’s Wooing* can be described as a three-stage process, as I examine in the following sections. First, she appropriates Lowell’s distinction between “realities” and “ideality” and reconfigures it as a gender polarization. She associates a mode of power of feeling and sentiment embodied by female community with representation of the practices of everyday life in contrast to the Doctor’s religious idealism. Second, through dramatizing the collaboration of two modes of authorship represented respectively by Miss Prissy and the Doctor, Stowe reconsiders the binary of realism and idealism and explores the possibility of conflation of the two. Finally, she thematizes the issue of slavery as the occasion and catalyst of the nationalization of the novel genre.

1-2. Separate Spheres to be Mingled: Domestic Realities and Religious Idealities

Stowe’s revision of the portrayal of Hopkins in *The Minister’s Wooing* is largely due to the strong presence of other characters, particularly a series of female characters in the community of Newport, Rhode Island, where the novel is set. The first sentence of the novel introduces four women gathering for an afternoon tea, followed by the history of Mrs. Katy Scudder, the heroine’s widowed mother, focusing on how capable she is as a household manager. She is “one of the much-admired class who, in the speech of New England, are said to have ‘faculty’ . . . the greatest virtue . . . of Yankee man and woman. To her who has faculty nothing shall be impossible. She shall scrub floors, wash, wring, bake, brew, and yet her hands shall be small and white; she shall have no perceptible income, yet always be handsomely
dressed” (*MW* 3-4). Hosted by her, a lively tea-party at her house at the beginning of the novel signals that “exploration of the power of the female community is a major theme in *The Minister’s Wooing*” (Harris 190).

Compared to the New England virtue of “faculty” Mrs. Scudder embodies, the Doctor is characterized by his marginality and impracticality. He is marginal both in the pulpit and the residence. His stern Calvinist theology and “the pertinacity with which the good Doctor preserved” (*MW* 54) in his sermons makes his ministry “unpopular and unworldly” (9) in contrast to other ministers such as Dr. Stiles, another historical figure introduced in the novel. Dr. Hopkins’s congregation consists of a “discouraging minority of hearers” and as a result, “[h]is salary was small” (54). Unable to afford to own his house, he is quite marginal even in his dwelling place, being a boarder in Mrs. Scudder’s house. His study, “the place where our Doctor was happiest” (55), is secluded from the rest of house where most of everyday activities take place. Contained in his study where “he explored, wandered, and read, and thought, and lived a life as wholly ideal and intellectual as heart could conceive” (55), his position is opposed to the realm of “faculty” in which prosaic, practical lives are made. The Doctor’s first appearance in the novel represents his character in a comical way. When Mary, the daughter of Mrs. Scudder and the heroine of the novel, comes to his study to tell him the tea is ready, he is “so absorbed” in his writing that he does not hear her. When he finally snaps back to reality after Mary’s several attempts to call his attention, he “rose suddenly with a start,” “looking confusedly about, and starting for the door, in his study-gown.” It is only after Mary’s suggestion for his coat and wig that he realizes he is not properly dressed for the tea-party (37-38). Far from being a heroic figure “so intensely practical . . . at the same time intensely speculative” as described in Stowe’s essay, the fictionalized Hopkins in *The Minister’s Wooing* is characterized above all by his lack
of care and ability in practical activities of the everyday. Considering the descriptions given above, Harris is accurate in noting that “[w]ithin the house . . . the minister seems almost a comic character, a bumbling male in female space” (190).

As explicitly shown in this example, the contrast between the unworldly and the everyday is a highly gendered polarization. In her now-classic discussion of nineteenth century sentimental literature, Jane Tompkins argues that “the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from woman’s point of view” and “offers a critique of American society” by way of the power of sentiment, which gives “women the central position of power and authority in the culture.” She regards *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as this female tradition’s “most dazzling exemplar” (122). Seen in this light, it can be argued that Stowe uses feminine domesticity in *The Minister’s Wooing* as a means to relativize Calvinist patriarchy. In fact, this novel is filled with the contrast between “the dryness of metaphysical discussions” (*MW* 54) of theology and experiential piety based on the “religious sentiment” (178) with frequent remarks on the discrepancy between them. The Doctor’s religious thought and expressions informs its “sublime ideality” (9), secluded from the realities of ordinary people’s lives. As “the pioneer leader of a new theology . . . whose early training had been all logical, not in the least aesthetic,” Doctor Hopkins’s sermons and religious teachings “were characterized by an ideality so high as quite to discourage ordinary virtue” that, as a result, “few could follow him” (53). In contrast, although they are “intensely matter-of-fact and practical women, who have not in themselves a bit of poetry or a particle of ideality” (8), it is female community who has a power and authority to bring religious ideality back to the everyday. “[W]omen are always turning from the abstract to the individual,” the narrator says in one point, “and feeling where the philosopher only thinks” (17). In this way, a gender polarity between the abstract, unworldly
minister and the practical women of “faculty” is extended to the question of religion, highlighting the conflict between ideality and reality.

I would like to extend Tompkins’s line of reading by connecting it with the question of novel genre and the aesthetics of nation building, focusing on Stowe’s construction of authority and genre. Unlike Tompkins, who believes the “distinguishing features” of Stowe’s works (Uncle Tom’s Cabin in particular) “are not those of the realistic novel, but of typological narrative” (135), I argue that her later New England novels can be read as her exploration of the possible conflation of the two.^[4]

1-3. Miss Prissy and the Doctor: Two Modes of Storytelling and Nation Formation

The Minister’s Wooing develops the issue of ideality and reality by arranging it into a question of narrative authority and modes of storytelling. It is at this point that the figure of Miss Prissy, “the dressmaker in a small New England town” (MW 111) of Newport, becomes crucial in this novel. Taking a methodological cue from Elaine Showalter’s suggestion that “the strongly marked American tradition of piecing, patchwork, and quilting has consequences for the structures, themes, and meaning of American women’s writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (223), critics have explored various ways in which Miss Prissy, as “seamstress/gossip/doctrinal questioner” in the community (Harris 190), functions as a reference

^[4] In this respect, my intention here is to situate The Minister’s Wooing in the context of what Gregory Jackson specifies as “the intersections between modern empirical epistemology and American spiritual pedagogies” which eventually lead into “the intersection of Protestant narrative with literary realism in the late nineteenth century” (7). According to Jackson, “the relationship between realism and idealism might be more usefully configured . . . between divergent ontologies of the real, what we can discretely delineate as material and spiritual reality” (10; italic original). Understanding Stowe’s novelistic design in this way allows us to situate The Minister’s Wooing in the historical trajectory of what Jackson calls “homiletic realism” which emerged before more secular oriented literary realism held sway.
point of Stowe’s reflection “on the position of women, and, specifically, of female artists in nineteenth-century America” (Schultz 33). Focusing on Miss Prissy’s role as the prime mover of Mary’s marriage plot as well as her dual craftswomanship “of sewing and storytelling,” Nancy Schultz demonstrates how Stowe “draws a careful parallel between her narrative art and Miss Prissy’s” (34, 40). By “employing the same metaphor for her own craft that she applies to Miss Prissy’s,” writes Schultz, “Stowe sees sewing and gossip as Miss Prissy’s important art forms and aligns herself with the seamstress” (40) and in so doing associates Miss Prissy’s art forms “with the larger narrative framework of the novel itself” (35). Thus, Schultz argues that “[i]n The Minister’s Wooing, Stowe explores the relationship between authorship and authority as a way of illustrating the subtle but subversive role of female artists in a patriarchal culture” (34).

Schultz’s point about Stowe’s interest in narrative frame is useful here insofar as it demonstrates that the use of women’s point of view for Stowe is a matter of aesthetic as much as cultural concern. However, her emphasis on narrative in this novel as specifically and only feminine obscures the fact that Miss Prissy is not the only character associated with the role of an artist and author. There is another important character associated as deeply as Miss Prissy with the narrative framework of the novel: the Doctor himself. It should be noted that the novel first introduces the Doctor at work in his writing desk and ends with the publication of his theological system. The three-year story of the novel develops concurrently with the Doctor’s process of writing, and throughout the book, he is characterized by his status as author-artist as well as minister. As Buell points out, “[i]t is not accidental that the novel is set on the eve of the joint publication of the System [of Doctrines] and the Treatise [on the Millennium]”; he calls the former book “the first . . . summa theologia by an Edwardsean divine” (“Calvinism” 123). As a historical novel, The Minister’s Wooing can be seen as a fictionalized rewriting of how Samuel
Hopkins completed his magnum opus. Understanding the novel in this way would allow us to see Stowe’s interest in Hopkins residing not only in the content of his thought (the abolitionist cause) but also in the process and form of his writing. In fact, the first conversation Hopkins has at the tea is about his work in progress. Through this dialogue, he is represented as not merely a writer on Calvinist theology but a vanguard, progressive writer. Mr. Brown, “a thriving trader to the coast of Africa, whence he imported negroes for the American market” (MW 36), tells the Doctor about people’s concerns about his new doctrine: “people are beginning to make a noise about your views. I was talking with Deacon Timmins the other day down on the wharf, and he said Dr. Stiles said that it was entirely new doctrine—entirely so,—and for his part he wanted the good old ways” (38). Hearing this news, Hopkins responds: “Well, let them. I had rather publish new divinity than any other, and the more of it the better,—if it be but true. I should think it hardly worth while to write, if I had nothing new to say” (39). Here, Hopkins’s desire for publishing “new divinity” is predicated on his view that the truth about divinity has not yet been articulated and he has something new to say about it. In contrast to the nostalgic writers who persist in following “the good old ways,” his status as a writer is characterized by its radicality, both theologically and—as shown later in the novel—politically.

Thus, Stowe constructs her narrative authority by taking Miss Prissy as a model of female artist of domesticity and the Doctor as of male writer of ideality at the same time. In addition, these two modes can also be seen as two different ways of nation building. Miss Prissy’s piecework is a gesture of making up a nation from the bottom up, collecting and quilting the stories and voices of people. By contrast, the Doctor’s writing represents the makeup of nation based on precept. In this fashion, Stowe’s use of the dual narrative authorities leads us
also to consider her aesthetic of nation formation, to which I will return later when discussing her treatment of slavery in this novel.

Stowe’s way of associating these two modes with the larger frame of the novel is already presented in the second paragraph of the first chapter:

When one has a story to tell, one is always puzzled which end of it to begin at. You have a whole corps of people to introduce that you know and your reader doesn’t; and one thing so presupposes another, that, whichever way you turn your patchwork, the figures still seem ill-arranged. The small item which I have given will do as well as any other to begin with, as it certainly will lead you to ask, “Pray, who was Mrs. Katy Scudder?”—and this will start me systematically on my story. (3)

The narrator’s reference to “patchwork” as a description of her own work and her interest in the “arrangement” of it gives us a strong example of Stowe’s framing of her novel in association with Miss Prissy’s sewing and gossiping. Schultz cites this passage to show that “Stowe employs a metaphor which suggests that the challenge of writing is much like the challenge a good seamstress must face when quilt-making” (37). Carolyn Karcher also quotes this passage in her discussion of Stowe’s aligning of “her own art of narration with the domestic arts its female members practice,” arguing that “[h]er narrative, she hints, will take the shape of a patchwork quilt rather than a yarn with an obvious beginning and ‘end.’” Patterning her storytelling on quilting, according to Karcher, “*The Minister’s Wooing* eschews a linear plot and dominant character” which makes it “the most experimental of Stowe’s novels” (213). While I agree with their arguments that Stowe connects the framework of her novel with the female art form of quilting by employing the metaphor of “patchwork,” I would like to call attention to another mode of the art of narration mentioned here: she declares she will start her story
“systematically.” Although she admits her way of beginning the story “will do as well as any other,” she is still interested in framing it “systematically” rather than randomly. Furthermore, considering that the term “system” is primarily and consistently associated with the Doctor’s “theological system” in this novel, we can see here that Stowe is drawing a parallel between her own work of fiction and the minister’s doctrine of theology, both of which are in progress toward completion. In this way, the opening of *The Minister’s Wooing* stages her dual identification with two distinct forms of storytelling—quilting as a patterned association among miscellaneous parts and system as a unified whole formulated on the basis of a precept.

In other words, Stowe is neither reprising her essay on New England ministers nor constructing a purely feminine mode of authorship. Instead, her idea of the novel is that it is an exploration of the possibility of collaboration between the two modes—female and male, realistic and idealistic. In this context, it is significant that Stowe articulates a sort of thesis statement of her version of art of fiction at the end of the Chapter 12:

> So we go, dear reader,—so long as we have a body and a soul. Two worlds must mingle—the great and the little, the solemn and the trivial, wreathing in and out, like the grotesque carvings on a Gothic shrine—only, did we know it rightly, nothing is trivial; since the human soul, with its awful shadow, makes all things sacred. (130)

Noteworthy here is that Stowe writes this passage for articulating her aspiration rather than for presenting her achievement. That is why she states the two realms “must” mingle. These two realms are not necessarily contradictory, but for Stowe, they are hard to reconcile in the novel form, not in the least because of the novel’s cultural and social status at that time. As I showed above, the prevailing notion of superiority of the literary to the religious—promulgated by literary authorities such as Lowell—is made conceivable by regarding the two realms as
something separate. In *The Minister’s Wooing*, Stowe resists this notion by envisioning the possible conflation of the two while recognizing the difficulty of that task.

1-4. When Narrative and Metanarrative Coincide: Slavery as the Point of Divide and the Catalyst of Nationalization

We cannot neglect the fact, however, that the vision of the conflation of the prosaic realities and the divine idealities expressed by the narrator of *The Minister’s Wooing* has its stumbling block: it is the issue of slavery and slave-trade where the point of conflict is exposed. Yet at the same time, as I hope to show, Stowe thematizes slavery and uses it as the occasion and catalyst of nationalization by way of the novel form.

Miss Prissy’s agency as storyteller functions in a less subversive way when it comes to the issue of slavery. In the Saturday morning following the party at the Wilcox Manor, Miss Prissy speaks to Mrs. Scudder about the gossip she got in the party. She was there “to see about that money to get the Doctor’s shirt with,” and there Mrs. Wilcox, the host of the big party, asked Miss Prissy to help her. She tells Mrs. Scudder that people in the party were talking about their concerns on the Doctor’s “such strange notions,” namely, his abolitionist creed. She says: “Why, I heard some of ’em say, he’s going to come out and preach against the slave-trade; and I’m sure I don’t know what Newport folks will do, if that’s wicked. There a’n’t hardly any money here that’s made any other way; and I hope the Doctor a’n’t a-going to do anything of that sort” (140). When Mrs. Scudder responds by defending the Doctor’s (and her late husband’s) view that the slave-trade is “a great sin, that ought to be rebuked,” Miss Prissy expands her view.

“Oh,—ah, —yes, —well, if it’s a sin, of course,” said Miss Prissy; “but then—dear me!—it don’t seem as if it could be. Why, just think how many great houses are living
on it;—why, there’s General Wilcox himself, and he’s a very nice man; and then there’s Major Seaforth; and why, I could count you off now a dozen—all our very first people. Why, Doctor Stiles doesn’t think so, and I’m sure he’s a good Christian.

Doctor Stiles thinks it’s a dispensation for giving the light of the gospel to the Africans. . . . Well now, who would ’a’ thought it? I believe the Doctor [Hopkins] is better than most folks; but then the best people may be mistaken, you know.” (140–41)

We can see in the way Miss Prissy moves back and forth that there is a conflict between what she knows for herself—she agrees with Mrs. Scudder that it is a sin “of course”—and how that seems counterintuitive because people respected in the community (who are male authorities) do not take that view. Being a communal voice of “Newport folks,” Miss Prissy cannot directly criticize the sin of slave-trade, precisely because it constitutes the community as a substructure of it. The issue of slavery painfully reveals that Miss Prissy’s role as the quilting artist of the local reality, with which Stowe is highly sympathetic and aligns herself, can end up being a voice for status quo. It is no coincidence that Miss Prissy’s view on the slave-trade shares much similarity with the slave-ship owner Simeon Brown’s, who believes himself to be a man of “common-sense” and thinks the Doctor does not know “anything of real life,” even though he appreciates Hopkinsian theology in a theoretical level (96–97). For either of them, the two worlds do not mingle in the face of the reality of slavery.

The Doctor’s abolitionism, then, makes himself “a dreamer,” “an unpractical man” (as Brown calls him [96]) within the novel as well as the community of Newport. In “New England Ministers,” Stowe had praised Samuel Hopkins’s deep concern in moral reform as an example—and in fact, exemplary—of the Puritan ministers because he “did not . . . confine himself to analyzing virtue in the abstract, but took upon himself the duty of practicing it in the concrete
without fear of consequences” (490). But in *The Minister’s Wooing*, the dominant impression of the Doctor’s moral reform is characterized by its emphasis on his attempts as quixotic. It is true that the Doctor’s powerful and heroic sermon against slavery and the slave-trade casts a “spell” over the audience: “Gradually an expression of intense interest and deep concern spread over the listeners; it was the magnetism of a strong mind, which held them for a time under the shadow of his own awful sense of God’s almighty justice” (144). It is also true that his anti-slavery sermon influenced some of the audience—among others, Miss Prissy—and actually made them change their minds. But still, after the sermon, “the respectables of Newport began gradually to unstiffen themselves from the spell” and shrank back to their common-sense. After all, they conclude, the Doctor was “a radical and a fanatic” (144). His sermon results in Simeon Brown leaving his parish and attending instead the pro-slavery Dr. Stiles’s church, which makes the Doctor even more unpopular.

For Stowe, slavery is the central difficulty also in her negotiation with the *Atlantic*. After all, central to Lowell’s warning is the danger of pursuing “a moral aim.” He would later favorably compare *The Minister’s Wooing* with the way Stowe had handled her political interests in abolition in her former novels, noting that “[i]t has always seemed to us that the anti-slavery element in the two former novels of Mrs. Stowe stood in the way of a full appreciation of her remarkable genius, at least in her own country.” He condemns this way of appreciation as “a cheap sympathy with sentimental philanthropy” (5), as I mentioned earlier. Furthermore, when he expresses his “great satisfaction” with *The Minister’s Wooing* in that Stowe “has chosen her time and laid her scene amid New England habits and traditions” (5), he intentionally ignores the question of slavery permeating the novel. Instead, he keeps “discussing persons and scenes” with almost no reference to “the theologic aspects of the novel” (“Introductory Note” ix). In this light,
it becomes clear that when advising Stowe to let her “moral take care of itself,” he meant to request her not to expand her anti-slavery political cause in the novel, for the sake of “the requirements of art.” Just as Newport folks concern about the Doctor’s “unpractical” moral ideal and warns him not to expand it in the pulpit, the editor of the Atlantic gives warning about Stowe’s passion for “preaching” the abolitionist cause in her novel. Lowell’s avid interest in the realistic representation of local persons—which made the magazine a strong supporter of the rise of local color fiction (Sedgwick 10)—and his ideological attempt to de-politicize Stowe were, after all, two sides of the same coin.

Lowell’s way of excluding the problematics of race from Stowe’s novels anticipates John De Forest’s reading of Stowe in a certain sense. When De Forest praises Uncle Tom’s Cabin as the “nearest approach to” the Great American Novel, he drops the anti-slavery element of the novel from his discussion, making the issue of race irrelevant to the novel’s “national breadth.” Instead, he attributes Americanness of the novel to the “picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling” of both Northerners and Southerners. Noteworthy in this context is Lawrence Buell’s observation that “during the early heyday of GAN discourse far more critical energy was spent worrying about the place of regional cultures than about the issues of gender and race” and that therefore they are “virtual nonissue[s]” for the making of the national novel at this time (Dream 31-32).

For Stowe, however, that is not the case. On the contrary, it is precisely the intertwined problematics of race and gender that nationalizes the scope of the novel. The last chapters of The Minister’s Wooing inform Stowe’s literary endeavor to “mingle” the Doctor’s idealism and Miss Prissy’s domestic realism focusing on the consequence of the anti-slavery element in the Doctor’s writing. After the Doctor’s sermon in Chapter 15, the issue of slave-trade and abolition
almost disappears from the surface of the novel. Instead, the second half is mainly devoted to Mary’s marriage plot and how she finally accepts the minister’s wooing after the news of her lover’s presumed death in a shipwreck. For this reason, critics have often assumed that “Hopkins’ anti-slavery efforts are finally . . . a secondary theme” (Buell, “Calvinism” 121).

The ending of the novel, however, represents the ways in which Stowe prioritizes the antislavery plot over the marriage plot. The last chapters revolve around Mary’s marriage after the young hero James Marvyn’s sudden return to Newport. People in Newport had been told that James was lost and presumably dead in the shipwreck, but after all it turns out that he survived the disaster and came back to his hometown. In the middle of the shipwreck, he experienced a conversion and now is regenerated as a Christian. He proposes to Mary without knowing that she has just gotten engaged to the Doctor. Although the main characters of this story are the young couple, the prime movers and driving forces of the plot are the Doctor and Miss Prissy. Being faithful to her duty to her own words of promise to the Doctor, Mary cannot break it and marry James, even though she knows she loves him more than anybody else. Then, it is Miss Prissy who decides to visit the Doctor and tell him of the young couple’s situation and of Mary’s love for James. After going through a severe inner struggle caused by Miss Prissy’s courageous suggestion, in a chapter entitled “The Sacrifice,” the Doctor determines to release Mary from her promise and declares to James that “I give thee this maiden to wife” (319). The chapter closes with a highly suggestive metafictional remark: “The Doctor saw them slowly quit the apartment, and, following them, closed the door, and thus ended THE MINISTER’S WOOING” (320). In the next chapter, Miss Prissy takes over the role of the narrator and details Mary and James’s wedding in the form of a long letter to her sister.
Nancy Schultz regards this ending as a completion or triumph of Miss Prissy’s communal counter-narrative both in terms of content and form. By persuading the Doctor to give up Mary and then “writing the ending of the story from within the text” (37) as a letter writer, argues Schultz, Miss Prissy “spoils the novel the narrator declares is the one she must write” (41). Thus, Schultz observes: “In dismissing the novel by name (capitalized in the text) at the close of the chapter, Stowe closes the door on all the self-conscious artistry that has governed the novel up to this point. While the narrator’s plot of the Minister and Mary has ended, Miss Prissy’s continues in the form of a benevolently gossipy letter to her sister full of details about Mary and James’s wedding” (42). Although Schultz’s argument is useful particularly in terms of her close attention to the meaning of the ending in relation to the novel’s framework, I would like to complicate and revise her account by focusing on the Doctor’s role as a writer and how the issue of slavery returns at last. It should be noted that the Doctor makes his “sacrifice” at the very same moment in which he is completing his system of theology. After his meeting with Miss Prissy, the Doctor “sat down by the table and covered his face with his hand,” suffering a great agony in the face of difficult situation. After reading his Bible for a while, however, “he determined to set himself to some definite work.” To the narrator’s surprise, then, “taking his Concordance,” he “began busily tracing out and numbering all the proof-texts for one of the chapters of his theological system! till, at last, he worked himself down to such calmness that he could pray” (317–18). This scene of the Doctor’s study at that night ends precisely when he came to “the conclusion” (318)—both of the book and of his meditation on his engagement. Therefore, when the narrator makes a performative declaration at the end of the chapter that “thus ended The MINISTER’S WOOING” by using capital letters, she draws a strong parallel between the Doctor’s book and
her own novel—The Minister’s Wooing closes at the very same moment where The System of
Theology is completed.

The narrator’s identification of her novel with Hopkins’s book leads us to see another
significant parallel she draws between them. Just as the Doctor’s book is at last completed by his
reconciliation with communal voices (which were collected and told to him by Miss Prissy), the
story of The Minister’s Wooing ends by Stowe’s choice—she chooses not to “preach” the moral
of her story and the Doctor’s heroic surrender. In fact, unlike Uncle Tom’s Cabin, there is no
concluding speech by the third-person narrator regarding political and religious cause for
antislavery. Instead, she means to close the story by conceiving the Doctor’s surrender as his
triump. The final two chapters after the Doctor’s “sacrifice” describes the productive
consequences of his decision. First, his surrender changes James’s mind and makes him a truly
religious person. “The gentle guiding force” of the Doctor “led James Marvyn from the maxims
and habits and ways of this world to the higher conception of an heroic and Christ-like
manhood.” Moreover, he becomes “the most energetic and fearless supporters of the Doctor in
his life-long warfare against an inhumanity,” that is, the system of slavery and slave-trade (326).
Since James “has come home quite rich” after his sail to China and is “twice as rich and
generous as that old Simeon Brown,” his church gets relatively larger presence among Newport
folks. Also, as a result of the increase of his parish with a strong support from James, his book
sold well. The very last chapter describes the publication of “his theological system” and its
success despite there being “no earthly patron” of the book: “Quite unexpectedly to himself, the
work proved a success, not only in public acceptance and esteem, but even in a temporal view,
bringing to him at last a modest competence, which he accepted with surprise and gratitude”
(327). In this way, his surrender made him and his views popular. Furthermore, with James’s
endorsement and support, the economy of Newport becomes much less dependent on the system of slave-trade. The Doctor’s surrender brings profound changes to the community both in terms of its economy and ideology.

Reflecting these social changes, Miss Prissy’s letter serves as a medium for circulation of the Doctor’s cause beyond the community of Newport. It is significant that her letter is directed to her sister living in Boston and thus gestures toward a larger circle beyond “her immediate sphere” (321). Also worth noting is that the narrator introduces Miss Prissy’s letter not just as written words but as a historical material, which she transcribed in order to show it to the reader. According to the narrator, the original letter is “still preserved in a black oaken cabinet of our great-grandmother’s” (321). In this gesture, she conceives of the letter as a common property inherited from an eighteenth-century New England town and still shared by everybody, inviting the readers around the nation to imagine that they have access to the common past. In this sense, Stowe’s way of introducing Miss Prissy’s letter at the end of the novel can be interpreted as her intention to create an imagined community beyond a New England locality.

Miss Prissy’s letter details the young couple’s marriage, but it ends with her remark on the Doctor’s book. She writes:

“Between you and I, Martha, I never could understand all the distinctions our dear, blessed Doctor sets up: but when he publishes his system, if I work my fingers to the bone, I mean to buy one and study it out, because he is such a blessed man . . . So if I don’t understand the Doctor’s theology, or don’t get eyes to read it, on account of the fine stitching on his shirt-ruffles I’ve been trying to do, still I hope I may be accepted on account of the Lord’s great goodness; for if we can’t trust that it’s all over with us all.” (325)
Taking over the role of narrator, Miss Prissy in turn ends her letter by defining herself as a prospective reader of the Doctor’s book. Considering the parallel between the Doctor’s book and Stowe’s novel drawn by the narrator’s self-referential remark, it can be argued that Miss Prissy’s position as a reader is connected to the reader of the novel. In other words, her role as the embodiment of communal voice now merges into the community of the reader: through Miss Prissy’s appreciation of the Doctor’s deed and creed, the narrator suggests that the reader would inherit and share Miss Prissy’s account. In this sense, Miss Prissy’s “quilting” analogy ultimately speaks to the illustration of the process of depicting a “quilted” community with the reader.

Thus, if Stowe’s vision of the “mingl[ing] of “the two worlds” is accomplished, it is through this relay of narrative authority from the narrator to Miss Prissy and then back to the novel itself. _The Minister’s Wooing_ is a novelization of Hopkinsean Calvinism and abolitionism in a double sense: in describing the transformation of the Doctor’s _System_ into metanarrative, Stowe transforms her political creed into the form of novel itself.

2. The Unfinished Self-formation and Nation Formation in _Oldtown Folks_

Although _Oldtown Folks_ is Stowe’s favorite novel and regarded as “the culmination of her career” (Hedrick 334) by the author herself, it has often been criticized for being nostalgic and having no coherent plot. Historically speaking, the novel is associated with one of the earliest examples of the term “local color”⁵ and has been charged by critics as the perfect evidence of

---

⁵ The term “local color” as a description of an American fiction first appeared in a 1869 review of _Oldtown Folks_. The reviewer praises Stowe’s novel, writing that “[e]verything that is tinged with local color becomes a reality to us, and we get so charmed with the company of the country folks that we are loath to leave them for more distinguished society” (455).
Stowe’s retreat into provincial past.\(^6\) However, some recent scholars point out that this novel is not just a story about the past rural New England but about a negotiation between two historical time frames, between the post-Revolutionary past and the Reconstruction present.

“[S]imultaneously occup[ying] two historical-discursive positions,” notes Kathryn Kent, the novel is “clearly a critique of Reconstruction” and “constructs a legitimating fantasy of origins for Stowe’s political vision of American society at the same time that it explores pressing contemporary cultural concerns” (42; see also Diedrich 109–10). In order to develop this point further, I suggest that Stowe’s historical imagination becomes more visible when looking at her way of staging three models of New England villages in the novel. Indeed, *Oldtown Folks* is not a story of a community, but of a network of communities. Almost half of the fifty chapters are devoted to stories and characters outside Oldtown. The story of Oldtown and its folks, although it remains central, is always situated in relation to other communities. And as I argue in the following, it is through her exploration of inter-community relations that reveals Stowe’s awareness of the historical context of the Civil War and Reconstruction, which is one of the novel’s most significant thematic concerns. While *The Minister’s Wooing* renders abolitionism a national cause and a narrative of national identity inherited from its Puritan legacy, *Oldtown Folks* envisions a diverse, inclusionist form of community as a prototype and potential for rebirth of the nation.

Furthermore, just as in *The Minister’s Wooing*, Stowe’s contemporary political project in *Oldtown Folks* is closely intertwined with her aesthetic strategies. In part due to its lack of a dramatic, centralized plot and protagonist, reviewers and critics have posed the question as to

\(^6\) James M. Cox, for instance, calls Stowe’s “retreat” to old New England “literary decadence” in tandem with the historical background of New England’s decline (449) and claims that her later novels “impose a nostalgic historical frame on the region” (465).
whether this two-volume narrative can be regarded as a “novel.” Unlike *The Minister’s Wooing*, which Cindy Weinstein calls “a masterfully crafted novel” (2), *Oldtown Folks* is characterized by its loose structure. An 1869 review in the *Nation* complains that “[h]er book, though it is called a novel, is better to be described as a series of pictures of life as seen from the kitchen, and best-room, and barnyard, and meadow, and wood-lot of a Massachusetts parsonage of the pre-locomotive days.” “So far as it is a novel,” the reviewer harshly continues, “‘Oldtown Folks’ cannot be said to call for remark except from those whose duty it may be to point out defects of literary workmanship” (437). Although later critics such as Edmund Wilson recognize *Oldtown Folks* as “the most important of her novels” after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, he still admits that it “should not probably have been a novel at all. It would have been better as a series of essays . . . or sketches” (43-44).

My point is that this fragmented structure can be understood as Stowe’s literary strategy. It is a literary trope for cultural conditions in which people who are not fully attached to the nation can still mediate that relationship through a region. The following sections excavate the novel’s nationalizing process in three ways. First, by framing the novel as a story of three allegorized models of community, Stowe refuses to reduce Oldtown to a mythical construction of pastoral, homogeneous community outside modernity. Second, by telling the story of how “fugitive slaves” from a community dependent on excessive industrial capitalism become members of “our folks” in Oldtown, this novel also addresses the problem of reconstruction and its relation to the (re)making of U.S. nation. Lastly, I examine the frame of the novel by focusing on the relation between two storytellers, Sam Lawson and Horace Holyoke. Modeling after Sam, the prototypical regional storyteller and “do-nothing,” the first-person narrator Horace tells his story of bildungsroman, which ends up incomplete. But precisely in his failure to construct
himself as a complete narrator-protagonist, Horace embodies an unfinished attempt to narrate the nation in the wake of the Civil War, questioning the legitimacy of the romance of reunion at a formal level.

2-1. Embracing Modernity, Envisioning an Inclusionist Community: Oldtown and Cloudland

In *Oldtown Folks*, Stowe invents three fictional late eighteenth-century villages in Massachusetts, each of which allegorizes a form of community: Cloudland, Needmore, and Oldtown. As William B. Allen observes, these towns are designed to be “the form of three prototype regimes,” each of which represents “three historical or moral stages” (409; 413). To examine how this framing of the story represents Stowe’s inquiry into the cultural conditions of the nation, let me start by discussing the description of Oldtown.

Contrary to the prevailing view that it is a nostalgic idealization of the provincial New England village as utopia, Oldtown is not conceived of simply as the pastoral world separated from the modern, industrial society. Rather, it is a proto-industrial as much as a pre-industrial community. The image of Oldtown is characterized both by its stillness and movement. On the one hand, located on the bank of a “tranquil” river, Oldtown is one of those “pretty,” “quiet little villages,” which is “separated by pathless ocean from all the civilization and refinement of the Old World, forgotten and unnoticed.” These descriptions emphasize the pastoral image of the

7 This is also a prevailing and persisting view of local color writing in general, which regards it as “essentially a retreat to the past and a defense of past points of view, due largely to the fact that the traditional assumptions of American culture were in conflict with new circumstances of American life” (Martin 83) such as industrialization, urbanization, the rapid increase of immigrants, reforms in education, and the growth of science and technology. By contrast, some recent scholars have suggested that we need to see “the region as a contemporary place of struggle rather than a nostalgic projection of a past community” (Bramen 127).
village. Yet at the same time, it is “burning like live coals under this obscurity with all the fervid activity of an intense, newly kindled, peculiar, and individual life” (OF 9). Using a metaphor of “live coals” here, Stowe draws attention to another aspect of Oldtown already at work under the appearance of seclusion and stability. Her attention to proto-industrial moments in the preindustrial village is developed in her description of “the presiding buildings of the village.” After mentioning “the motherly meeting-house,” the narrator lists several more institutions located in the town center:

There was also the school-house, the Academy and Israel Scran’s store, where everything was sold, from hoe-handles up to cambric needles, where the post-office was kept, and where was a general exchange of news, as the different farm-wagons stood hitched around the door, and their owners spent a leisure moment in discussing politics or theology from the top of codfish or mackerel barrels, while their wives and daughters were shopping among the dress goods and ribbons, on the other side of the store. (10)

This passage closely describes the way the store functions as the hub of people’s lives in the town, focusing on various kinds of activities performed around the place. It sells commodities not only for means of production such as farming (“hoe-handles”) and embroidery (“cambric needles”) but also for fashion consumption (“the dress goods and ribbons”). Being a post-office, it is also the locus for exchange of knowledge as well as merchandises and serves as a center of circulation of letters and information. Furthermore, it provides a forum of political and theological discussions and thus combines people’s material and intellectual life. As a result, this store makes it an attractive place for families to spend their “leisure moment,” which facilitates diverse kinds of exchange and circulation. Far from its appearance of pastoral, premodern small
village, Stowe’s Oldtown is organized around a lively, commercial market in its center. Analyzing the process in which the image of old-time rural New England has been historically constructed, Stephen Nissenbaum points out that “New England town centers developed not in simple opposition to capitalism but rather as an early strategy of adapting to it” (45). By paying attention to the socioecomonic sphere and various kinds of exchange and circulation at work in Oldtown, rather than just reinforcing the ideal image of past pre-industrial community, Stowe suggests that the New England village was the “seed-bed” equally of the republic and of capitalism.

Stowe’s formulation of Oldtown as both pastoral and early capitalist community is significant because it is what differentiates Oldtown from the two other villages presented in the novel. Cloudland is a mythical construction of premodern, pastoral community, while Needmore is an extreme case of northern capitalism at work. “[S]o lonely and retired a place” (357), which takes “a two days’ journey up into the mountains” from Oldtown (341), Cloudland is literally “a region of fancy, myth, or unreality” as the word is defined in *OED*. If there is one place which Stowe idealizes with nostalgia in this novel, it is Cloudland and education there. The narrator states: “Certainly, of all the days that I look back upon, this academy life in Cloudland was the most perfectly happy” (393). A secluded community where “everybody’s characteristic way is known to every one else” (382), free from the fear of the modern city of strangers, Cloudland is characterized by its homogeneity and integrity: “without a pauper, with scarcely an ignorant person in it, with no temptation, no dissipation, no vice” (394). Being a “very sweet and lovely hiding-place,” where “those resplendent moonlight nights” light up the village “like a fairy dream” (394; 358), Cloudland is depicted as a utopia, but by no means without any cautionary tone (Allen 413; 433n7). As Allen points out, it is likely that Stowe took this village’s name from
one of her series of essays written during the Civil War, *House and Home Papers* (433n7). In the beginning of the essay “The Lady Who Does Her Own Work,” a wife calls her husband back to reality from his “cloud-land,” where he loves “to sail away in dreamy quietude, forgetting the war, the price of coal and flour, the rates of exchange, and the rise and fall of gold” (*Household* 85). Worth noting is the list of things presented here: forgotten in the state of “cloud-land” are the fate of the republic (“the war”) and capitalist market economy. As has been discussed above, Stowe conceives of Oldtown as the germ of the republic and capitalism by carefully depicting the capitalist moments at work, “burning like live coals under this obscurity.” Unlike Oldtown, Cloudland is the place where the material reality and the trace of the war—not only of the Revolutionary War as a direct reference, but, by extension, of the Civil War as the second American revolution—are erased.

In contrast to the homogeneity and exclusiveness of Cloudland, Oldtown is marked by its highly heterogeneous population and openness in terms of race and religious creed. Sandra A. Zagarell accounts for the existence of “two strains” in the tradition of village sketch literature, “one in which ‘America’ is tantamount to a homogeneous village community, another that proclaims the Americanism of diversity and features communities with diverse populations” (“America” 144). *Oldtown Folks* thematizes this contrast by putting both of these strains in juxtaposition; if Cloudland represents the first strain, Oldtown stands for the latter. “[O]riginally an Indian town” (*OF* 11), Oldtown has a number of Native American and African American population, who regularly attend Sunday gathering at the meeting house together with white people. Describing the participants of the meeting which “united in those days, as nearly as possible, the whole population of a town,” the narrator details each character of the people of color, with intention to “plac[e] my readers in sympathy with the scene and actors of this
history” (44). In a later chapter, recalling the history of the United States, the narrator describes how racial inequality took over the heterogeneous community without hierarchy which had once existed as Oldtown: “The time had not yet dawned . . . when the black skin of the African was held to disqualify him from a set at the social board with the men whom he joined in daily labor. The strength of the arm, and the skill of the hand, and the willingness of the mind of the workman, in those days, were his passport to equal social rights” (125). Oldtown is thus conceived of as an archetype of an inclusive, diverse community. It is true that Stowe’s historical reconstruction of Oldtown is utopian insofar as it imagines a possible vision of the past which remains unrealized even in her own time. By comparing it with the state of Cloudland, however, she creates a certain degree of authenticity in this vision, making it less unreal or inconceivable as a potential for U.S. nation.

2-2. Black and White Slavery and the (Re)making of U.S. Nation: Oldtown and Needmore

By framing Oldtown Folks as a story of three allegorized models of community, Stowe also addresses the problem of slavery and its relation to the making of U.S. nation. These issues are developed primarily through the contrast between Oldtown and Needmore, another village next to it. As I examine in this section, while Oldtown has an active debate over slavery, Needmore is characterized by its dependence on slave labor and excessive industrial capitalism.

In a chapter entitled “Fire-Light Talks in My Grandmother’s Kitchen,” Major Board, one of the leading citizens in Oldtown who attended the Convention of the State of Massachusetts of 1788 and came back, “began a warm discussion of the Constitution of the United States” with Deacon Badger, the narrator’s grandfather (71). While the Deacon is for the Constitution and
says that “If we accept this Constitution, we shall be a nation—we shall have something to go to work on,” Major Board expresses his objections.

“The other [problem] is the recognizing and encouraging of slavery in the Constitution. That is such a dreadful wrong,—such a shameful inconsistency,—when we have just come through a battle for the doctrine that all men are free and equal, to turn round and found our national government on a recognition of African slavery. It cannot and will not come to good.”

“O, well,” said my grandfather, “slavery will gradually die out. You see how it is going in the New England States.”

“I cannot think so,” said the Major. “I have a sort of feeling about this that I cannot resist. If we join those States that still mean to import and use slaves, our nation will meet some dreadful punishment. I am certain of it.” (71–72)

By way of the issue of slavery, Stowe draws a clear parallel between the post-Revolutionary and Reconstruction eras, in both of which the question of (re)making of a nation was the most urgent issue to deal with. She consolidates this parallel by letting the Major refer to the possibility of a future catastrophe (“some dreadful punishment”) by which the author suggests the Civil War.8 This scene implies Stowe’s intention to show that slavery had been the central point at issue long before the emancipation became the Union cause. She adds a (fictionalized) historical documentation to this scene, echoing the same gesture she makes in Miss Prissy’s letter in The

8 Stowe’s use of the word “punishment” shows that she endorses what David Blight calls the “revolutionary—regenerative—conception of the war,” which regards “the Civil War as cleansing tragedy and bloody rebirth.” Blight cites Frederick Douglass’s 1863 speech “The Mission of the War,” in which Douglass declares “[t]he mission of this war . . . is National regeneration,” and examines how this conception eventually helped to create the reconciliationist vision of Civil War memory (18).
*Minister’s Wooing*. She notes: “The dissent of Major Broad of Natick, and several others, on the grounds above stated, may still be read in the report of the proceedings of the Convention that ratified the Constitution” (72). In this way, Stowe tries to verify the authenticity of this fictional conversation and show that “the issues central to Reconstruction are as old as the American republic” (Foner xxvii). As *The Minister’s Wooing* attempts to make abolitionism a national cause inherited from its Puritan legacy by tracing its root in Samuel Hopkins’s Calvinist theology, *Oldtown Folks* seeks to demonstrate that the legal status of black people has been the bottleneck in the making of a nation and that the relation of the Constitution to slavery was already problematized in New England communities during the process of its ratification.

Beginning immediately after this chapter, the story of Needmore further explores the issue of slavery by “draw[ing] analogies between black slavery and white slavery” as Joan Hedrick observes (343). The plot set in Needmore is a captivity narrative of two English orphans, Harry and Tina Percival. Abandoned by their father, an English officer who had a private marriage with a girl in New England and fled away to England at the close of war (a parental metaphor of the US’s breaking from England), Harry and Tina tried to get to Boston with their mother, hoping for his address in England to “make one more appeal to him” (*OF* 81). Since their mother became sick, however, they asked for a “bed of charity” in Needmore. After the mother’s death, the two orphans were consigned respectively to old Crab Smith and his sister Miss Asphyxia Smith. Both of the adopters kept abusing the children in hard labor and corporeal punishment until one day, Harry and Tina decided to “run away from their cruel taskmasters as if they are fugitive slaves” (343). Indeed, the narrator uses the term “slavery” to describe their situation (99). After they escaped from Needmore, Tina declares that “this was *slavery*” (127). Crab Smith is an embodiment of patriarchal oppressor, making his wife into “his life-long bond-
slave” (78), so “crabbed” a man that all of his children went away from their home. But more important for the present discussion is the figure of Miss Asphyxia. She is a product of New England value of hard work taken to the extreme.

Now all Miss Asphyxia’s ideas of the purpose and aim of human existence were comprised in one word,—work. She was herself a working machine, always wound up and going,—up at early cock-crowing, and busy till bedtime, with a rampant and fatiguing industry that never paused for a moment. She conducted a large farm by the aid of a hired man, and drove a flourishing dairy, and was universally respected in the neighborhood as a smart woman. (87)

This characterization of Miss Asphyxia as “a working machine” can be read as Stowe’s critique of “northern-style capitalism,” which is “now rampant” at the dawn of the Gilded Age (Hedrick 342). The narrator expands this metaphor of “working machine” and reinforces the image of Miss Asphyxia as an avatar of Yankee capitalist industry, calling her “a steam-engine or a powerloom” (OF 93). In this sense, it is appropriate that she is a resident of “Needmore,” a place for the perpetual pursuit of profit. As an agent of capitalism, she needs more work and produces more profit, hiring and abusing Tina as a “slave” as if to “asphyxiate” her.

The parallel between black slavery and white slavery drawn here suggests that, in Stowe, “[w]hat begins in Uncle Tom’s Cabin as an anti-slavery, anti-market protest culminates in a critique of labor relations and valorization of independent housekeeping” (G. Brown 53). In her essay on Reconstruction published in the Atlantic in 1866 while working on Oldtown Folks, Stowe, as an opinion of one of her fictional characters participating in the “family-talk on Reconstruction,” observes that even after emancipation, the problems of slavery persist as a conflict in labor relations. The character, named Theophilus Thoro, says: “The desire to
monopolize and to dominate is the most rooted form of human selfishness” and “[a]ll through free society, employers and employed are at incessant feud; and the more free and enlightened the society, the more bitter the feud.” In this sense, declares he, “the essential animus of the slave system still exists, and pervades the community, North as well as South” (93).

Written as a casual talk rather than a political treatise, this essay does not provide any persuasive solution to Thoro’s pessimistic observation. Yet still, taking his dark picture of Reconstruction, Christopher Crowfield, the narrator and host, wraps up the conversation by expressing a social hope. He observes that “[r]epublican institutions in America are in a transition state” and that “[d]emocratic republicanism has yet been perfectly worked out either in this or any other country” (95–96). Then he tries to articulate his vision of a sort of classless society based on the ideal of American democracy. According to him, it is made possible when the “equal respect for physical and mental labor” is cultivated in “every American citizen.” Then, “there will be no so-called laboring class; there will no more be a class all muscle without brain power to guide it, and a class all brain without muscular power to execute. The labors of society will be lighter, because each individual will take his part in them; they will be performed better, because no one will be overburdened.” Predicated on this vision, his conclusion reads like a plea for a renewal of individualism: “Every American ought to cultivate, as his pride and birthright, the habit of self-helpfulness” (97–98). Thus, according to Crowfield, the task of reunification of the nation should be carried out through the remaking of the American individual.10 As I show

---

9 Andrea Holliger interprets the surname “Crowfield” as “the Crow-fields: the bleak remnants of bloody battle.” According to Hollinger, “Christopher Crowfield’s surname invites readers to imagine the scene post-battle, when fields of the Civil War dead and wounded remain, fodder for the crows” (46–47).

10 In her history of the novel genre and the modern subject, Nancy Armstrong provocatively suggests that by the early Victorian period, “the British novel could no longer tell the story of subject formation without telling the story of nation formation as well,” due to the “mutually
in the rest of this chapter, this is what Horace Holyoke, the narrator and “alphabetical successor to Christopher Crowfield” (Hedrick 333) attempts to do in *Oldtown Folks*.

### 2-3. *Oldtown Folks* as the Novel of Education of the Three Orphans

In *Oldtown Folks*, the story of nation building is inseparably interwoven with that of self-formation. One of the major plots is the story of education and coming-of-age of the three orphan children. The two of them, Harry and Tina, are English siblings, and the other is the narrator Horace Holyoke as one of Oldtown locals. As Dorothy Berkson states, much of the novel “can be seen as a *Bildungsroman* in which the three orphans are educated in the values of egalitarianism, communalism, and New Testament theology and values” (“Introduction” xxxiii).

The plot about Harry and Tina unfolds as a process of the social integration of outcasts who allegorically represent fugitive slaves as well as immigrants. Abandoned with their invalid mother by an English officer in the wake of the Revolutionary War, Harry and Tina were captivated into Needmore, where “employers and employed are at incessant feud.” Then, abused as powerless employees, they escape to Oldtown “as if they are fugitive slaves” (*OF* 343), where they are adopted and raised as members there. Indeed, one of the central interests in the novel is their process of becoming “our folks” through education. This interest is clearly shown in the chapter titles such as “What is to be done with the Boy?” (Chapter 21) and “What shall we do with Tina?” (Chapter 31). As a community characterized by its heterogeneity and openness, Oldtown is the place to make freedpeople as well as immigrants Americans. Toward the end of defining relationship between an individual and a collective body intent on achieving autonomy and coherence in its own right” (59). According to Crowfield’s opinion in the essay, it might be argued that a similar kind of change happened to the American novel by the Reconstruction period, when the question of (re)making a nation became most urgent.
his education, Harry declares: “My future home will never be England . . . America has nursed me and educated me, and I shall always be, heart and soul, an American. My life must be acted in this country” (411). Even when he finally decided to live in England as an Episcopalian clergyman in order to “see what could be done in England,” the narrator still believes that “his heart was set upon a home in America. The freedom and simplicity of life in this country were peculiarly suited to his character” (491).

Thus, if Oldtown becomes a model for what Stowe calls in her essay the “republican institutions in America” which “has yet been perfectly worked out,” it is through its process of adopting the orphans in separating them from “the essential animus of the slave system” in Needmore. In this sense, Harry and Tina’s story is also an important part of Oldtown’s story of becoming a diverse and inclusionist nation.

2-4. Horace Holyoke and Sam Lawson

However, this story undergoes a slight but decisive change when we take account of another important factor in the novel, which I have left undeveloped thus far: the place of Horace Holyoke, “the novel’s other orphan” (Berkson xxxiii) and the first-person narrator. It is significant to note that the preface is signed under his name, not Stowe’s, for on the one hand, it is his intention to write a story of Oldtown as “the seed-bed” of “the great American republic” (3) instead of his own life. As a “sympathetic spectator” who is “as still and passive as a looking-glass, or a mountain lake” (4; 3), he narrates a story of nation building through the stories of self-formations of Harry and Tina, who eventually nurture their senses of belonging as members of “our folks.” From the preface, we can see that Horace identifies himself first and foremost as the narrator-observer of a communal history. On the other hand, he is clearly aware of the link
between personal and collective history. At the beginning of the first chapter, he explains the reasons why he offers his life “as an open page to the reading of the public.” He writes: “every individual is part and parcel of a great picture of the society in which he lives and acts, and his life cannot be painted without reproducing the picture of the world he lived in; and it has appeared to me that my life might recall the image and body of a period in New England most peculiar and most interesting” (9). In this way, Horace ambitiously aligns the picture of his individual life with that of Oldtown. In other words, he identifies himself as the soul-nation allegory of “the seed-bed” of “the great American republic” and expresses his aspiration to write an American bildungsroman, through which he “soar[s] to unmeasured height of literary distinction” (340). Thus, as Buell contends, “[t]exts like Oldtown Folks . . . also belong to a tradition of attempts at the great American novel, attempts originally inspired by some of the same models that produced the social anatomies of Victorian fiction” (New England 295).

Nevertheless, Horace’s story of his own development is not organized into any meaningful whole. As critics have pointed out, Horace as the protagonist is “a colorless character” (Hedrick 342). It is true that the whole novel is framed in terms of the development of Horace’s individual life trajectory: it starts with his father’s death and adoption by his grandmother and ends with his marriage with Tina. But although he fragmentally mentions his ambition to be a successful lawyer and confesses his love for Tina, the story of how he established himself as a lawyer in Boston and how he came to marry her is largely untold, especially because of the eight-year narrative break interpolated between the last two chapters (495). As a result, the story of his subject formation thus remains fragmentary if not abandoned to the end.
It is largely due to this fragmentary temporality of Horace’s story of development that *Oldtown Folks* has been regarded as a failed novel rather than a successful series of sketches. The reviewer for the *Nation* who criticizes Stowe’s “defects of literary workmanship” to create a well-organized novel regards her choice of Horace as the frame narrator as the “entirely needless mistake” (437). I would like to resist this assessment of Stowe’s use of the narrator-protagonist and argue instead in the following that it is her literary strategy to unsettle and embrace the attempt to narrate a story of nation formation.

To elaborate this point, the role of Sam Lawson, the “decided do-nothing” (31) and the spokesperson of Oldtown, becomes important, because Horace’s way of narration inherits Sam’s. Sam performs the role of Horace’s surrogate father in the story. His first word in the novel is his sympathy and consolation to Horace when he lay sobbing under a tree away from the people gathering at his father’s deathbed (31). Recalling his attachment to Sam, Horace writes that “Sam was to me, during my childhood, a guide philosopher, and friend. The lazy, easy, indefinite atmosphere of being that surrounded him was to me like the haze of Indian summer over a landscape, and I delighted to bask in it. Nothing about him was any more fixed than the wavering shadows of clouds” (156). Humorous and lively, he is a type of country folk in the old days and as critics have noticed, he “served as a prototype” for the regional storyteller speaking a dialect in local color fiction, such as Charles Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius (Pryse 149).

Both in his working and storytelling, his style is undisciplined and irregular. The first work he does in the novel is to repair a clock. But his “work” turns out to be totally unfinished: “I shall never forget,” the narrator recalls, “the wrath and dismay which he roused in my Aunt Lois’s mind by the leisurely way in which, after having taken our own venerable kitchen clock to pieces, and strewn the fragments all over the kitchen, he would roost over it in endless
incubation, telling stories, entering into long-winded theological discussions, smoking pipes, and
giving histories of all the other clocks in Oldtown” (32). Here, Sam’s fragmenting of the clock
certainly has its symbolic aspects. As Josephine Donovan points out, “Lawson’s dilatory attempt
to repair a clock metonymically reflects a clash between the modern clock-dominated sense of
time . . . and the predisciplinary ethos of Sam’s rural mentality” (234). Bluffing that “one day is
with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (*OF* 32), Sam Lawson
undermines teleological, linear temporality.

Sam’s non-linear way of ordering things can also be seen in his storytelling. He plays a
crucial role as a storytelling figure in the novel, a collector and circulator of the local knowledge.
As the narrator puts it, Sam’s story is “a boundless world of narrative and dreamy suggestion,
tending to no point and having no end” (156). In this sense, it is correct to observe that Sam is
“not governed by linear instrument rationality but by an associative meandering narrative style
that does not excise the details it encounters, considering them irrelevant or unimportant, but
embraces them in a holistic, inclusive vision—a style affirmed in other local-color works”
(Donovan 234). It is therefore no wonder that after the publication of *Oldtown Folks*, Stowe was
able to continue writing local color stories featuring Sam Lawson: it is precisely because his
storytelling does not have any end and therefore persists beyond the end of the novel.

Donovan’s argument helps us to see how Stowe preserves a non-linear temporality and
non-rational way of thinking and telling in her invention of Sam Lawson. However, it should
also be noted that Stowe never fails to notice the fact that the “do-nothing” like Lawson has
served as a catalyst for modernization in the United States.

Every New England village, if you only think of it, must have its do-nothing as
regularly as it has its school-house or meeting-house. Nature is always wide awake in
the matter of compensation. Work, thrift, and industry are such an incessant steampower in Yankee life, that society would burn itself out with intense friction were there not interposed here and there the lubricating power of a decided do-nothing . . . And there is on the face of the whole earth no do-nothing whose softness, idleness, general inaptitude to labor, and ever-lasting, universal shiftlessness, can compare with that of this worthy, as found in a brisk Yankee village. (31)

In this passage, the narrator clearly explains the reason why it is necessary for every New England village to have its own Sam Lawson. Rather than a subversive counter to the Yankee ethic of “[w]ork, thrift, and industry,” a do-nothing has its primal role as “compensation” in the community: it has a “lubricating power” for the society to alleviate the “intense friction” arose from its daily life of industry. Thus, Lawson’s premodern nature paradoxically promotes modernization of a Yankee village.

Indeed, toward the end of the novel, the narrator compares Sam Lawson with a newspaperman, a quintessential modern profession. He observes that Lawson “was born a generation too soon” and that if he would be born in the modern times, he would make “a valuable reporter of the press.” Praising his abilities of “collecting information, thinking nothing of long tramps of twenty miles in the acquisition, never hesitating to put a question and never forgetting an answer,” the narrator states that “it is astonishing what an amount of information he may pick up” (466). Furthermore, he believes in the general credibility of Lawson’s news report: “Sam seems to have but one talent, and that is picking up news; and generally his guesses turn out to be about true” (437). In this way, by delineating an implicit genealogy from a do-nothing of small village to a local newspaperman, Stowe reveals an intricacy between a premodern rural subject and a process of modernization.
As the frame narrator of the novel, Horace inherits his surrogate father’s way of storytelling and narrative temporality. Indeed, Horace self-consciously confesses that his novel might be never-ending, just as Sam’s story: “I am warned by the increased quantity of manuscript which lies before me that, if I go on recounting scenes and incidents with equal minuteness, my story will transcend the limits of modern patience” (487). Then the novel ends in an anticlimax by skipping many years of events by describing them in brief summary. At the same time, however, Horace clearly engages in a teleological temporality of the history of the nation, from “its seed-bed” to “the great trees of to-day” (3), from “the ante-railroad times” (9) to “this modern time” (142). It is fair to say that he tries to narrate his personal story of development by framing it in the story of the progress of the American nation.

But we do not necessarily have to understand these two ways of framing as contradictory. In his discussion of the “aesthetic relationship between the time of the nation and its idling hiatus” (123) in Washington Irving, James Lilley writes:

Rather than situate the idle fragments of the nation’s past strictly outside of the modern metropole, Irving instead insists on their continued productive centrality within its borders. Never simply antimodern, they offer up a ruined spatio-temporal hiatus against which the flow of national time and space can be measured. Rip does not sleep through the American Revolution: in testifying to the antiqued pastness of the past, he hollows out a discontinuous space and time that brings into relief the full flow of the modern, that makes “the revolution” thinkable as an isolated, national event along time’s axis. . . . What is so remarkable about The Sketch-Book is its aesthetic coproduction of antiquarian nostalgia and modern nationalism. Rather than
structure these concepts antagonistically, Irving instead reveals their dialectical mutuality. (133–34).

Taking a cue from Lilley’s insightful and provocative account, I argue that Stowe inherits and develops Irving’s aesthetics of hiatus/history in *Oldtown Folks*. As a major successor to Rip Van Winkle, Sam Lawson the decided do-nothing “has the potential to energize as well as to arrest the spirit of the modern” (Lilley 134–35). What is remarkable about *Oldtown Folks* is its employment of Horace Holyoke as the first-person narrator and a nuanced successor to Sam, for the coexistence of Sam and Horace makes it possible to stage the dialectical mutuality and tension between “antiquarian nostalgia and modern nationalism” both at characterological and formal levels. For Stowe, Sam’s way of maintaining the tension between nonlinear narrative temporality and the progressive force of modernity is the occasion for Horace’s unsettling and for his attempt to narrate the development of the nation. Horace tells the story of unfinished nation formation through his fragmentary self-formation and thus embodies an unfinished attempt to remake the nation in the wake of the Civil War. Horace’s narrative voice resists to become a unified whole. Refusing to make its first-person narrator a typical soul-nation allegory of “the great American republic,” *Oldtown Folks* questions the legitimacy of the romance of reunion at a formal level.

**Conclusion**

By tracing nationalizing processes and modes of telling in Stowe’s two regional novels, this chapter has examined how she negotiates the call for the national novel both at the thematic and formal levels. While both novels dramatize dialectical relationships between competing arts of nation formation, their aesthetic and political orientations are different. Facing the urgent crisis
of the house divided, *The Minister’s Wooing* resolves the conflict between Miss Prissy and the Doctor—demonstrated particularly over the issue of slavery—through the collaborative relay of narrative authority which is finally synthesized in the metanarrative of the novel. Written in the midst of Reconstruction and equally urgent discussion about the way to reunify the nation, *Oldtown Folks* keeps rather than collapses the dialectical tension in the fragmentary narrative structure and incomplete self-formation of the narrator. Resisting the decisive closure of the bildungsroman of a soul-nation allegory, it deflects the romance of reunion. For Stowe, the dream of the Great American Novel is about envisioning the U.S. nation as community much more inclusive and diverse than De Forest presupposes.
Chapter Three

Chapter Three: The Romance of Reunion and Howells’s South-Amediated Realism

As the editor of the *Atlantic*, in August 1874, William Dean Howells wrote in his magazine a critical review of Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s recently published fiction *Prudence Palfrey*. The review helps us to see his conception of what a “novel” should look like as opposed to a romance.

We say romancer, because in spite of the title-page, and of many aspects of a novel in setting and local circumstance, *Prudence Palfrey* is hardly a novel. It is told in that semi-idyllic key, into which people writing stories of New England life fall so inevitably that we sometimes think a New England *novel* is not possible; that our sectional civilization is too narrow, too shy, too lacking in high and strong contrasts, to afford material for the dramatic realism of that kind of fiction. . . . In fact, the New England novel does not exist. Mr. Aldrich is nearer giving it in *Prudence Palfrey* than anybody else, but he does not give it. (228-29)

For Howells, a “novel” should be something beyond sectionalism and localism. That is why he declares “a New England *novel* is not possible.” When he considers New England “too narrow” to be a proper subject for a “novel,” he suggests that the “novel” should have a national breadth. “[T]he New England novel does not exist”: the American novel does exist.

The romance is sectional or local (he calls Aldrich “romancer”), whereas the novel is national: in this sense, what Howells is doing in his discussion of Aldrich is in perfect accord with what De Forest does in his discussion of Hawthorne. De Forest dislocates Hawthorne from
the realm of the national, pushing him to the wider world of artistic imagination on one hand, 
and confining him to New England locality on the other (“Great” 28). In so doing, he 
appropriates the very distinction Hawthorne articulated in his renowned prefaces by pressing the 
distinction of national and local on to that of novel and romance. When Howells claims the novel 
requires “high and strong contrasts” lacking in Aldrich’s New England romance and associates 
the novel with “the dramatic realism” just as De Forest does, he also gestures toward the national 
scope of the novel genre by assigning romance the role of a foil.

This chapter explores how Howells attempts to invest his fiction with national breadth by 
establishing “high and strong contrasts” and, in so doing, develops his “dramatic realism.” 
Reading the novels which mark two of the crucial turning points in Howells’s literary career as 
well as his aesthetic development, I argue that Howellsian realism emerged out of his negotiation 
with and response to the culture of reconciliation in post-Civil War America and the discourse of 
the romance of reunion.

_A Foregone Conclusion_ (1875), which was serialized in the _Atlantic_ when Howells 
published the review of _Prudence Palfrey_, marks the first big turning point in Howells’s literary 
career as a novelist. Howells later called it “my first novel” even though it was actually the third 
Novel he published (Cady 187). Considering that Howells was deeply interested in the art of the 
Novel and literary genres throughout his career, there was “nothing inadvertent” in his remark on 
_A Foregone Conclusion_, as Edwin Cady states (189). Regarding what Howells means by calling 
it his first novel, James Woodress states that the two previous novels he had published were 
actually “fictionalized travelogue[s]” rather than novels (153). In _A Foregone Conclusion_, 
continues Woodress, “[a]t last Howells had written a book which neither depended on the travel 
device to give it movement nor used Mr. and Mrs. Howells as the thinly disguised protagonists.
For the first time he had managed to create a respectable plot in which complicated characters enacted their story in a severely restricted locale” (154). Woodress’s elaboration lets us clearly see Howells’s development from travel writer to novelist. With this context in mind, this chapter argues that Howells’s “first novel” is characterized by both dependence on and departure from the romance of reunion by way of the rearrangement of national identity through an international setting. *A Foregone Conclusion* represents the *novelizing process* of the romance: the romance of reunion becomes a novel when it enters into the metafictional and self-reflective mode of critique.

*A Modern Instance* (1882) marks another turning point in Howells’s career, and it can be seen as his first major attempt at managing the Great American Novel. In the late 1870s, “[a]s Howells’ creative work deepened . . . the burden of the Atlantic weighted increasingly heavy” (Cady 200). In order to spend more time and effort in writing, he resigned the *Atlantic* editorship in March 1881. As Michael Anesko states, “Howells was eager to tackle something on a larger scale” (*Letters* 166). Thus, *A Modern Instance* was the first novel he worked on as a full-time author and became “the longest work Howells had yet written” (167) and “his most ambitious novel so far” (Goodman and Dawson 218). He created as protagonist “a new version of the American self-made man” (Eschholz 94), Bartley Hubbard. In Bartley’s character, “Howells came closer than James or any other American writer before Dreiser to creating a truly representative American man” (Habegger, *Gender* 91). In this way, as a self-made journalist of the Gilded Age, Bartley works as a soul-nation allegory of the postbellum U.S. nation. Rather than involving himself in the sectional opposition between North and South, he establishes a new framework for the nationalization of his newspaper by way of accumulating as many different varieties of local and distant reports as possible. By dramatizing the end of Bartley’s marital life
concomitant with the ruin of his career at the end of Reconstruction, *A Modern Instance* demonstrates Howells’s ambivalence toward Bartley’s new nationalist framework and unsettles the romance of reunion.

In *Our South*, Jennifer Rae Greeson elucidates how “the Reconstruction South appeared as a proving ground for the civilizationist mastery of the modern United States” as well as “the site of irresolvable collision between national ideals and national reality” (14; 255). Taking an example of “local color” fiction, she examines the way “it characterized the Reconstruction South by denoting a mutually constitutive narrative process of peripheralization and racialization” (260). When he attempts to establish “high and strong contrasts” requisite for his “dramatic realism” in *A Foregone Conclusion* and *A Modern Instance*, Howells also introduces some “Southern” main characters who are peripheralized and problematized by other characters and/or the narrator. In the following, I hope to complicate Amy Kaplan’s conception of the “mass-mediated realism” of Howells by exploring his “South-mediated realism.”

1. Realism as the Self-consciousness of the Romance of Reunion in *A Foregone Conclusion*

*A Foregone Conclusion* is the first international novel written by Howells. Unlike his previous novels, in which the main characters travel around the U.S. and Canada, this story has a distinctively European setting, that is, the city of Venice. Based on his years of residence in the Italian city as a U.S. Consulate appointed by the Lincoln Administration, Howells for the first time used his European experience as material for his fiction. “[S]hifting the axis for the contrast

---

11 In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Kaplan famously defines realism as “a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change—not just to assert a dominant power but often assuage fears of powerlessness” (10) and argues that “Howells formulates his theory and practice of realism in an uneasy debate with the development of the mass media in the late nineteenth century” (16).
of manners from West vs. East to New World vs. Old” (Anesko, “William” 503), he makes a novel of manners that portrays the lives of Americans in Italy even before Henry James takes up this subject and writes his major novels of international theme such as *Roderick Hudson* and *The American*.

My reading in the following, however, is less concerned with Howells’s international theme as such than the ways in which he complicates his Italian story by interweaving it with his domestic concerns. As Goodman and Dawson argues, “[t]he political backdrop of the novel . . . invites comparison between the destinies of two republics, Venice and the United States” (188). Situating this international novel in cultural and political context of post-Civil War America, I hope to demonstrate how it is a story about the state of the republic through its contrast between North and South as well as New World and Old. *A Foregone Conclusion* can be seen as Howell’s literary articulation of his double vision, which is transatlantic and domestic at once.

1-1. Point of View Character and the Divisions of Nation

*A Foregone Conclusion* has an observer figure as one of its main characters. Toward the beginning, the story introduces him with a direct reference to the Civil War.

It was in the first year of the war, and from a motive of patriotism common at that time, Mr. Ferris (one of my many predecessors in office at Venice), had just been crossing his two silken gondola flags above the consular book-case, where with their gilt, lance-headed staves, and their vivid stars and stripes, they made a very pretty effect. *(FC 4)*

Coming to Venice in 1861, Ferris is “partially a self-portrait” of Howells (Crowley, *Mask* 22), who also was appointed as consul Venice by Lincoln Administration in the same year. The third
person narrator associates himself with Ferris and draws a distinction between them at once in calling him “one of my many predecessors.” In this way, the story creates its narrative viewpoint alongside with Ferris by authorizing him as an observer based on his resemblance to the author himself. This passage also shows that with the presence of “their vivid stars and stripes” at his office, Consul Ferris is portrayed as literally a representative of United States of America. Given that it is “the first year of the war,” what he represents is a divided nation—Northern States of America.

Just as the country he represents is divided, Ferris is also divided into two identities. He has two occupations in Venice: consul and painter. In fact, as he tells one visitor to his office, he defines himself first and foremost as painter: “I am a painter by profession, and I amuse myself with consuling” (FC 11). In this sense, at least in his identity, he is an artist who is assigned a position as consul just like Howells himself. Furthermore, the aesthetic principle which Ferris believes in also reminds the reader of Howells’s inclination toward realistic representation of things. “Ferris was an uncompromising enemy of the theatricalization of Italy, or indeed of anything” (33). Later in the story, when one character suggests that he should put the portrait of an Italian priest “at the centre of some famous or romantic scene,” he fiercely disagrees with her opinion: “I’ve no patience with the follies people think and say about Venice! . . . You all think that there can be no picture of Venice without a gondola or a Bridge of Sighs in it. . . . I’m going to try to paint a Venetian priest so that you’ll know him without a bit of conventional Venice near him” (49). Taking a position of detached observer and point-of-view character, Ferris is characterized as a painter who shares realist aesthetics with Howells. In this way, by foregrounding the resemblance between his theory of realism and Ferris’s aesthetic creed, Howells also frames Ferris’s story as an inquiry into the politics of realism.
The heroine of the story, who becomes one of Ferris’s subjects of interest, is a seventeen-year-old American girl. She traveled around Europe with her mother for several years for the sake of the mother’s health before they came to Venice. Being independent, innocent, and proud of herself while loyal to her mother, she clearly belongs to the literary type of the “American girl.”12 Unlike typical Jamesian American girls from upstate New York, however, the heroine of A Foregone Conclusion has a peculiar feature: Florida Vervain, this Howellsian prototype of the American girl, is from the South.

Miss Vervain seemed sometimes a little burdened by the passionate nature which he [her father] left her together with the tropical name he had bestowed in honor of the State where he had fought the Seminoles in his youth, and where he chanced still to be stationed when she was born. (14)

Named after the State she was born in, where his father stayed as a colonel of the U.S. Army, Florida embodies the image of South in the wartime. The narrator attributes her “passionate nature” to “the tropical name” given to her. In this way, in inventing his American girl, Howells foregrounds geographic contrasts not only between Europe and America but also between Northern and Southern United States through the characterization of the two protagonists. Howells’s American girl, in other words, is also a regional type in a transatlantic context.

Recent scholars such as Sara Blair, Nina Silber, and Jennifer Greason have examined various travel writings in postbellum America and demonstrated the superimposition of images

---

12 In both of his two reviews of this novel, Henry James gives unreserved praise to the characterization of the heroine, calling her a “singularly original invention.” She is, writes James, “a remarkably picturesque study of a complex nature” and “no heroine in fiction in whom it is proposed to interest was on just such terms. . . . She is a poet’s invention, but she is extremely real” (Rpt. in Anesko, Letters 103). Thus, as critics have pointed out, this American girl in Venice becomes one of the major predecessors of James’s Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer.
between the American South and the European South, particularly through their tropical climate and the presence of ruins. For instance, analyzing Sarah Putnam’s travel writing on Charleston in the Reconstruction period, Silber argues that “the sight of decay and ruination in the South frequently encouraged northern travelers to compare those sites with the fashionable tourist vistas for Europe” (77). In her reading of Henry James’s Italian essays “on the enchants of Venice,” by way of contrast, Blair contends that “[b]y the 1870s that “Siren of the South”—in an idiom of degeneracy and feminization that chimes with Reconstructionist narratives about the American South—had become a monitory icon of erotic transgression, of racial and sexual masquerade” (131). Several decades before these recent academic discussions, Jay Martin writes that “[i]n A Foregone Conclusion, Howells contrasts the American South (in his heroine Florida) to the European South, Italy” (48). His point is validated by some specific descriptions of Venice in the novel. For example, the residence of the Vervains is characterized by its “broken” and “ruined fountain” (FC 41; 57). Also, the landscape of Venetian villas shows “marks of greater or less decay, and here and there one was falling to ruin” (65).

What I would like to call attention to, adding to these insightful observations, is the fact that this novel tries to underline the tension between observer and observed by analogizing it to the North-South divide. In so doing, the novel draws a formal analogy between sectionalism and narrative perspective: the North unilaterally observes and occupies the South. Florida’s “passionate nature,” while establishing a connection between American and European South, is presented in tension with Ferris, her observer from North.

Her pride was on the alert against him; she may have imagined that he was covertly smiling at her, and she no doubt tasted the ironical flavor of much of his talk and behavior, for in those days his liked to qualify his devotion to the
Vervains with a certain nonchalant slight, which, while the mother openly enjoyed it, filled the daughter with anger and apprehension. Quite at random, she visited points of his informal manner with unmeasured reprisal; others, for which he might have blamed himself, she passed over with strange caprice. Sometimes this attitude of hers provoked him, and sometimes it disarmed him; but whether they were at feud, or keeping an armed truce, or as now and then happened, were in *entente cordiale* which he found very charming, the thing that he always contrived to treat with silent respect and forbearance in Miss Vervain was that sort of aggressive tenderness with which she hastened to shield the foibles of her mother. (47)

This passage shows how Florida feels about Ferris. Noticing “the ironical flavor of much of his talk and behavior” and “a certain nonchalant slight” he puts to her and her mother, she is “on the alter against him” and “filled with anger and apprehension.” In this way, her rebellious feeling toward Ferris is foregrounded. It should also be noted that this passage describes their conflict by using vocabularies about military and war. She wants to “shield” her mother; her reaction to him takes a form of “unmeasured reprisal” and sometimes it “disarm[s]” him; the narrator wonders “whether they were at feud, or keeping an armed truce, or . . . were in an *entente cordiale.*”

Given that Howells sets their encounter in the first year of the Civil War, his choice of words seems no mere coincidence at all. Howells uses military vocabularies in representing their conflict in order to associate it with the current state of the republic. Thus, *A Foregone Conclusion* is a story about the divided America unfolding in the European South, in which the fortunes of “Florida” as an embodiment of rebellious South is problematized through the observer figure representing American North.
1-2. American Dream in Venice: The Southernization and Othering of Don Ippolito

In addition to Ferris and Florida, this novel has another main character. Originally entitled “The Tragedy of Don Ippolito,” the story centers around the struggle of an Italian priest and his tragic death. Just like Ferris, who is consul and painter at once, Don Ippolito has two identities: he is a Catholic priest and amateur inventor. When he visits the consular office at the beginning of the story, he tells Ferris about his wish to contribute to the war through his own invention. He brings “the model of a weapon of [his] contrivance” to show Ferris how it works. As one of “sympathizing foreigners,” he wants to cross the Atlantic to help “the government of the North” (7). In this way, Don Ippolito, who represents Italy as the European South, is introduced into this story as a potential immigrant to the United States who fancies himself an enthusiastic supporter of the North.

Noteworthy here is that Don Ippolito’s hope of emigration is galvanized by his aspiration toward America rather than by a political creed sympathetic with the Lincoln Administration. The narrator details what underlines Don Ippolito’s motivation as follows.

[H]e began to dream of going to America. He pinned his faith in all sorts of magnificent possibilities to the names of Franklin, Fulton, and Morse; he was so ignorant of our politics and geography as to suppose us at war with the South American Spaniards, yet he knew that English was the language of the North, and he applied himself to the study of it. Heaven only knows what kind of inventor’s Utopia our poor, patent-ridden country appeared to him in these dreams of his, and I can but dimly figure it to myself. But he might very naturally desire to come to a land where the spirit of invention is recognized and fostered, and where he
could hope to find that comfort of incentive and companionship which our artists
find in Italy. (30)

For Don Ippolito, the United States is first and foremost the “inventor’s Utopia.” Modeling
himself after American inventors since Franklin, he is fascinated by “all sorts of magnificent
possibilities” in his career as inventor, and a dream of becoming a successful self-made man. In
this sense, this novel can also be read as a story about the American dream of a Venetian priest,
who wants to come to the United States as an immigrant.

At the same time, however, we should also note the sarcastic tone of this passage. A
series of ironic remarks here reveal the fact that the narrator does not really believe in the
feasibility of Don Ippolito’s dream. For instance, by pointing his basic misunderstanding about
the ongoing war in America, the narrator underscores how ignorant Don Ippolito is. He also
suggests that his utopian conception of America is fundamentally misguided. Thus, the narrator
characterizes him as a foreign dreamer motivated by an unrealistic romance with America.

The plot about Don Ippolito unfolds as a process of his Americanization. By the agency
of Ferris, he starts to serve as Florida’s tutor. While teaching Italian language to her, he learns
English through daily conversations with the Vervains. Making a friendship with them, he
“anxiously . . . studied the ways of these Americans, and conformed to them as far as he knew”
and, as a result, “[h]is English grew rapidly in their society.” The narrator summarizes this
process by saying that “[h]e was Americanizing” (51). He in this way plays the role of potential
immigrant longing to become an American while he represents Old World.

Precisely because of the purity and blindness of this aspiration, he paradoxically becomes
the embodiment of American innocence. Indeed, this novel foregrounds the innocence of two
characters, that of Ippolito as well as of Florida. As the narrator discovers “a bold innocence” in
Florida’s eyes (60), he also refers to “the sort of tragic innocence which seemed to characterize Don Ippolito’s expression” (33).

The American dream of this Italian priest, however, is destined to be frustrated after all. Although it seems clear that the weapon he claims he has invented is unpractical, we should also note that both the narrator and Ferris the observer almost always intend to emphasize his otherness in devaluing him. For instance, when he points out the impracticality of the idea of cannon Don Ippolito brought to him, Ferris declares that it is “disabled” (9). In addition to using offensive expressions in noting the defects of the priest’s invention, he rhetorically excludes him from the possible contribution he wishes to make for the United States: “‘It was a cannon,’ returned Ferris . . . with a sort of absent laugh, ‘that would make it very lively for the Southerners—if they had it. Poor fellow!’” (25). By making this highly sarcastic remark, Ferris artfully undermines Don Ippolito’s aspiration toward American North by linking him and his cannon instead to the South. In this sense, what he is doing here is the othering of Don Ippolito through his southernization.

Furthermore, considering the symbolic connotation of Ferris’s attempt to emasculate the priest’s weapon by calling it a “disabled” and “ridiculous cannon” (36), we can also notice that what he does here is to effeminize as well as southernize Don Ippolito: he emphasizes his lack of masculinity by declaring the impotence of his cannon. In fact, throughout the story, the Catholic priest is characterized by his feminine feature or “girl-image” (Fryckstedt 151). The gown he wears is described to be “like a woman’s skirt” (94); the way he steps is “like some tall, gaunt, unhappy girl” (124); the story he tells “affected Ferris like that of some girl’s adventure in men’s clothes” (52). Given “an idiom of degeneracy and feminization [in] Reconstructionist narratives about the American South” examined by recent scholarship, it is clear that this story shares the
same discourse when it others Don Ippolito (Blair 131). The Americanization of Italian priest is thematized in this way, and through the process of his feminization and southernization, its possibility is excluded as something impossible for the reader to imagine after all.

For Ferris, the innocence and romantic possibility of Don Ippolito’s dream was something he had to repress. He is both fascinated and threatened by the priest’s unpractical ideas of inventions. Listening to a series of ideas of his possible inventions, Ferris perceives “aspirations toward the impossible” and considers it their “some fatal defect.” For all the defects they have, however, “they strongly appealed to the painter as the stunted fruit of a talent denied opportunity, instruction and sympathy” (34). Enchanted by him and his imperfect inventions, Ferris takes the chance to deepen their relationship by placing him in a job of teaching Italian to Florida. In this sense, Ferris’s attempt to other him discussed above can be seen as his means of self-defense.

Ferris’s desire to paint a portrait of Don Ippolito also derives from the same kind of defense mechanism. He explains the reason why he wants to paint the priest in this way: “He made me melancholy; and his face haunts me. I should like to paint him” (24–25). Hoping to break free from his obsession with Don Ippolito by objectifying him, Ferris persists in the idea of painting him. To put it another way in context of the present discussion about the southernization of Don Ippolito in this story, what motivates Ferris to paint is his desire for counterinsurgency. Set in 1861, Venice in this story is still under Austrian occupation. It follows that Ferris’s public position as United States Consul is made possible by “requesting the Emperor of Austria to permit him to enjoy and exercise the office of Consul of the ports of the Lombardo-Venetian kingdom,” that is, the city of Venice (11). Based on his public identity authorized by Austrian sovereignty, Ferris sees in Don Ippolito’s face a rebellious expression.
I want to show that baffled aspiration, apathetic despair, and rebellious longing which you catch in his face when he’s off his guard, and that suppressed look which is the characteristic expression of all Austrian Venice. (50)

Here, Ferris speaks out the cause underlying his attempt to paint Don Ippolito’s portrait. It is striking that Florida sees no such expression in his face: “[h]e had the simplest and openest look in the world . . . and there’s neither pagan, nor martyr nor rebel in it” (50). It is only through Ferris’s public position as U. S. Consul that makes him perceive the “rebellious longing” in “that suppressed look.” We can see how Ferris’s consulship informs his artistic vision of Venice in this respect.

For Howells as well as Ferris, “[t]he plight of the city reminded him of the military struggle at home,” as Goodman and Dawson demonstrates in their recent biography (76). Against the “rebellious longing” of Don Ippolito which reminds him of the Confederate Rebellion, Ferris, as the representative of American North authorized by Austrian sovereignty, sticks to the idea of painting the Venetian priest with hope to suppress the rebellion. In this sense, painting is his counterinsurgency campaign. This reading can be supported by the important fact that his portrait is finally completed and shown to the reader for the first time at an exhibition in New York at precisely same time when the Civil War ends in the story (160). Indeed, completion of the painting is the completion of southernization and othering of Don Ippolito.

1-3. The Narrator’s Self-reflective Critique of Ferris and His Romance of Reunion

Don Ippolio’s story ends up in his tragic death. Falling in love with Florida, who shows sympathy for his sense of longing toward America and his religious skepticism, he eventually
accepts her idea of bringing him to US when they go back. When he confesses his love to her, however, she rejects him and tells him that she loves Ferris. Ippolito gets terribly depressed and falls ill. Preparing for the return to the US at the end of his term as consul, Ferris does not know what happened between them until Ippolito tells him about it from his sickbed. When he visits Ippolito once again in the next morning, he realizes that Ippolito already passed away during the night.

However, this is not the conclusion of the story. In the final chapter, Ferris, yet to recover from the shock of Ippolito’s tragic death, finds a refuge from his frustration and depression in the war. As soon as he comes home, he volunteers for the military service. Getting wounded and back in New York two years later with no money, he completes Ippolito’s portrait and gets it displayed in one exhibition. One day, he finds Florida, who has since lost her mother, looking at the portrait and they reunite again by chance. Thus, he eventually marries her.

Many readers and critics, both past and present, have criticized this part of the story as “weak” (Woodress 155) or “contrived” (Godman and Dawson 188). Soon after publication, the novel came under heavy attack from contemporary readers, the best example of which was shown in the reviews by Henry James:

A matter which it is doubtless very possible to discuss, but in which we ourselves should be on the protesting side, is the felicity of the episodes related in the last twenty pages of the tale. After the hero’s death the action is transplanted to America, and the conclusion takes place in the shadow of the Fifth Avenue Hotel. We have found these pages out of tune with their predecessors, and we suspect that this will be the verdict of readers with the finer ear. . . . [I]n reading over “A Foregone Conclusion” we shall close the work when the hero dies—when the old
Veneranda comes to the door and shakes her hands in Ferris’s face and smites him, as it were, with the announcement. (Rpt. in Anesko, *Letters* 98–99)

Whereas James highly praises the novel as a whole and particularly its characterization of the American girl, he takes “on protesting side” regarding the ending and clearly states that it is a failure. According to him, “the episodes related in the last twenty pages of the tale” is unnecessary and the reader should stop reading the novel at the end of the second chapter to the last when Ferris is told Don Ippolito’s death.

Scholars have also investigated the reason why Howells chose to conclude the story in such a “contrived” way. Responding to the criticism, Howells in a letter writes about his decision as follows:

If I had been perfectly my own master—it’s a little droll, but true, that even in such a matter one isn’t—the story would have ended with Don Ippolito’s rejection. But I suppose that it is well to work for others in some measure . . . and I feel pretty sure that I deepened the shadows by going on, and achieved a completer verity, also. (*Selected*, 78n2)

Citing this passage, scholars have discussed what Howells meant by saying “it is well to work for others in some measure.” For example, Kenneth Lynn interprets this remark as Howells’s gesture of “catering to the frivolities of public taste” (231). Michael Anesko refers to Lynn’s reading as “only one of several possibilities” and argues that “the same pressure could have come from Howells’s wife or others who occasionally reviewed and criticized his work in manuscript.” Anesko also suggests the possibility that Howells “had willingly internalized, and wanted to respect, the narrative expectations he associated with the common reader” (*Letters*, 35).
With these insightful observations in mind, however, I would like to put more focus on Howells’s remark that the ending actually makes the novel better rather than worse. In the following, I argue that this ending demonstrates Howells’s consciousness of a cultural discourse prevailing in postbellum America: the romance of reunion.

Given that this novel with an international setting also engages in the cultural and political milieu of post-Civil War America, it is clear that the ending of the story basically follows the narrative pattern of what Nina Silber calls “the romance of reunion,” with “reunion” functioning as in distinction from “reconstruction.” As Silber persuasively argues, this “romance of reunion” is highly problematic both in terms of sexism and racism, because it advocates paternalistic control of the “feminine” South by the “masculine” North and, at the same time, suppresses the suffering of freed people by promoting “the culture of conciliation” between Northern and Southern whites. Reading A Foregone Conclusion with reference to Silber’s conception of postbellum romance of reunion, we can clearly see that this story perfectly fits this narrative from its beginning: the conflict between Ferris as an ironic, detached observer from North and Florida as passionate Southern belle resistant to him; Ferris’s rivalry with Don Ippolito as potential protector of Florida and his refusal to accept him as a member of Northern United States by putting him on the side of rebels; the love between Northern man and Southern girl as a result of defeat of the rebel. All of these plots can be seen as an international variation of the romance of reunion performed in European South. Therefore, their marriage after Ferris’s experience as a Northern soldier is by no means far-fetched or contrived. On the contrary, it perfectly follows the narrative expectations. The ending is a pre-established harmony—a foregone conclusion. When Howells changed the title of the novel from “The Tragedy of Don Ippolito” to the one he took from a line in Othello, a Shakespearean tragedy about the Moors in
Venice, he is severely aware that the story of Ippolito’s tragic death is inextricably interwoven with another ending as its foregone conclusion.

What clearly demonstrates Howells’s consciousness against the romance of reunion is the story after the young lovers’ marriage. In fact, the novel does not end with their happy reunion. Several years later, they revisit Venice for the first time after their marriage. Contrary to his own expectation, Ferris feels released from the memory of dismal past associated with that city: “Ferris had once imagined that the tragedy which had given him his wife would always invest her with the shadow of its sadness, but in this he was mistaken. There is nothing has really so strong a digestion as love . . . and when they got back to Venice, Ferris found that the customs of their joint life exorcised all the dark associations of the place” (FC 169). Feeling released from the tragic past, he freely talks of Ippolito and criticizes him. He delightfully judges the absurdity of Ippolito’s inventions and the dubiousness of his religious skepticism, despising “his whole stock of helplessness, dreamery and unpracticality” (169). He goes so far to suggest that all of the suffering Don Ippolito feels he undergoes is unreal.

This coda to the story marks its departure from the narrative expectations of the romance of reunion particularly in two ways. His last conversation with Florida makes the point.

Mrs. Ferris remained silently troubled. “I don’t know how to answer you, Henry; but I think that you’re judging him narrowly and harshly.”

“Not harshly. I feel very compassionate toward him. But now, even as to what one might consider the most real thing in his life,—his caring for you,—it seems to me there must have been a great share of imagined sentiment in it. It was not a passion; it was a gentle nature’s dream of passion.”

“He didn’t die of a dream,” said his wife. (171)
First, what is foregrounded here through their dialogue is Ferris’s dishonesty. Disguising the fact that he is at least partly responsible for Ippolito’s collapse and death, Ferris is happy to undermine Ippolito’s dream, love, and suffering by pointing that is was just his “imagined sentiment.” Through his self-deceiving performance of forgetting the pain of the past, the coda clearly demonstrates Ferris’s faults and limitations. Secondly, it should also be noted that his dishonesty is made visible for the reader largely through Florida’s critical remarks against him. Far from becoming an obedient wife, she remains independent and critical to the last. In this sense, at its very ending, *A Foregone Conclusion* steps out of the narrative pattern of the romance of reunion.

To put it another way, what happens in the ending is the separation of the narrator from the point-of-view character. Concerning the difference between Howells and Ferris, Kenneth Lynn points out that “while Howells often speaks his own thoughts through Ferris, . . . he views Ferris more objectively and with a far more serious awareness of his faults” (227). The biggest role of the coda in the novel is to highlight this narrative distance. Following the conversation quoted above, the novel ends with the narrator’s comment on Ferris and Don Ippolito:

Thus lapsing more and more into a mere problem, as the years have passed, Don Ippolito has at last ceased to be even the memory of a man with a passionate love and a mortal sorrow. Perhaps this final effect in the mind of him who has realized the happiness of which the poor priest vainly dreamed is not the least tragic phase of the tragedy of Don Ippolito. (*FC* 171)

In this highly ironic remark, the narrator suggests that the real tragedy of Don Ippolito resides in the way Ferris treats him: the fact that his suffering is no longer considered tragic is the tragedy. In so doing, he completely detaches himself from Ferris here by commenting on Ferris’s
commentary on Don Ippolito. In this sense, the effect of adding their revisiting of Venice at the end of the novel is the separation of the narrator from “one of [his] many predecessors in office at Venice” (4), to use the phrase he introduced Ferris at the beginning.

The third-person narrator is complicit with Ferris in othering Don Ippolito. Collaborating with Ferris, he emphasizes Don Ippolito’s lack of masculinity and the absurdity of his inventions. In this context, the narrator’s detachment from Ferris at the end of the novel by revealing his dishonesty in a critical way can be seen as an expression of his self-consciousness about what he had been doing. Being aware that the story he was writing has its “foregone conclusion” as a romance of reunion, the narrator crystallizes his self-reflective critique of the romance itself at the end after depicting the young lovers’ expected marriage. It seems true to me that Howells actually “deepened the shadows by going on, and achieved a completer verity, also” (Selected, 78n2).

In this way, we can understand that Howells’s “first novel” is made conceivable only through its both dependence on and departure from the romance of reunion. On the one hand, Howells relies on the plot of the romance of reunion to establish “high and strong contrasts” requisite for his conception of the “dramatic realism” as delineated in the Aldrich review we discussed, especially the geographic and thematic contrasts between the Northern and the Southern United States as well as between Europe and America. On the other hand, Howells’s conception of the “novel” realized in A Foregone Conclusion also resides in its metafictional and self-reflective mode of critique, which disrupts the romance of reunion. In this sense, A Foregone Conclusion became his “first novel” by representing the novelizing process of the romance.
2. The Nationwide Accumulation of Localism and the Return of Inter-sectional Romance in *A Modern Instance*

*A Modern Instance* has two main plots: the story of a failed marriage and the tale of the career of a city journalist. When he originally came up with the idea of this novel under the working title of *The New Medea* in 1876, Howells conceived of it as a divorce story, in which the hero was a country school teacher. At a certain point in his writing, however, he changed the protagonist’s profession into a journalist. In September 1881, he wrote to Charles Dudley Warner: “I’m making the hero of my divorce story a newspaper man. Why has no one struck journalism before?” (*Selected*, 295). As a result of this change, the story of modern journalism developed into one of the central themes in the novel. Critics have picked one of these two themes as the main focus of their readings of this novel. Widely recognized as “the first treatment of divorce by canonical author” (Freeman 66), this novel has galvanized critical discussions on various issues explored through the story of failed marriage. On the other hand, Amy Kaplan and others have called critical attention to the thematic importance of the newspaper business in this story. For instance, in her now-classic account of realism as a response to the development of mass culture, Kaplan examines how Bartley Hubbard can be read as Howells’s figure for “a demonic realist” (27) and argues that Howells’s “need to punish and thereby dissociate himself from Hubbard speaks to the uncomfortable resemblance between his theory of realism and Hubbard’s practice” (33–34).

With these somewhat overlapping but basically distinct threads of critical discussions in mind, I examine how the question of reunification of nation serves as the intersection of these two intertwined narratives. Divorce in this story is used as trope of certain “cultural divorce” (Eschholz 93). Although it is true that this cultural divorce is about “the split between the new
and the old America” (Eschholz 92), it should also be noted that the split was largely experienced through the Civil War, “the divorce of the nation itself” (Freeman 65). As my reading of *A Foregone Conclusion* has suggested, Howells was one of “many writers, historians, artists [who] sought still more actively to create an American tradition, indicative of a desire to reunite the nation by giving it a national character” (Freeman 65). By situating Howells’s divorce story in this context, I argue that *A Modern Instance* can be read as Howells’s attempt to seek an alternative to the cultural discourse of the romance of reunion.

Howells addresses the question of nation also through the story of journalism in the Gilded Age. Talking of his ideal newspaper and the nature of journalism, Bartley articulates his plan to give his newspaper a national scope. According to him, what seizes the national readership is a nationwide accumulation of localism, the conception which was not available for his fellow old-school journalists. At the same time, as an avid consumer of beer, Bartley enjoys various local tastes precisely by engaging in national network of distribution. Tasting a variety of local beers from distant parts of the country, he feels national, experiencing nationwide accumulation of localism. The presidential election of 1876 marks the climax of both of these two threads of the story. The centennial crisis leads to the crisis of Bartley’s marriage as well as his journalism. I will examine the ways Howells depicts the end of Reconstruction in parallel with the end of his marital life and his career as an emerging journalist. Then, this chapter concludes by discussing the controversial ending of this novel, focusing particularly on what Howells suggests in finishing the novel not by divorce or by Bartley’s death, but instead with an open question regarding Marcia’s remarriage with Ben Halleck.
2-1. To Contain Marcia: The Othered Southernness of Howells’s American Girls

Florida Vervain is not the only Howellsian heroine who is associated with the image of South. In fact, a lot of American girls in Howells’s early fiction embodies Southernness, literally or figuratively. Kitty Ellison, the innocent heroine in *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873) and the first American girl made by Howells, was born in Illinois, but her family was originally from West Virginia. She is characterized in close connection with the political conflict concerning the American South (the Border War between Northern and Southern United States), with particular emphasis on the contrast between her father’s proslavery ideology and her uncle’s abolitionism. Although the story of *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879) starts off with its heroine’s departure from “a farm-house on the skirts of a village in the hills of Northern Massachusetts” (1) to Venice, Lydia Blood is invested with the image of South by people around her.

---

13 She became an orphan after her father was “shot by the Missourians” in Kansas. Her father first went there “to publish a proslavery paper.” “But when he found out what the Border Ruffians really were,” continues Kitty, “he turned against them. He used to be very bitter about my uncle’s having become an Abolitionist; they had had a quarrel about it; but father wrote to him from Kansas, and they made it up; and before father died he was able to tell mother that we were to go to uncle’s. But mother was sick then, and she only lived a month after her” (235–36). Raised under the strong influence of her uncle’s abolitionism, she grew up to have “her childish apprehension” of Boston “as very little less holy than Jerusalem, and as the home of all the good and great people outside of Palestine” (6). Kitty explains this background when Miles Arbuton, the sophisticated and snobbish Bostonian, makes the marriage proposal to her. She tells the story of her family in order to let him know that her life is “very, very different from” his “in many things” (234).

14 For example, her suitor Staniford constantly sees Southernness in her: “Every novelist runs a blonde heroine; I wonder why. This girl has the clear Southern pallor; she’s of the olive hue; and her eyes are black as sloes” (68). Depicted as a type different from “the blond type in fiction” (68), she is told by an Italian girl that she “look[s] Spanish” (264). When Staniford talks with his friend about her possible first name, he fancies that it is “Lurella,” a name which seems very exotic to those who he calls “we cultivated Yankees” (59). Even after he befriends Lydia on the ship and comes to know that she is actually from Massachusetts, he still tells her: “I’m sure that in the life before this you were of the South somewhere. . . . You have the color and the light of the South” (161). Thus, their marriage and new life in a ranch Staniford bought in California in
Marcia Gaylord, the heroine of *A Modern Instance*, can be also situated in line with Howells’s “Southern” American girls. At the beginning of *A Modern Instance*, Howells presents “for the first time an extended study of his heroine in her native setting” (Eakin 104). Instead of presenting Marcia’s figure as an ideal New England type of heroine, however, the narrator calls attention to a certain sort of exoticism and Southernness in her. Characterized by “the Roman pride of her profile” (3) somewhat out of place in her native village in Maine, she eventually becomes “a Roman patrician in an avatar of Boston domesticity” (156). Also, the narrator suggests that she would be southernizing even more in the future: she would “be all the more southern in her type for the paling of that northern color in her cheeks,” for “her beauty was of the kind that coming years would only ripen and enrich” (3). Clara Kingsbury, a genteel Boston lady, also perceives some exoticism in her and tells her that she looks like “a Roman matron” (158). As Florida’s “passionate nature” is inscribed in her southern “tropical name” (*FC* 14), Marcia’s character as passionate, jealous girl, which scholars have examined in various ways (Cady 214; Lynn 258–60; Crowley, *Black* 131–32), is presented in association with her “Roman profile” located in New England settings.

Marcia’s exotic otherness is further foregrounded through “her paganism” (Habegger, *Gender* 90) in this story. Under the strong influence of her deistic and agnostic father (*MI* 23), she is unchristened and does not belong to any particular church. Although she wants get her daughter christened, she is not interested in the creed of the church at all. She declares that she “didn’t care what she believed” (182). Her wish is just to let her daughter “belong to the church where most of the good people went” (179). Thus, as Alfred Habegger points out, Marcia

the end (319) shows that this is a romance of reunion of a Yankee man and a Southern belle after their split in context of the postbellum westward expansion of the reconciled America.
represents “a modern post-Christian pagan” (Gender 89) and “she is to a great extent the product of a decayed Christian culture” (90). It should be emphasized here that her paganism is also presented through vocabularies about the South. Shocked by Marcia’s ignorance about Christianity, the Calvinistic Mrs. Halleck laments to her son: “I couldn’t have believed . . . that there was any person in a Christian land, except among the very lowest, that seemed to understand so little about the Christian religion, or any scheme of salvation. Really, she talked to me like a pagan. She sat there much better dressed and better educated than I was; but I felt like a missionary talking to South Sea Islander” (184). In this way, although she is a type of American girl who has a distinctive New England origin, she figuratively embodies the image of the South just as her predecessors do.

Thus, the plot of A Modern Instance centers around the destiny of “its barely civilized heroine, driven by primitive compulsions” (Goodman and Dawson 235) who allegorizes the U.S. South facing a divorce crisis. Depicting Bartley Hubbard and Ben Halleck—“Bartley’s double” (Habegger, Gender 96)—as two competing possible partners of Marcia, this postbellum novel engages in what Paul Giles calls “a program of unification that sought not only to reconstruct the South but also to integrate the United States within a new nationalist framework” (111). The following section examines what kind of nationalist frameworks Bartley embodies in this novel.

2-2. Bartley’s Cosmopolitan Nationalism: The Nationwide Accumulation of Local Taste

A Modern Instance addresses the question of new nationalist frameworks not only through the failed marriage of the Hubbards but also through the story of modern journalism. In her highly influential reading of this novel, Kaplan demonstrates that “the newspaper contributes to the breakdown of social order” through “a violation of the boundaries between the public and
the private” (32), which both resembles and threatens Howells’s conception of realism. Taking a
cue from Kaplan’s insightful observation, I examine how this novel highlights the interrelation
between the local and the national both through Bartley’s production of newspaper and his
consumption of beer.

Sometime after his salaried employment and the birth of his daughter, Bartley discusses
the role of the newspaper with Ricker. In contrast to Hubbard, who regards the newspaper as a
form of “private enterprise,” Ricker considers it “a public enterprise, with certain distinct duties
to the public.” He states: “It’s sacredly bound not to do anything to deprave or debauch its
readers; and it’s sacredly bound not to mislead or betray them, not merely as to questions of
morals and politics, but as to questions of what we may lump as ‘advertising’” (MI 190). In this
way, as Amy Kaplan writes, “[i]mplicit in Ricker’s notion of the truthfulness of the press is a
conception of the public as a polis, a group of citizens bound by shared political and ethical
concerns” (28). But precisely because of his conception of the public as a polis, Ricker’s notion
of newspaper as a form of public enterprise is predicated on logic of exclusion, which is best
revealed in his assumption about the issue of race. Ricker says:

I had been fancying that the vice of our journalism was its intense localism. I have
doubted a good while whether a drunken Irishman who breaks his wife’s head, or
a child who falls into a tub of hot water, has really established a claim on the
public interest. Why should I be told by telegraph how three negroes died on the
gallows in North Carolina? . . . Why should my newspaper give a succession of
shocks to my nervous system, as I pass from column to column, and poultice me
between shocks with the nastiness of a distant or local scandal? (MI 192)
It is striking that his examples of “the nastiness of distant or local scandal” are mostly related to racial and ethnic minorities. The painful incidents of “a drunken Irishman” and “three negroes” are left outside of “certain distinct duties to the public” which his ideal newspaper is based on. Put it differently, he does not criticize “the nastiness of distant or local scandal” as such; what is “nasty” for him is being constantly informed of the fate of racial others. In this sense, what he calls the “intense localism” is an essentially racialized concept. His conception of newspaper as a form of public enterprise is made possible by exclusion of those who should not constitute “the public.”

Being a thoroughly private enterprise, by contrast, Hubbard’s conception of newspaper is characterized by its intense localism on one hand and its expansive inclusiveness on the other. Talking about his dream of “a thorough newspaper that every class of people must have it,” he makes a list of the content of the newspaper. It includes “best reports of every local accident and crime,” “first-class non-partisan reports of local political affairs,” and reports of “the local religious world” (190). Thus, he conceives of a city as totality, or a culturally and politically unified entity, which a newspaper must represent in whole. Then he continues: “When I’d got my local ground perfectly covered, I’d begin to ramify. Every fellow that could spell, in any part of the country, should understand that, if he sent me an account of a suicide, or an elopement, or a murder, or an accident, he should be well paid for it; and I’d rise on the same scale through all the departments” until “people of every kind and degree would have to say . . . we can’t get along without it” (191).

His dream of nationwide accumulation of localism is represented not only in his conception of newspaper but also in the way he consumes beer. Howells portrays him as an avid
consumer of beer as well as a prolific newspaper writer. When Bartley starts a habit of having beer with meals, he tries various brands of local beers:

He was rather particular about his beer, which he had sent in by the gross,—it came cheaper that way; after trying both the Cincinnati and the Milwaukee lagers, and making a cursory test of the Boston brand, he had settled down upon the American Tivoli; it was cheap, and you could drink a couple of bottles without feeling it. (185)

In order to elucidate the significance of this passage in present discussion, it is necessary to refer to the historical condition which makes it possible for Bartley to choose the beer of his preference in this way. “In the antebellum period,” writes Martin Stack in his paper on the history of America’s brewing industry, “brewing was a relatively unimportant affair”: in the years following the Civil War, “it grew into a leading national manufacturing industry” (437). This growth was propelled by the emergence of “national breweries that were trying to combine mass production with national distribution” (436). Formerly confined to local market, the brewing industry had had “relatively little competition: the consumer simply was not offered so many choices” as another scholar on this industry states (Baron 257). But “the development of a national web of railroads” and “the great technological advances within the brewing industry” such as the refrigerated freight cars “made it feasible for individual brewers to look for customers farther afield,” and as a result, “the national brewer—a new concept in the industry” emerged (259).

This history helps us to see that Bartley’s way of consumption of beer is made possible by the presence of “a broad, national network” of distribution (Stack 435). Trying the beers from distant parts of the country makes him feel that he is living in “the era of national distribution”
(Baron 259); buying them “by the gross” makes him a consumer of mass-production. Bartley feels national through the taste of a variety of local beers from distant parts of the country—another way of experiencing nationwide accumulation of localism. Furthermore, that fact he finally “settled down upon the American Tivoli” is also important in two ways. First, it is the only one among his choices which has no particular name of place, whereas all the other brands are identified with a certain locality of the side of production. This detachment from the name of place was a characteristic of beers produced by national breweries, which was new at that time (Baron 261). Rather than attaching itself to a particular place, it is named “American” Tivoli, emphasizing its “national” quality. Secondly, made by a company on the west side of Colorado Territory, the American Tivoli is from the most distant and westernmost among Bartley’s choices. Just as the nation itself, his consumption of beer expands further west. In this way, the beer in this story functions as another significant locus on which Howells stages the nationalizing force of the accumulation of localism.

The connection between Bartley’s consumption of beer and his production of newspaper is consolidated by the fact that Bartley and Ricker discuss the effects of the newspaper to the reader in terms of gustatory taste. Bartley contends that newspaper reports must have “spice,” because that is what the public wants to taste. And when the readers get “sick of spice” just as Ricker does, suggests Bartley, what his newspaper should do then is just serving another flavor, “cater[ing] to them with milk-toast” (192).

Given this connection, it seems natural that Howells portrays Bartley’s getting fat both as a result of his habitual beer drinking and as a symbol of his immoral success as a vulgar newspaperman. Bartley is constantly getting fatter by consuming local taste of the beers distributed nationwide, just as his ideal newspaper is expanding to “any part of the country,”
after getting his “local ground perfectly covered.” At the height of his social and economic success, he tells Ricker: “You’re behind the times, Ricker. . . . I began to get fat six months ago. I don’t wonder the Chronicle Abstract is running down on your hands. Come round and try my Tivoli on Sunday. That's what gives a man girth, my boy” (220). Calling one of the nationally distributed beers “his” own possession, Bartley feels national just as his ideal newspaper should make the reader feel.

Jessica Berman points out that in the late nineteenth century “[t]he cosmopolitan has become a subspecies of the national, or, at best, a way of enlarging its scope, rather than a threat to its very existence.” Rather, “when attached to post-Civil-War American culture,” cosmopolitanism “simply becomes a cover for the expansion of American national and commercial interests” (38). The modern conception of journalism embodied by Bartley’s ideal newspaper is both cosmopolitan and nationalist in this sense. While overcoming the exclusivity of Ricker’s genteel journalism and getting a national scope through its cosmopolitan ideal of inclusion, it is highly complicit with rapacious expansionism, offering no challenge to it. Bartley’s newspaper and beer make him a soul-nation allegory of “a new nationalist framework” emerged in the Gilded Age.

But Bartley’s dream is not exactly Howells’s dream. Howells expresses his critical consciousness toward Bartley through Ricker’s response to him: “as he looked at Bartley’s back, he had his misgivings; it struck him as the back of a degenerate man, and that increasing bulk seemed not to represent an increase of wholesome substance, but a corky, buoyant tissue, materially responsive to some sort of moral dry-rot” (MI 220). Howells does not denounce the idea of expansion as such. By differentiating the growth of “wholesome substance” from unhealthy fat, he questions Bartley’s rapacious way of expansion. In this sense, as Olov
Fryckstedt states, “Bartley’s degeneration first manifests itself in a great fancy for light beer . . . His beer-drinking seems intended to underline his growing self-indulgence and increasing laxness” (245–46). Bartley’s habitual overconsumption of beer becomes an index of his nationwide accumulation of localism and of its limitation and thus foreshadows his eventual ruin, which is realized through the centennial crisis of the nation.

2-3. The Return of the Unreconstructed South: Centennial Crisis as the Divorce Crisis

The presidential election of 1876 marks the climax of both of the two storylines we have examined. The centennial crisis leads to the crisis of Bartley’s marriage as well as his journalism. It leads to the separation of Bartley and Marcia at the same time it informs the failure of Bartley’s “practice of independent journalism” (MI 239) by revealing what is left out from his all-encompassing private enterprise: the affairs of State. This section examines how this historical event conflates the two central themes of the novel we have discussed. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate the ways Howells stages the Reconstruction South as “the site of irresolvable collision between national ideals and national reality” (Greeson 255).

The novel situates the presidential election of 1876 as the decisive event of Bartley’s ruin. As one of the most disputed elections in the nineteenth century, which resulted in the compromise of 1877 and the end of Reconstruction, the centennial election in this novel foregrounds Bartley’s detachment and helplessness. During the election campaign in the summer, as the assistant editor of a Boston magazine, he keeps on “the practice of independent journalism”: “To hold a course of strict impartiality, and yet come out on the winning side was a theory of independent journalism which Bartley illustrated with cynical enjoyment. He developed into something rather artistic the gift which he had always shown in his newspaper
work for ironical persiflage” (*MI* 238). Even when the Election Day was approaching and “the feverish excitement spread its contagion through the whole population,” it still “did not affect Bartley. He had cared nothing about the canvass from the beginning having an equal contempt for the bloody shirt of the Republicans and the reform pretensions of the Democrats. The only thing that he took an interest in was the betting.” (246). In other words, he is interested in the national political event in the public sphere only insofar as it is related to his immediate private concern. Hubbard enjoys national politics as a spectacle and object of speculation, transforming it into a private enterprise. Just as he consumes the bottles of beer privately at home, Bartley makes the affairs of State his own private entertainment.

In this way, the presidential election reveals the limitations of Bartley’s practice of journalism. The crucial risk of his idea of nationwide accumulation of localism is depoliticization. Unlike Ricker, he does not exclude the fate of “three negroes died on the gallows in North Carolina” from his newspaper. But at the same time, his ideal newspaper cannot connect their fate with the politics of Reconstruction, because his national concern is limited just to an extension or a total sum of his interest in tasting and catering a variety of local tastes: he cannot configure the United States as a politically unified entity. Thus, on another level, Hubbard’s newspaper is also a form predicated on the logic of exclusion. By inquiring into the question of newspaper as a form, *A Modern Instance* meditates on the issue of inclusion and exclusion. If Howells’s realism is in part a project “to construct a public sphere” as Kaplan argues (25), both Ricker’s and Hubbard’s newspapers turns out to be unsatisfactory. Ricker’s conception of “the public” is highly exclusive; despite its inclusion of “every class of people,” Hubbard’s depoliticized newspaper cannot provide any channel to connect private and public concerns. The nationwide accumulation of localism cannot include the affair of State.
Depoliticization is not presented as Bartley’s personal problem but as a problem of the “modern conception” held especially by the new generation at that time. In fact, his cynical detachment from the national political body is still not unsupported by the taste of the public. Even in his involvement in the election bets, Bartley’s wager has a strong influence: “he laid his wagers with so much apparent science and sagacity that he had a certain following of young men who bet as Hubbard did. Hubbard, they believed, had a long head” (247). And he did have a long head indeed, because Tilden was winning at least in the popular result of the election. Bartley’s “true newspaper instinct” is still at work, and he remains popular.

At the same time, however, it is also true that Bartley has a strong anxiety about his own sense of detachment from national politics. Now being unemployed and independent once again, he often regrets what he has done and wishes he could start over again. At one point, he feels so depressed as to think about death: “I wish I was dead—or some one” (244). Given his anxiety and depression during the election campaign, his betting can be better understood as his performative gesture. His need to be absorbed in betting and thereby have an interest in and get connected with the election speaks to his anxiety about the powerlessness of his journalism at national level and his feeling of alienation from it. This anxiety of powerlessness and alienation makes him increasingly rely on the private enjoyment of beer. At the night of the Election Day, he “went down into the cellar for some beer. He could not have slept without that” (248). Consuming the beer in his private sphere becomes a means of escape from his public anxiety.

Tellingly, the end of reconstruction coincides with the end of Bartley’s marital life with the “Southern” woman: his fear of ruin is realized not only in the result of the election but also in the private level of his life with Marcia. Worth noting here is that Bartley experiences the breakup with Marcia for the second time. A couple of years ago, back in Equity, he had to break
his engagement with Marcia because of the scandal caused by his flirtation with his coworker Hannah Morrison (57). He reconciled with Marcia after a while and they eloped to Boston as a married couple. In this respect, being a cultural trope of postbellum America, they started their marital life as a romance of reconciliation after split. Then, the failure of their marriage is portrayed as the failure of reconciliation. Howells narrates the story of their divorce as a consequence of the return of the repressed. Accidentally meeting Hannah on the street at the very day he loses the bet, Marcia gets possessed with jealousy once again and it ends up in the split of the couple (249-51). Hannah Morrison, who has the inverse initials of Marcia Hubbard and is the reminder of their first split, still haunts Bartley and returns to reanimate Marcia’s repressed “jealous temper” (250) which actualizes his fear of ruin.

Considering this point, we can understand Howells’s intention of putting the defining moment of their breakup in the context of the election of 1876. By intertwining the election with the divorce plot, Howells undercuts the idea of celebrating the centennial anniversary and the end of Reconstruction as a happy reconciliation of nation. In this sense, A Modern Instance can be read as a “countercentennial novel,” to borrow the phrase which Alfred Habegger uses to describe The Portrait of a Lady (Henry 180). At the same time, by foregrounding the limitation of a self-made man’s ideal of nationwide accumulation of local taste, Howells also counters cosmopolitanism’s complicity with American expansionism emerging at that time.

Bartley’s new nationalist framework is largely in accord with Howells’s way of praising the realism of local color fiction as “our decentralized literature” whose “chief value is its honesty, its fidelity to our decentralized life” (Literature 177). Nancy Glazener points out that local color fiction, aligned with “realism’s emphasis on the empirical observation of culture,” “responded especially astutely to the post-Civil War desire for cultural renovation” by replacing
“the sectional opposition between North and South” with “a peaceful array of regions whose distinctive histories and ways of life could be sampled without controversy” (“The Novel” 347). Dramatizing the rise and fall of Bartley as a representative journalist of the era, Howells articulates his ambivalence about realism’s complicity with this replacement of the sectional opposition. As I show in the next section, the story of Ben Halleck also speaks to Howells’s ambivalence.

2-4. Ben’s Inner War and Marcia’s Incomplete Remarriage

Returning from Europe at the very middle of the novel, Ben Halleck serves as a judgmental observer of Bartley’s social success. Especially after Bartley’s ruin, Ben has a protagonist-like presence and brings Marcia and her daughter Flavia to Indiana for attending the divorce court as defendants. This section examines the role of Ben after Bartley’s disappearance and discuss the controversial ending of this novel, focusing particularly on what Howells suggests in finishing the novel not by divorce or by Bartley’s death, but instead with an open question regarding Marcia’s remarriage with Ben, the Boston-born expatriate.15

The presidential election in this novel is also related closely to Ben Halleck’s story, for he leaves Boston on the day after Bartley’s disappearance. Like Bartley, Ben does not seem really interested in the presidential election, either. Prolonging his summer vacation “beyond the end of

15 With all their differences in wealth, family background, physical appearance, and personality, Bartley and Halleck have a lot of striking similarities. First of all, their names have same initials. This coincidence eventually results in the misdelivery of a newspaper which includes an advertisement of the divorce suit between Bartley and Marcia. This episode shows that Howells intentionally employs similar names and calls the reader’s attention to that fact. They went to the same college together, originally seeking a career in law as their ideal profession after graduation. Furthermore, neither of them belongs to any particular church. In this way, it seems clear that Ben is portrayed as “Bartley’s double” (Habegger, Gender 96).
October” (252), he “was coming home to vote,” according to Marcia’s explanation (248). But what interests him at that time was not so much the presidential election as another project he had conceived of: “[h]e spoke of an interesting man whom he had met at the mountain resort where he was staying; a Spanish-American, attached to one of the Legations at Washington, who had a scheme for Americanizing popular education in his own country” (252). Then, against his family’s and friends’ expectation, he gives up his prospective careers in law or leather industry to leave for South America to start over again. Thus, as a consequence of the presidential election, both Ben and Bartley leave Boston and take expansionalist moves. As Bartley “follows the course of empire westward” (Eakin 116), Ben also participates in the historical trajectory of the United States through the Americanization of the global South.

Given the context of the present discussion, Ben’s southward migration is interesting in two ways. First, it reminds us of the southernness invested in Marcia. While his migration is partly for his health, it is also for him to go away from Marcia and give up his love for her. But his mother presumes he would go South America for “a missionary work,” though Ben does not admit it (253). As I have noted before, Mrs. Halleck is shocked by Marcia’s ignorance about Christianity and states that when she talks to Marcia, she feels “like a missionary talking to South Sea Islander” (184). Her comment on Ben’s cause suggests that he cannot detach himself from the Howellsian American girl invested with the image of south. Second, he often refers to his project through vocabularies about the war. On his departure, for example, he talks to his friend and lawyer Atherton: “I know I’m running away because I’m beaten, but no other man can know the battle I’ve fought” (266). When he comes back two years later, once again to Atherton, he says: “And here I am. The fight is over, and that’s end of it. I’m beaten” (287). In this way, his experience in South America is constantly associated with his inner struggle and sense of
defeat. It is as if he goes to the war and loses it. If the divorce plot in this novel is a figurative index of the Civil War as the divorce of the nation, then the Americanization of the global South is the lost cause of Ben’s inner war.

The divorce court in the town of Tecumseh, Indiana, is also characterized by its lurking southernness. While the town was “certainly very much more like a New England village” as Ben had expected, it “wore a more careless and unscrupulous air than the true New England village; the South had touched it, and here and there it showed a wavering line of fence and a faltering conscientiousness in its paint” (316). What makes the Western town distinct from New England village is its southernness. In the court scene, the narrator calls attention to the judge’s accent “which is the gift of the South to some parts of the West” (320). In this way, Ben goes “South” once again to witness the divorce of the “Southern” woman whom he has long been caring for.

Thus, as Ben takes over the role of Bartley toward the end of the novel, the narrative structure of an inter-sectional romance comes back to the surface. The possibility of the romance of reunion between a Boston-born male intellectual and a southerized American woman, however, remains indeterminate to the end. The fact that Howells finishes this novel by keeping this question open rather than concluding it with their happy marriage demonstrates his critique of the culture of reconciliation. At the same time, by letting Ben resist Atherton, whose moralizing voice represents a conservative anti-divorce ideology, this novel “reveal[s] that Atherton’s apparently objective codes of value are really only conventional labelling systems,” as Richard Brodhead states (School 100). In his letter to Atherton at the end of the novel, Ben asks: “She is free, now; but am I free? Am I not rather bound by the past to perpetual silence?” (MI 329). His inner war is not over yet.
The double plot of Bartley and Ben in *A Modern Instance* dramatizes two different modes of incorporation of America. Rather than involving himself in the sectional opposition between North and South, Bartley establishes a new framework for nationalization of his newspaper by way of accumulating as many different varieties of local and distant reports as possible. By contrast, Ben sticks to the possibility of the inter-sectional romance of national reunion with his old love. The Reconstruction South embodied in the figure of Marcia resists both of their strategies of containment. Dramatizing Bartley’s and Ben’s stories in an intertwined plot, *A Modern Instance* demonstrates Howells’s ambivalence toward Bartley’s new nationalist framework.

**Conclusion**

Howells’s development as a literary author can be seen in the way he uses the romance of reunion. In *A Foregone Conclusion*, the whole plot is predicated on the inter-sectional romance between North and South in a transatlantic context. The narrator’s self-reflective critique of Ferris toward the end of the novel is made barely possible through the metafictional separation of the narrator from the point-of-view character. In *A Modern Instance*, however, Howells cultivates a sort of double vision. By juxtaposing Bartley’s nationwide accumulation of localism and Ben’s romance of reunion and keeping the tension between them, this novel succeeds to imaginatively create a soul-nation allegory of postbellum America in the figure of a self-made man of modern journalism, without abandoning its self-critical capacity. In this sense, the

---

16 I agree with Jennifer Travis’s observation that “Howells seems to be more sympathetic to Bartley (he admits that Bartley was to some extent a self-portrait) than critics have previously thought” (72).
development of Howells’s “South-mediated realism” is measured by its gradual departure from the romance of reunion in his attempts at managing the Great American Novel.
Chapter Four

_The Portrait of a Lady as the Novel about the Great American Novel_

As a contemporary of John De Forest, Henry James was one of those haunted by the dream of the Great American Novel. Even though it has become the accepted view among literary critics, including Lawrence Buell, that “James was far more interested in Anglo-European fiction than American” (“Theories” 333), this acknowledged “transatlantic” novelist of “international theme” nonetheless was engaged in the American national literary project of his period. This chapter argues that while _The Portrait of a Lady_ (1881) is a Jamesian masterpiece of international theme, it is actually the culmination of postbellum writers’ attempts to write the Great American Novel precisely because it is a novel _about_ the Great American Novel.

The following discussion consists of two parts, each devoted to analysis of _Portrait_. I divide my discussion according to the approaches to the text as well as the characters discussed. The first part offers a geographical reading and situates _Portrait_ in the historical context of the centennial celebration and the end of Reconstruction through investigating Gilbert Osmond’s enigmatic identity and his place of origin. The second half shifts more to character analysis with special focus on the role of Ralph Touchett, questions of gender, and the generic template of the bildungsroman. What binds these sections is the novel’s protagonist, Isabel Archer. Reading her life in relation to the two male characters closest to her, I hope to give my full interpretation of one of the most brilliant heroines in American literature. I will show how her seemingly unaccountable decision to return to Rome at the end of the novel is a vigorous critique of the idea of the Great American Novel from within. By situating Isabel in-between reunion and divide and
depicting her decision as a return to Ralph rather than to Osmond, James uncovers and revises the twin ideological cores embedded in the Great American Novel: the romance of reunion and the soul-nation allegory.

1. Where is Gilbert Osmond from? The Portrait of a Lady and Reconstruction

The first half of this chapter reads *The Portrait of a Lady* by examining the hidden origins of Gilbert Osmond. Focusing particularly on the textual variants between the 1882 edition and the 1907 New York edition, I argue that while constantly regarded as a representative international novel with a European setting, this novel also informs James’s engagement with domestic context of postbellum America. To show that the question of Osmond’s “native place” is by no means a trifling detail, Section 1-1 examines how the novel depicts regional identities and how it foregrounds the mystery about Osmond’s birthplace both to people around him and to the reader. Section 1-2 offers a close reading of the two different versions of the text regarding Osmond’s mother and argues that at least before the revision in the New York edition, Gilbert Osmond is a son of a Southerner. Drawing on the historical and cultural discourse of the centennial and the end of Reconstruction, Section 1-3 situates *The Portrait of a Lady* in the context of the reunion of the nation. As a conclusion, Section 1-4 historicizes the meaning of Osmond’s southernness as well as Isabel’s return to Rome.

1-1. Regional Identities and the Mystery of Osmond’s “Native Place”

Whereas it has traditionally been regarded as one of James’s major fictions of the international theme, almost all the characters in *The Portrait of a Lady* are Americans except the British aristocrat Lord Warburton. In addition to the protagonist Isabel Archer, her cousin Ralph
Touchett, and her frustrated suitor Caspar Goodwood, those who have constantly been associated with “European” values of tradition, experience, and convention—Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond—are also Americans coming to Europe at some point in the past. In this respect, the story hinges on the difference within Americans living in European countries as well as on the sharp contrasts between Europe and America, or the Old World and the New World: its focus is more about how different types of American characters manage their lives in Europe. As a result, their stories reveal not only international conflicts but also intranational, regional ones.17

James often describes the personalities of the main characters by referring to their places of origin and, in so doing, foregrounds their regional identities. For instance, the narrator as well as other characters frequently mention Isabel’s birthplace: she is recognized as “this spontaneous young woman from Albany” (PL 58), “this simple young lady from Albany” (98), or “the frivolous young woman from Albany” (308). Her identity is intimately interwoven with regional characteristics, making her native place a part of her epithets. The narrator’s statement that Isabel “was not a daughter of the Puritans, but for all that she believed in such a thing as purity” relates her character in terms of geographical proximity of Albany to New England (416). Her “spontaneous,” “simple,” and “frivolous” personality is something close to yet distinct from morally strict tradition of New England puritanism, just as Albany is near New England but does not belong to it. Although it is often assumed that Isabel is a Jamesian type of “American girl,”

17 In terms of mapping of the characters, then, The Portrait of a Lady is largely different from James’s former novels of international theme such as The American. The Bellegardes, the aristocratic villains of The American, is a French family, and their characterizations are sharply contrasted with Christopher Newman’s as an energetic and vulgar American entrepreneur. As a result, The American foregrounds a highly melodramatic bipolar structure of the clash between the New World and Old World much more than The Portrait does. In this way, James’s treatment of his international theme is by no means a monolithic one.
her identity is charged with a more geographically specific locality of the non-New England
Northeast (along with Daisy Miller of Schenectady).

The inner character of the other characters is also situated in relation to their regionally
specified identities. The characterization of Caspar Goodwood as Isabel’s determined and tireless
suitor resonates his being a Bostonian. The narrator emphasizes this point by making epithets
such as “a straight young man from Boston” (32) and “a perpendicular Bostonian” (476) for him.
Mr. Touchett, Isabel’s uncle who has lived in England for a long time, is also characterized in
connection with his American place of origin: his “almost rustic simplicity” (5) is among “many
characteristics” which “he had retained . . . of Rutland, Vermont,” which is distinct from “the
more luxuriant parts of New England” (35) such as Boston area. Here again, the contrast
between characters echoes a certain regional contrast.

Although we never know the birthplace of Isabel’s friend Henrietta Stackpole, she all the
time plays a role of “a newspaper-correspondent” (83) or a “newspaper-woman” (376) working
for “the New York Interviewer” (110). Therefore, her identity in the novel is always associated
with the place of publication and with the image of New York City in the Gilded Age. Ralph
Touchett, who moved to England in his childhood and got his education on both sides of the
Atlantic, has no particular connection with one single place. Detached from any specific
geographical affiliation, he is “what is called a cosmopolitan” (81) as Isabel suggests.
Nevertheless, since his whole life history is explained in detail, there is nothing left unclear
concerning his background.

Then, how about Madame Merle? A thoroughly Europeanized expatriate, she apparently
“seems to embody none of the characteristics associated with her native land” (Sanner 108). Still,
James carefully puts significant information of her place of origin and uses it to characterize her.
In her first appearance in the novel, she says to Isabel: “I was born under the shadow of the national banner. . . I came to the world in the Brooklyn-navy yard. My father was a high officer in the United States navy” (PL 167-68). Isabel, who “would never have supposed that she had been born in Brooklyn,” was surprised because “the air of distinction, possessed by Madame Merle in so eminent a degree, was inconsistent with such a birth” (168). Later, referring once again to her birth, the narrator states that “[s]he was one of the small ones of the earth; she had not been born to honours” (183). Contrary to Isabel’s fancy that she might be “a German of rank, countess, a princess” (168), Madame Merle’s birth is far from aristocratic. Her identity as a highly sophisticated, Europeanized expatriate resides in the gap between her impression and her place of origin. In other words, she is characterized by her struggle to erase the trait of her birth and the extent to which she achieved it. In this paradoxical way, her character is associated with a very specific regional identity. She is a “brilliant fugitive from Brooklyn” (183), as the narrator calls her.

When compared with these other characters, Gilbert Osmond occupies an exceptional position in the novel. He is the only character whose American background is never fully explained. In fact, the lack of information about his history—his being a person from nowhere—is no doubt one of the reasons why they disapprove of Isabel’s marriage to him. Ralph expresses his disgust and distrust toward Osmond by attributing it to his obscurity: “Who is he—what is he? . . . I don’t know his antecedents, his family, his origin. For all I know, he may be a prince in disguise” (239). When Goodwood comes to Rome to propose to Isabel for the third time, Isabel tells him that she has already been engaged to Osmond. Then Goodwood questions Osmond’s identity.

“Where does he come from?” he went on.
“From nowhere. He has spent most of his life in Italy.”

“You said in your letter that he was an American. Hasn’t he a native place?”

“Yes, but he has forgotten it. He left it as a small boy.” (318)

In this conversation, the question of Osmond’s identity is rephrased and foregrounded as the mystery about his place of origin. His being “an American” is not enough for Goodwood to understand him. Instead, what he demands is the information of Osmond’s “native place.”

Isabel’s explanation is by no means satisfactory. Rather, it further deepens his suspicion. Given that James frames region as a defining trait for each of his characters, Osmond is exceptional. Osmond’s “native place” remains a mystery in terms of the novel’s form and content.

1-2. Gilbert Osmond, the Son of Southerner

Rather than just a matter of his characterization as an enigmatic person, the mystery of Osmond’s place of origin is one of the central issues both for Isabel’s marriage plot and the narration of the novel. The only clues to Osmond’s American background are descriptions of his mother; three chapters include direct references to her. According to Madame Merle, Osmond’s father had “died long before,” and Mrs. Osmond “had brought her children to Italy after her husband’s death”; then after she raised her two children (Gilbert and Amy) by herself, she “died three years after the Countess’s marriage” (269). She was known as a “woman of letters” and “poetess” (433), writing “descriptive poems” and “correspond[ing] on Italian subjects with the English weekly journals” (269). Madame Merle does not offer positive assessment about her and says that “[she] had pretentions to ‘culture’” (269). Mrs. Touchett also makes a harsh judgment; she calls Osmond’s mother “a horrible snob” (269).
The snobbery of Osmond’s mother is signaled by her romantic epithet, “the American Corinne” (269; 344; 433). The name “Corinne” is taken from the title of the novel published in 1807 by French author Madame de Staël. She adapted the name of an ancient Greek poet Corinna “for the title character of her highly influential romantic novel . . . in which the beautiful, vivacious, and talented poet captivates a reserved English lord” (603-4n143), as Michael Anesko notes. “With the publication of her novel Corinne,” writes Kathleen Lawrence, “de Staël introduced French, English, and American readers to the ideas of the German Romantics, especially the idea of ‘enthusiasm,’ or Romantic devotion to the spirit and intuition of the individual as an extension of the divine” (54). As a result, the name “Corinne” in the nineteenth-century United States became emblematic of an intellectual woman with literary interests. In The Portrait of a Lady, the narrator states that “Mrs. Osmond liked to be called” by that epithet (269): she seemed to like it because it enhanced her highly romantic self-image as a woman of letters. That partly explains the reason why Mrs. Touchett calls her a “horrible snob.”

Yet some critics have claimed that the epithet “the American Corinne” contains positive connotations. Taking a cue from Perry Miller’s observation (see P. Miller xxvi), Kathleen Lawrence tries “both to strengthen the case for Margaret Fuller as Gilbert Osmond’s mother and to propose an alternative appraisal of James’s critical stance towards Margaret Fuller gleaned from numerous of his works but most evident in Portrait” (53). Through an extensive discussion on cultural context and examples of referring to Fuller as the “New England Corinne,” Lawrence revises the negative assessment of Osmond’s mother’s (as well as Fuller’s) personality and instead emphasizes “Osmond’s mother’s liberalism, republicanism, and literary innovation” (54), which confronts and undermines the ideology of “the decadent nineteenth-century American expatriate” (55) embodied by Madame Merle, Gilbert Osmond, and Countess Gemini. According
to Lawrence, “James uses the ‘American Corinne’ as a moral litmus test for his knot of expatriates in Florence and Rome” (54) by alluding to Fuller as Mrs. Osmond.

Lawrence’s essay has introduced an important connection which was hitherto unexplored in the discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Her case for Mrs. Osmond as Margaret Fuller, however, may still be open to question – especially given James’s revision of her background. In the New York edition, the Countess Gemini compares two “literary ladies,” her mother and Henrietta Stackpole, and ponders:

She [her mother] had spoken softly and vaguely, with the accent of her “Creole” ancestors, as she always confessed; she sighed a great deal, and was not at all enterprising. (*PLNYE* 376, emphasis added)

James provides important information about the Osmonds’ genealogical inheritance by suggesting Mrs. Osmond’s “Creole” background. Considering the equivocality of the connotation of the word itself—whether or not she has any mixed racial ancestries in the family—we cannot identify her origin just from this passage. Nevertheless, it may be safe to say that this point does not dovetail perfectly with the image of Margaret Fuller, who was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The “Creole” ancestors instead seem to give Mrs. Osmond southern American or Caribbean characteristics.

Of course, Lawrence does not ignore this point. To support her argument that “James subtly strengthens the Fuller attribution with his mention of ‘Creole’ ancestors,” she discusses two points. First, Lawrence reads this passage in *Portrait* as “referring obliquely to Fuller’s autobiographical sketch ‘Mariana’ first written in 1843,” in which the title character has Spanish Creole blood on the father’s side (55-56). Second, “with its connotation of the exotic and of mixed race,” the word “Creole” “justifies behavior that was unacceptable in antebellum
Protestant girls who were subject to the rules of the cult of domesticity” as shown in the characterization of Mariana (56). In this way, Osmond’s mother’s “Creole” blood indexes her subversive element through an allusion to Fuller’s autobiographical work.

Since Lawrence shows no evidence that James was familiar with Fuller’s “Mariana,” this allusion remains oblique at best. Still, her second point is persuasive if we take it as the claim that Mrs. Osmond’s “Creole” blood gives her non-normative characteristics through its exotic impression, because as the passage indicates, it is nothing but her self-proclaimed identity—just “as she always confessed” it (PLNYE 376). So long as it is a self-confessed genealogy, the word “Creole” shows not so much her origin but her theatricality: her performance of presenting herself as mysterious and thus romantic. In that sense, the “Creole” in the passage does not necessarily mean her southernness.

However, this is not the case if we read the same passage in the novel’s earlier version. In the first published edition, James makes no mention of the “‘Creole’ ancestors” of Osmond’s mother. Instead:

She spoke softly and vaguely, with a kind of Southern accent; she sighed a great deal, and was not at all enterprising. (PL 434, emphasis added)

Much more directly than in the New York edition, the narrator refers to the way Mrs. Osmond speaks. It is equally significant that there is no additional note of self-confession here. In other words, her “Southern accent” is presented as a fact in the narrative. Therefore, there is no room for the interpretation Lawrence makes of the New York edition: Osmond’s mother has her origin somewhere in the American South.

Through her close examination of the two different versions of Portrait, Nina Baym has famously argued that James’s revision “transform[ed] the story into a drama of consciousness.”
“In the 1908 version,” writes Baym, “Isabel Archer’s inner life is the center of the character and of the novel’s reality. In the early version the inner life is only one aspect of character, which is defined by behavior in a social context” (183). The change in the way Mrs. Osmond’s background is presented coincides with Baym’s account. While the social context of her place of origin is clearly described in the 1881 version, the later version transforms it into an expression of self-recognition of personal identity. As a result, in the New York edition, Mrs. Osmond may or may not be a Southerner: her origin remains ambiguous, which makes the revised version even closer to James’s later style. Thus, raised only by his mother, Gilbert Osmond is the son of a Southerner at least in the first version.

We can see the southernness attached to the character of Osmond more clearly by looking at social discourse at the time of *Portrait*. As I have shown in the previous chapter on Howells, scholars such as Sara Blair, Don Doyle, Jennifer Greeson, and Nina Silber have examined various travel writings in postbellum America (including essays by James himself) and demonstrated the overlapping of images between the American South and the European South. Moreover, as Doyle demonstrates, there is a “peculiar relationship of the South to the nation in America and Italy,” since “The Brigands War coincides with the American Civil War in which the Confederacy’s bid for nationhood was defeated after a bloody conflict” and “[i]n each setting the Southern Question eventually found its remedy in various efforts to reconstruct the South” (66).

The presence of these contemporary discourses and imagination makes us realize that Gilbert Osmond is associated with the image of the South in various ways. For instance, the locations of the two major houses are divided into Northern Europe and Southern Europe. Gardencourt, “an old English country-house” (*PL 3*) the Touchetts bought, is along the Thames
“at some forty miles” up north from London (4). In contrast, the Osmonds, another American family coming to Europe, settle down in Italy. Since Osmond moves from Florence to Rome after his marriage with Isabel, their habitation goes further south. In this way, Portrait is predicated on the contrast between Gardencourt in the European North and the Palazzo Roccanera in the European South.

The city of Rome, in addition to its geographical position, draws a strong analogy to postbellum American South, particularly through the presence of ruins. Just as “the sight of decay and ruination in the South frequently encouraged northern travelers to compare those sites with the fashionable tourist vistas for Europe” (Silber 77), Isabel is captivated by Rome at her first visit particularly in the sight of its ancient ruins: “The sun had begun to sink, the air was filled with a golden haze, and the long shadows of broken column and formless pedestal were thrown across the field of ruin” (PL 277). The fascination Isabel feels with Rome is analogous to what attracted northern travelers to the Reconstruction South. As Silber and Greeson have pointed out, the large demand for southern tourism and travel writings in the postwar decades was driven by imperial desire for appropriation, which coincided with the “protoethnographic narrative structure and exoticist aesthetics” (Greeson 237) of local-color fiction. The “local color” of Rome is what counts for Isabel in choosing her place to live: “on settling themselves in Rome she and her husband chose this habitation for the love of local colour” (PL 352). Thus, led by Osmond, Isabel discovers her “South” in Rome.

Furthermore, the “European” conventions generally associated with the character of Osmond—“I am convention itself” (301), he declares—can also be considered the “Southern” ones. We can see his typically “Southern” qualities in his aestheticism, his aristocratic pose of disinterestedness, his tyrannical control over his wife and daughter, and his non-Puritanical
ethics. In this way, Gilbert Osmond is a “Southern” character in terms of his place of origin, his place of living, and his interiority.

1-3. The Centennial Celebration and the Romance of Reunion

In that case, what if Osmond is a Southerner? What kind of new reading of Portrait does this observation make possible? To answer these questions, I would like to contextualize this novel in relation to two overlapping political discourses at that time.

The first point is the relation of Portrait to the centennial celebration of the United States. It is no accident that the one single date mentioned in this long novel is 1876, the centennial year of U.S. national independence. Nor is it coincidence that the date is mentioned precisely at the biggest turning point of the novel, when the story jumps for three and a half years from Isabel’s engagement to Osmond. Indicating the significant narrative break, Chapter 36 begins: “One afternoon, towards dusk, in the autumn of 1876, a young man of pleasing appearance rang at the door of a small apartment on the third floor of an old Roman house” (PL 345). Two paragraphs later, the date is repeated: “In the summer of 1876, however, an incident befell him” (345).

Adeline Tintner calls attention to the importance of the date mentioned here, observing rightly that “James seldom specifies the dates of his novels and tales, but the dates that he does provide are not given frivolously. . . So we must pay strict heed to James’s dates” (27). She demonstrates the connection between Portrait and the centennial celebration of national independence by demonstrating James’s awareness of the centennial celebration in his letters to his brother and Howells, the fact that James started to think about Portrait in the very year of 1876, and the strong resemblance between Ralph’s caricature of Isabel as “Columbia” and the figure of Columbia appearing as newspaper cartoons around the Centennial. Tintner identifies
the “great irony of the book . . . cleverly expressed in the stated date” in the sense that
“[s]uddenly, the heroine who had prided herself on her sense of freedom and liberty has found
herself to be imprisoned in a ‘house of suffocation.’ In the year 1876 she recognizes her slavery”
(27). Alfred Habegger also takes up this irony and call Portrait “a counter-centennial novel”
(Henry 180). Their discussions help us see the significance of the date in this novel and situate it
in context of national celebrations of independence.

What I would like to add to Tintner’s and Habegger’s insights is another contemporary
discourse concerning the reconciliation of the nation. The date mentioned in Portrait not only
suggests that “[t]he year 1876 marks . . . the central idea of the book” (Tintner 29). It also means
that the final scene of the novel takes place in the following year. In other words, although the
novel was written after Reconstruction, the story of Portrait concludes when the Reconstruction
comes to an end. Isabel returns to Rome in the year of 1877, when the U.S. government removed
federal troops from the remaining Reconstruction states.

To explore Portrait’s relationship to the end of Reconstruction as well as to the
Centennial Celebration, I draw on what Nina Silber calls “the romance of reunion.” She defines
this concept as “the love between a northern, often Union, man and an initially resistant, but
ultimately submissive, rebel woman.” According to Silber, “most dramas of reunion” told in
postbellum period “revolved around the story of a northern man’s conquest of a rebel belle,” and
this type of tale was “repeated over and over in the culture of conciliation” (110). As Silber
persuasively argues, this “romance of reunion” is highly problematic both in terms of sexism and
racism, because it advocates paternalistic control of “feminine” South by “masculine” North and,
at the same time, suppresses the suffering of freed people by promoting “the culture of
conciliation” between Northern and Southern whites.
Silber’s concept of the postbellum romance of reunion clarifies how this “international” novel actually engages with the culture of conciliation in the wake of the Civil War. As I discuss in the following section, *Portrait* uses this narrative template and troubles it by reversing the marriage plot of a white northern man and a white southern woman.

1-4. Becoming a (Southern) Lady

Isabel Archer has some of the major characteristics generally associated with the northern male in the romance of reunion. First, although she is not a member of the armed forces, she is portrayed as a representative of United States of America. She is fond of “liberty” and her “personal independence” more than anything else (153) and proud of having a “thoroughly American” point of view (56). The picture of her presented to the reader through Ralph’s consciousness is “a very pretty young woman, dressed, in the height of the prevailing fashion, in the folds of the national banner” (57). In this way, imagined by Ralph as “Columbia” (57), she represents the American Union.

*Portrait* describes her enthusiasm about the Civil War when she was in her early teenage years (calculated from its reference to the year of 1876):

While the Civil War went on, she was still a very young girl; but she passed months of this long period in a state of almost passionate excitement, in which she felt herself at times (to her extreme confusion) stirred almost indiscriminately by the valour of either army. (32)

Young Isabel’s romantic inclination is depicted particularly through her relationship to the Civil War. As the Columbia being excited with the war, she represents the Northern States of America. Moreover, what is worth noting here is that this passage also demonstrates the blindness of her
“almost passionate excitement.” Despite her social position, she gets fascinated in the vision of the war heroes on both sides “almost indiscriminately” and cannot control her emotion in a proper way. She is confused by her own feeling of excitement toward the war “to her extreme confusion.” Isabel is connected to the Northern cause, and James critiques the ideological power and danger of blind patriotism.

The novel’s marriage plot also informs both similarities and differences between Isabel and the typical Northern character of the romance of reunion. As many critics have discussed, Isabel’s development in Portrait is the process of realizing and accepting her moral responsibility for what she has done on her own will (for example, see Krook 41–52). One of the biggest moments in her growth comes when she begins to realize her underlying motivation of marrying Osmond. In the renowned inner monologue in Chapter 42, Isabel says to herself:

She had felt at the time that he was helpless and ineffectual, but the feeling had taken the form of a tenderness which was the very flower of respect. . . . As she looked back at the passion of those weeks she perceived in it a kind of maternal strain—the happiness of a woman who felt that she was a contributor, that she came with full hands. But for her money, as she saw to-day, she wouldn’t have done it. And then her mind wandered off to poor Mr. Touchett, sleeping under the English turf, the beneficent author of infinite woe! For this was a fact. At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience. . . . Unless she should give it to a hospital, there was nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she was as much as Gilbert Osmond. (411–12, emphasis added)
Looking back on her life and what she has done, Isabel admits that Mrs. Touchett was right when she criticized Isabel by asking: “Do you marry him out of charity?” (323). As she learns to see, feeling burdened with her money—her unexpected large inheritance from her uncle Mr. Touchett—Isabel, “filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience,” finds the economically disabled Osmond as a “charitable institution.”

This passage marks the novel’s dependence on and departure from the plot of romance of reunion. On one hand, her position as an economically advantaged Northern “contributor” who hopes to redeem a “helpless and ineffectual” Southerner “with a maternal strain” can be seen as a counterpart of the paternalistic position of a Northern man controlling a Southern belle. On the other hand, Isabel’s story makes a clear departure from the romance of reunion because her inner reflection in this chapter marks the decisive moment of self-relativization. The legitimacy of her behaving like a “contributor” is undermined not by some authorial and authoritative commentary by the narrator, but precisely by her own awakening through self-reflection—“Yes, she had been hypocritical; she liked him so much” (413). Unlike the romance of reunion, in which the legitimacy of the Northern control over the South is never questioned, Portrait reveals and stages the hypocrisy of the naturalization of uneven distribution of power between the sections which ends up keeping the South peripheral. James thus troubles the marriage plot of a Northern man and Southern woman. In reversing the gender roles assigned in the romance of reunion, he disrupts the dominant ideology of the postwar period. Therefore, it is no surprise that the central focus of the story is the failure of marriage, for as a critique of the culture of conciliation, marriage as a metaphor of reunion no longer means the end of the struggle.

The conflicts between Isabel and Osmond after their marriage are described in the vocabularies of sectional divide. For instance, when he expresses his disgust toward her spirit of
independence and her sense of moral duty, he uses words of abuse typical for a southern conservative to blame northern liberals (or people like “Boston radicals” [289] as Henrietta calls them): “He at least knew now that she had no traditions! It had not been in his prevision of things that she should reveal such flatness; her sentiments were worthy of a radical newspaper or of a Unitarian preacher”; “It was very simple; her despised her; she had no traditions, and the moral horizon of a Unitarian minister” (416; 417). The narrator’s commentary—“Poor Isabel, who had never been able to understand Unitarianism!” (417)—is also important because it undermines Osmond’s word of blame, which is dependent on stereotypes socially constructed by the prevailing discourse of sectional divide. In this way, the story of Isabel’s failed marriage with Osmond reveals not only the problems underlying the romance of reunion but also the ideological construction of the discourse of North-South divide itself.

As I have hoped to suggest, this reading of Portrait provides some revised perspectives on the interpretation of its controversial ending. Despite Isabel’s new awareness of imprisonment and failure and the revelation of the fact that Pansy is the illegitimate daughter of Osmond and Madame Merle, the story does not result in the dissolution of marriage. Refusing Goodwood’s proposal for divorce and remarriage, Isabel finally figures out “a very straight path” (568) and chooses to return to Rome where Osmond and Pansy reside. I would like here to suggest one important aspect of the symbolic meaning of Isabel’s return to Rome, specifically its parallel to the end of Reconstruction. When, as a result of the compromise of 1877, federal troops were removed from the remaining Reconstruction states, this withdrawal and return of the “redeemers” to the North left what Eric Foner calls “the second founding” unfinished. In sharp contrast to their questionable withdrawal of the North as well as Madame Merle’s return to the United States in the end, Isabel goes back South. In the very year of 1877, facing the harsh
reality of the impossibility of reconciling with her estranged husband, she still refuses to withdraw to the United States with Goodwood and instead returns to remain in Rome. She stays on the road: her story concludes on her way from Gardencourt in European North to the Palazzo Roccanera in European South.

Starting with a contemporary book review in Spectator, some readers and critics have referred to the possibility to interpret Henrietta’s last words “just you wait!” (569) as her suggestion that Isabel goes back Rome to get a divorce from Osmond. According to Michael Anesko, however, this is not the case: “James reportedly told one reader, at a dinner in 1883, that her last words were ‘meant only to suggest that something might turn up favorable to Goodwood, if he were more patient.’ This gloss was inscribed in a copy of the novel owned by L. E. Opdycke and dated 13 October 1889” (PL 634n303). Instead of suggesting the end of their marriage, James makes Isabel choose to face her internal other, Osmond the Southerner, to relativize and unsettle the narrative of reconciliation promoted in the name of centennial celebration of national independence. In so doing, he reveals the falsehood of regarding the end of Reconstruction as the end of conflict and presents a realistic form of narrative situated in-between reunion and divide. Therefore, this novel is a portrait of an American girl becoming a Southern lady. To further elucidate and reconsider the process of her becoming southern, however, we need to start over and discuss the role of Ralph Touchett in Portrait.

2. “History of an Americana”: Reconstructing Ralph’s Dream in a Female Bildungsroman

The second half of this chapter explores the role of Ralph and his relationship to Isabel’s story of development. I restart my discussion by staging the contrast between Osmond and Ralph. Reading their similarities and differences as two different versions of cosmopolitan male figure,
Section 2-1 elucidates how Portrait stages the question of national identity. Then, examining the way Ralph envisions of Isabel as a promise left unfulfilled in his own life, I demonstrate in Section 2-2 that what Ralph wants to see in Isabel is in fact the dream of the Great American Novel generated from his desire for rootedness. Section 2-3 introduces questions of gender and female bildungsroman to my discussion and shows how Isabel’s dilemma unsettles Ralph’s dream. Finally, in Section 2-4, I will go back to Isabel’s final decision and read her act as a retrospective ratification of Ralph’s dream.

2-1. Gilbert Osmond and Ralph Touchett, Two Versions of Cosmopolitans

Why is Osmond’s Southern background almost hidden from the surface of the text? In making Osmond’s identity half-invisible, James underscores both similarities and differences between Osmond and Ralph, and he stages overlapping but divergent versions of cosmopolitanisms in order to address the question of nationhood. Divesting Osmond of the traces of his American origin, James presents someone who is not bound by any fixed identity linked to particular regions or nations. In other words, James invites us to consider him a citizen of the world—a cosmopolitan with “the appearance of a man living in the open air of the world, indifferent to small considerations, caring only for truth and knowledge and believing” (PL 413–14), just as Isabel had seen him until their marriage.

When he first appears in the novel, Osmond’s indeterminate nationality is memorably depicted as follows:

You would have been much at a loss to determine his nationality; he had none of the superficial signs that usually render the answer to this question an insipidly
easy one. If he had English blood in his veins, he was one of those persons who, in the matter of race, may, as the phrase is, pass for anything. (219)

Osmond is introduced with the impression of his fluid national identity. He lacks characteristics that link him to any particular nationality or ethnicity. Furthermore, his identity gets more fluid through his performance of showing his multilingual ability. When he talks to his daughter Pansy, he uses “the Italian tongue . . . with perfect ease” (219). After a while, in Pansy’s departure from the convent, Osmond intentionally switches language and asks a question to her in French. Pansy’s reply “in a sweet, small voice, and with a French accent as good as his own” (221) registers not only her French skills but also her father’s proficiency in that language. Thus, Osmond is characterized by his transnationality, ethnic hybridity, and multilingual ability, all of which provide him with a certain cosmopolitanism.

However, his cosmopolitan identity, or his detachment from any fixed national or ethnic identity, paradoxically highlights his character as an American. When she first mentions Osmond in her conversation with Isabel, Madame Merle refers to him as “a friend of mine, a countryman of ours, who lives in Italy” and continues: “He is Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Italy; that is all one can say about him” (189). Having no other words than this to describe him means that his being an American constitutes the indispensable basis for his identity. Moreover, as Michael Gorra among many other critics has pointed out, the list of what Osmond lacks—“No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything” (PL 189)—bears a notable resemblance to James’s famous catalogue of what is absent from America in the time of Hawthorne, which he declares two years before the publication of Portrait. In this sense, “[d]efined by his residence abroad, by his loss of the distinguishing marks of origin, Osmond is nevertheless cast in an American mold” (Gorra 163).
An American national identity foregrounded by the absence of any particular belongingness—this is precisely what applies to the characterization of Ralph as well. Having moved to England in his childhood and educated on both sides of the Atlantic, “[h]e is what is called a cosmopolitan” (81). Giving up filling the shoes of his father as “a shrewd American banker” (4) who has succeeded financially in Europe, Ralph, due to his illness, has no “regular occupation” (85) which gives him a solid position in society. The way Madame Merle refers to him is remarkably similar to her introduction of Osmond to Isabel: “Look at poor Ralph Touchett; what sort of a figure do you call that? . . . [W]ho would he be, what would he represent? ‘Mr. Ralph Touchett, an American who lives in Europe.’ That signifies absolutely nothing—it’s impossible that anything should signify less” (189). Just like Osmond, Ralph has no particular affiliation or identity in himself. Precisely because of the lack of visible position in the world, he also represents a type of national character, or, as Henrietta blames him, “the alienated American” (82).

Given this basic similarity between Osmond and Ralph, we can see the effect of hiding Osmond’s place of origin from the text. James foregrounds the doubling and contrast between these two characters with seemingly cosmopolitan characteristics and in so doing further explores the question of national identity in the novel. In fact, scholars have examined the relationship between them in various ways. In her insightful discussion of cosmopolitanism in Portrait in the context of Victorian ideology of separate gendered spheres, for instance, Anna Despotopoulou focuses on the contrast between them and sees Ralph as “the prime example” of “James’s cosmopolitan males” marked by “an ethical receptivity and openness to the possibility of fluid national and cultural identities” (142) in opposition to Osmond. According to her, Osmond, unlike Ralph, “embodies all the negative characteristics that Victorians associated with
cosmopolitans: hypocritical detachment and moral indifference” (154n5). Read this way, Ralph and Osmond represent either positive or negative aspects of cosmopolitanism, respectively.

On the other hand, other scholars have doubted Ralph’s role as a caring, benevolent supporter of Isabel. For example, Laurel Bollinger points out “disturbing ethical similarities” between Ralph and Osmond and sees them “as morally analogous” in Kantian terms “in that both characters use Isabel as a means to their own ends, not as an end in herself.” As represented in their treatment of Isabel “for their own amusement—Ralph for the pleasure of watching her actions, and Osmond for the pleasure of accessing her money,” they “become morally indistinguishable” because both of their actions “are motivated by selfish intentions” (144).

With these different views on Ralph’s role in relation to Osmond, I would like to focus more in the following sections on the question of what Ralph wanted to do by watching Isabel’s actions throughout the novel. Agreeing with Bollinger that Ralph and Osmond are the “two characters whose relation to Isabel is central to the novel’s action” (Bollinger 144), I argue that Ralph invests in Isabel the possibility of female bildungsroman in postbellum America, which ultimately turns out to be unavailable to Isabel herself.

2-2. What Did Ralph Want to See? The Making of Isabel as a Soul-Nation Allegory

There are two common understandings of Portrait’s metanarratives, which have often been somewhat separately discussed: nation-building and self-making. On one hand, “Isabel is a symbol of her country” (Edel 16), and “there are distinctive parallels between her personal and the country’s national quests” (Sanner 150). Predicated on this basic understanding, I have tried to historicize them by situating Portrait in the context of postbellum America, suggesting that Isabel’s story is a story of America in the time of national divide and reconciliation. At the same
time, the novel is Isabel’s bildungsroman, “a novel of initiation and education, a classic bildungsroman. A number of the most troubling critical questions surrounding the novel are closely linked to the developmental structure of the novel and the issues surrounding Isabel Archer’s initiation into culture, adulthood and womanhood” (Berkson, “Why” 53).

The correlation between these two metanarratives of self-making and nation-building in Portrait allows us to regard Isabel as a representative character embodying what Jed Esty calls “soul-nation allegory.” In Unseasonable Youth, Esty coins this term and defines it as “the allegorical co-implication of nationhood and adulthood in the biographical novel” (39), which constitutes “the core ideology of the classic bildungsroman” (52). Combining Franco Moretti’s account of the bildungsroman with Benedict Anderson’s analysis of the nation-building function of the novel (and also with reference to M. M. Bakhtin’s definition of bildungsroman as “the image of man growing in national-historical time” [25]), Esty argues: “What Moretti’s model leaves unexplored is the crucial symbolic function of nationhood, which gives a finished form to modern societies in the same way that adulthood gives a finished form to the modern subject” (4). His book traces how the modernist fiction by Kipling, Conrad, Woolf, and others brings the “disruption of the soul-nation allegory” (13) particularly through its “intertwined tropes of frozen youth and uneven development” (7) in increasingly globalized conditions in the age of empire.

Esty’s conception of the soul-nation allegory in nineteenth-century classic bildungsroman helps us see both Portrait’s alignment with and departure from it. Ralph as focalizing character plays a central role here, because Isabel’s role as an allegory of nation is made visible to the reader particularly due to Ralph’s imaginative interest in her. Instead of putting an authorial voice that explains Isabel’s representativeness in a semi-omniscient way, James renders one of his characters the producer (or investor) of allegorical significance in his heroine. In so doing, he
exposes the allegory-making process and dramatizes the underlying motivation for allegorization in Ralph’s story, while carefully detaching himself and depicting Ralph’s blind-spot: his unawareness of gender gap, which I will discuss in the next section. In this way, Portrait, as a story about the making of a soul-nation allegory, at once retains and exposes the ideological core of the classic bildungsroman.

James already envisions Isabel’s characterization as a soul-nation allegory from the beginning. He mentions his plan for Portrait for the first time in his letter to Howells in October 1876: “My novel is to be an Americana,—the adventures in Europe of a female Newman” (Complete Letters 1872-1876 3: 210). He holds this view of Isabel as “an Americana” and writes to his brother William in July 1878: “The ‘great novel’ you ask about is only begun; I am doing other things just now. It is the history of an Americana—a female counterpart to Newman . . . and I hope to be able to get to work upon it this autumn” (Complete Letters 1876-1878 2: 178). It is clear that James shares Ralph’s desire for seeing the nationally representative soul in Isabel.

Other characters in Portrait do not necessarily think of Isabel as idiosyncratically American. For instance, Isabel’s elder sister Lillian and her husband, a New York lawyer Edmund Ludlow, talk about Isabel’s un-American characteristics:

[Lilian said,] “I don’t see what you have against her, except that she is so original.”

“Well, I don’t like originals; I like translations,” Mr. Ludlow had more than once replied. “Isabel is written in a foreign tongue. I can’t make her out. She ought to marry an Armenian, or Portuguese.”

. . . “You know you have always thought Isabel rather foreign.”
“You want her [Mrs. Touchett] to give her a little foreign sympathy, eh? Don’t you think she gets enough at home?”

“Well, she ought to go abroad,” said Mrs. Ludlow. “She’s just the person to go abroad.” (27–28)

In this brief conversation, they repeatedly mention Isabel’s “foreign” feature. Their opinions are divided; Lilian believes Isabel should go abroad with her aunt because of her “foreign” character, but her husband believes not. For both, however, Isabel is by no means “a symbol of country” or “an Americana.”

Unlike other characters who see in Isabel some “foreign” character, Ralph invests a soul-nation allegory in Isabel. Ralph calls Isabel “Columbia,” a female personification of the United States: he “amused himself with calling her ‘Columbia,’ and accusing her of a patriotism so fervid that it scorched. He drew a caricature of her, in which she was represented as a very pretty young woman, dressed . . . in the folds of the national banner” (56-57). This passage shows that Isabel is “an Americana” precisely in Ralph’s imagination. Moreover, even before he first meets Isabel, he is interested in her “independence.” Isabel is introduced to the reader for the first time through telegrams sent to Ralph from his mother, in which she says she will “return England with niece” who is “quite independent.” Ralph considers this expression “puzzling,” for “it seems to admit of so many interpretations.” Then he shows some examples of interpretations on the term “independent”: “in what sense is the term used? . . . is it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they have been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? or does it simply mean that they are fond of their own way?” (11). By asking these questions, Ralph invites the reader to share his interest in Isabel’s “independence”—which of course is a symbolic reference to American national independence—and to try to interpret the
meaning of her being “independent.” In this way, Isabel’s role as “an Americana” in Portrait is made visible to the reader through Ralph’s imaginative interest in her. Ralph makes Isabel a soul-nation allegory.

If that is a case, why does Ralph want to see “an Americana” in Isabel? What does he want by making her a soul-nation allegory of his country? For these questions, we need to consider Ralph’s sense of situatedness and his desire for rootedness, which distinguish Ralph’s cosmopolitanism clearly from Osmond’s hypocritical detachment. When Henrietta calls Ralph “alienated” (82) and blames him for giving up his country, Ralph replies: “Ah, one doesn’t give up one’s country any more than one gives up one’s grandmother. They’re both antecedent to choice” (85). In the New York edition, Ralph makes an additional comment: both one’s country and one’s grandmother are “elements of one’s composition that are not to be eliminated” (PLNYE 85). In this way, although Ralph shows no strong attachment to American identity, he still “doesn’t stop being an American just because Oxford has swallowed up Harvard, and in one sense he might even be more of one” (Gorra 54). Moreover, he is deeply conscious of his family genealogy and its American roots. In his will and testament, Ralph generously left a legacy “to those cousins in Vermont,” even though “his father had already been so bountiful” to them (PL 560). He is clearly aware of his being conditioned by national as well as regional origin.

For Ralph, America is an indicator of his unfulfilled dream, the telos or finished form in his failed bildungsroman. The summary of his biography suggests that his life story is a bildungsroman, “the journey from youth to maturity” in which “a protagonist striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity” (1), borrowing Sarah Graham’s definition of the term. Ralph’s story as “a young man of promise” is portrayed in detail toward the beginning of the novel:
Ralph spent several terms in an American school, and took a degree at an American college, after which, as he struck his father on his return as redundantly national, he was placed for some three years in residence at Oxford. Oxford swallowed up Harvard, and Ralph became at last English enough. His outward conformity to the manners that surrounded him was none the less the mask of a mind that greatly enjoyed its independence, on which nothing long imposed itself, and which, naturally inclined to jocosity and irony, indulged in a boundless liberty of appreciation. He began with being a young man of promise; at Oxford he distinguished himself, to his father’s ineffable satisfaction, and the people about him said it was a thousand pities so clever a fellow should be shut out from a career. He might have had a career by returning to his own country (though this point is shrouded in uncertainty), and even if Mr. Touchett had been willing to part with him (which was not the case), it would have gone hard with him to put the ocean (which he detested) permanently between himself and the old man whom he regarded as his best friend. (PL 35)

In this informative passage, the contrast between America and England is essential both in Ralph’s psychological development and for his career. Becoming “at last English enough” by revising his “redundantly national” personality through his education at Oxford, he still holds his American identities under the “outward conformity to” English manners, enjoying his “independence” inside and “a boundless liberty of appreciation.” Also, as a promising youth who “distinguished himself” at Oxford, he had two incompatible options: seeking a career by returning America or being a banker by staying with his father. As told retrospectively in the same chapter, Ralph did have an ambition in his youth: “He was far from the time when he had
found it hard that he should be obliged to give up the idea of distinguishing himself” (37). In this sense, Ralph’s decision to stay with his father and follow in his footsteps is a compromise. Just like a bildungsroman protagonist who faces “the conflict between the ideal of self-determination and the equally imperious demands of socialization” (Moretti 15), he gives up “the idea of distinguishing himself,” the idea connected with the possibility of returning to America. Thus, America constitutes the telos he had to give up in his story of development. This point suggests that his biographical trajectory is in accord with Esty’s account of the classic bildungsroman in which “the twin plot of nationhood-adulthood” (52–53) works as a narrative and ideological closure of otherwise endless process of becoming. This is a story of a young cosmopolitan struggling to getting rooted in a nationhood.

Nevertheless, Ralph’s classic bildungsroman—even a potential way to compromise—is disrupted due to his illness. Upon graduating Oxford, he undertook a grand tour and travels around Europe for a couple of years before “he found himself mounted on a high stool in his father’s bank.” After one and a half years, however, “he became conscious that he was seriously out of health. . . He had to give up work and embrace the sorry occupation known as taking care of one’s self” (36). Even though he still had a “vision of virtual recovery,” this hope “was dispelled some three years before the occurrence of the incidents with which this history opens” (37), namely, the arrival of Isabel to Gardencourt. As a result, “he had simply accepted the situation,” pretending that “he had given up nothing,” for “there was really nothing he had wanted very much to do” (37). The fact that “[h]is consumption is his career” (206) means there is no other option available to him than being “ill and disabled, and restricted to mere spectatorship at the game of life” (155).
Then Isabel comes in. She revitalizes Ralph’s dream, this time as a supportive spec-
tator. What Ralph’s wanted to see in Isabel is the possibility of an American bildungsroman—a
requisite for the Great American Novel—that is no longer available to him. When he asks his
father to “put a little wind in her sails” (175) by giving a half of his inheritance to Isabel, he says:
“I should like to put it into her power to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the
world, for instance. I should like to put money in her purse. . . If she has an easy income she will
never have to marry for support. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free”
(175-76). This decision to make her free from any marriage plot gives him a “vision of [Isabel’s]
future” or “great ideas for” her (333)—an unlimited opportunity for a story of development from
which he is alienated. Thus, Isabel, as “an Americana,” becomes Ralph’s lost cause.

Furthermore, having Ralph as “the reader’s friend, with his perceptions guiding our own”
(Gorra 3) who is “present from the first chapter to the second-to-last” (Luciano 197), James
invites the reader to share Ralph’s “great ideas” and watch her “with deepest interest” (PL 156).
The narrator often refers to the reader’s affiliation with Ralph. For instance, whereas Isabel is
wondering why Ralph remains silent and says nothing about her engagement, the narrator shows
Ralph’s feeling of disappointment and suggests that “[w]e who know more about poor Ralph
than his cousin, may easily believe that . . . he had privately gone through many forms. . . Ralph
was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false, and his cousin was lost” (327).
Portray puts the reader in Ralph’s position and makes us privately share his “great ideas” for
Isabel. In this way, for Ralph as well as for the reader, Isabel becomes the protagonist of the
novel in which she represents the national soul.

When De Forest articulates the dream of the Great American Novel, his idea also hinges
on the soul-nation allegory, defining the task as “painting the American soul within the
framework of a novel” (27). This is exactly what Ralph wants to see and what James invites the reader to see in Isabel. In the wake of his own failed bildungsroman driven by his cosmopolitan desire for rootedness and the revitalization of his unfilled dream by Isabel, he redirects his yearning for nationhood toward Isabel’s bildungsroman. By transferring his original design of painting “the history of an Americana” to the focalizing character, James dramatizes and uncovers the process of allegorization that makes national-individual allegory possible. In this sense, Portrait is about the making of Ralph’s dream of the Great American Novel invested in Isabel’s life in Europe “as a land of promise” (PL 214).

2-3. Isabel’s Dilemma, or, the (Im)possibility of Female Bildungsroman

What Ralph does not see—but the reader can see—is the crucial role of gender in the bildungsroman plot. Examining fictional representations of female development, several scholars have demonstrated gender to be fundamental in determining generic conventions. In the introduction to their pioneering collection of essays on the female bildungsroman, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland argue that “[e]ven the broadest definitions of the Bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men” (7). Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman further focus on how “the contemporary narrative of female self-discovery plots a story of resistance and survival made possibly by the mediation of the women’s movement” (Felski 133) as well as on the historical trajectories of bildungsromans by and about women through tracing “the ‘counternarratives’ of these novels—those dissenting stories that cut across and break up the seemingly smooth course of female development and developmental fiction” (Fraiman xi).
The issue of gender in the bildungsroman helps us see the complexities of Isabel’s story and Ralph’s relation to it, for one of the significant questions at stake in *Portrait* is whether or not Isabel’s female bildungsroman unsettles the institution of marriage. *Portrait* is “a novel of initiation and education, a classic bildungsroman” that depicts “Isabel Archer’s initiation into culture, adulthood and womanhood” (Berkson, “Why” 53). Isabel herself “has internalized the teleological narrative of Bildung in order to see her life in terms of a progression toward an ethical end” (Jöttkandt 74)—she “was always planning out her own development, desiring her own perfection observing her own progress” (*PL* 50). Her aspiration toward development is an attempt to find out an alternative to a happy matrimony, which was expected to be the conventional goal of a young girl’s coming of age. Isabel “held that a woman ought to be able to make up her life in singleness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex” (49). Always valuing her personal independence more than anything else, as a result, there is “a certain masculine quality inherent in Isabel’s actions” as scholars have noted (Baris 214).

This “masculine quality” outside the marriage plot is precisely what Ralph wants to see in Isabel as well as what Ralph’s money makes possible. As Elise Miller argues, “Ralph shares Isabel’s view of the limiting nature of marriage for women. He believes that Isabel needs money, not marriage or men, in order to ‘meet the requirements of her imagination.’ And his legacy facilitates Isabel’s exploration of a conventionally masculine model of self and ambition” (20). In this sense, both conceive Isabel’s development as a trajectory of a young man coming into the world rather than of a young woman looking for the ideal choice of mate. What should be the end of Isabel’s process of self-formation? If Isabel appropriates a masculine, teleological model of *Bildung*, then what is the telos of it? Other than the purpose of avoiding a conventional
marriage plot imposed on a woman, the novel does not presuppose any obvious alternative path. Accordingly, Isabel cannot clearly articulate exactly what she wants in her life. People around her observe that “she herself will do everything she chooses” as Mrs. Touchett says (PL 41) and Isabel bravely declares herself—“I don’t see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don’t want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do” (143). Still, she gets little sense of what the “other things” might be like.

On this point, some critics contend that Isabel’s idealism is predicated on her insufficient understanding of the meaning of freedom. For instance, Paul Armstrong states that even though her wish is constantly expressed “in the positive terms of healthy-minded optimism,” Isabel’s definition of freedom “rests on a negative premise. For Isabel, to be ‘independent’ means that she will not be dependent on anyone or anything; she will not be limited or tied down in any way. One small step further, this ‘independent spirit’ would rather not commit herself to any person or project because ‘she must suffice to herself’” (106). As a result of this negative conception of freedom, continues Armstrong, Isabel, after inheriting Mr. Touchett’s fortune, “discovers that she does not know what course to set or how to navigate it because the negative character of her independence has made her more concerned about what commitments to avoid than what projects to undertake” (110). Isabel’s conception of freedom is based on a negative premise; she cannot articulate her aspirations in a positive and coherent way. Her inability to voice her projects is a necessary consequence of the absence of a strong role model of female development outside the institution of marriage. “While male protagonists struggle to find a hospitable context in which to realize their aspirations, female protagonists must frequently struggle to voice any aspirations whatsoever” (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 7). In this sense,
Isabel’s negative conception of freedom itself is an expression of her struggle with the constraints imposed upon her.

It is Ralph who gives voice to Isabel’s aspirations. When they are in London after she rejects Lord Warburton’s (and Goodwood’s) proposal, they talk about Isabel’s future plans or “the rest of [her] career.” Listening to her declare that she wishes not to tie herself by marrying, Ralph says:

“You want to see life, as the young men say.”

“I don’t think I want to see it as the young men want to see it; but I do want to look about me.”

“You want to drain the cup of experience.”

“No, I don’t wish to touch the cup of experience. It’s a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself.”

[...] 

“You have told me the great thing; that the world interests you and that you want to throw yourself in it.”

Isabel’s silvery eyes shone for a moment in the darkness. “I never said that.”

“I think you meant it. Don’t repudiate it; it’s so fine!”

“I don’t know what you are trying to fasten upon me, for I am not in the least an adventurous spirit. Women are not like men.”

Ralph slowly rose from his seat, and they walked together to the gate of the square. “No,” he said; “women rarely boast of their courage; men do so with a certain frequency.” (PL 143-44, emphasis added)
It is noteworthy that all of Isabel’s responses are made in a negative sentence. She repeatedly
denies Ralph’s way of interpreting her own desires—she feels somewhat uncomfortable with it.
Playing a role of the spokesperson for her desire, he dramatizes her career according to a young
man’s romantic quest for experience in the world, namely, a narrative of bildungsroman. Having
trouble accepting a developmental plot projected on her, Isabel tries to make him realize the
gender gap, which Ralph does not acknowledge after all. Although it does not seem that he
intentionally attempts to define and manipulate her “career” in a selfish way as some critics
contend, he still cannot help translating her aspiration into the script of developmental narrative
whose telos is not available to women, even with a sound financial basis secured by his legacy.

Madame Merle, in contrast, astutely recognizes the difficulty inherent in the position of
an uprooted woman in Europe.

You should live in your own country; whatever it may by you have your natural
place there. If we are not good Americans we are certainly poor Europeans; we
have no natural place here. We are mere parasites, crawling over the surface; we
haven’t our feet in the soil. At least one can know it, and not have illusions. A
woman, perhaps, can get on; a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place
anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more
or less, to crawl. (188–89)

As Despotopoulou explains, this striking passage “visualizes simultaneously both the socio-
political disadvantages that deprive women in the Victorian period of geographical stability and,
also, paradoxically, a bitter advantage” (141). As an expatriate woman characterized above all by
her residential mobility, Madame Merle realizes that her seemingly privileged position as a
sophisticated, cosmopolitan woman is in fact a result of her “crawling over the surface”—
struggling to adapt to the unstable national and geographical affiliations. Unlike men, as Despotopoulou points out, “women are used to not belonging to a nation or culture, just as they are used to not actively choosing their geographical positioning” (142), as Madame Merle’s words “wherever she finds herself” suggests. In order to “get on,” a woman like her is forced to make her disadvantage an advantage.

Having lost her parental home in Albany at the beginning of the novel (“with a notice of sale in the windows of the parlour” [PL 20]), Isabel has no “natural place” when this conversation with Madame Merle takes place. Despite their similarities as uprooted women, however, Isabel disagrees with her observation that a woman always “has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl,” as implied in the way Madame Merle’s continues: “You protest, my dear? you are horrified? you declare you will never crawl? It is very true that I don’t see you crawling; you stand more upright than a good many poor creatures. Very good; on the whole, I don’t think you will crawl” (188–89). Madame Merle’s metaphor of crawling on the surface highlights a sharp contrast with Ralph’s metaphor of “soaring and sailing” (333) when he envisions Isabel’s adventurous quest in Europe with “the independent spirit of the American girl” (145). These bipolar metaphors of crawling and soaring clarify Isabel’s position, for she accepts neither of them. On one hand, she feels pressured by Ralph’s imaginary and imaginative investment of a fundamentally male-centered plot of self-development on her life trajectory and recognizes the gender inequality which makes her alienated from the narrative template of bildungsroman. On the other hand, she refuses to give up her plans of development and get used to creep on the ground to survive. As a result, Isabel’s situation becomes doubly bound and burdened. Oscillating between soaring and crawling, it becomes extremely difficult for her to walk her way.
James gives form to this difficulty facing her by making a narrative break in the course of her journey. The discontinuity in the narrative of Isabel’s grand tour is “more a metaphor for her dilemma than a solution to it” (P. Armstrong 110). Looking back her experience, Isabel reflects:

Isabel had spent hers in seeing the world; she had moved about; she had travelled; she had exerted herself with an almost passionate activity. She was now, to her own sense, a very different person from the frivolous young woman from Albany who had begun to see Europe upon the lawn at Gardencourt a couple of years before. She flattered herself that she had gathered a rich experience, that she knew a great deal more of life than this light-minded creature had even suspected. (PL 308, emphasis added)

By inserting the phrases that remind the reader that this passage traces Isabel’s inner consciousness, James emphasizes her self-justifying way of thinking. She is much more passionate about figuring out the meaning of her experience than about travel itself. That is why she remains “restless” all the time during her trip around Europe: “Isabel travelled rapidly, eagerly, audaciously; she was like a thirsty person draining cup after cup” (312). This shows that she “still cannot be the agent of her mobility” unlike male travelers (Despotopoulou 149).

“Though she travels ‘rapidly and recklessly,’ perhaps emulating men’s adventure-seeking and risk-taking traveling tendencies,” writes Despotopoulou, “her travels . . . explore the male-inflicted emotional restraints that limit women’s threatening mobility” (148). Travel, in other words, cannot provide her with any meaningful opportunity for female bildungsroman.

In this section, I have examined the way James addresses the question of gender inherited in the novelistic genre of bildungsroman through an analysis of both Ralph’s and Isabel’s blind spots. Ralph’s unawareness of Isabel’s dilemma as an uprooted woman unsettles his desire for
making Isabel a soul-nation allegory by envisioning her career in the form of a developmental narrative. Rather than proof of her naïve idealism, Isabel’s negative conception of freedom and her failed quest for experience through travel instead highlights her struggle with the constraints imposed upon her. Exposing the mechanism of gender politics underlying the idea of self-formation, *Portrait* criticizes the male-centered premise of the bildungsroman.

2-4. To Make Ralph Free: Isabel’s Return, Revisited

Instead of representing dissolution or reconciliation, *Portrait*’s inconclusive closure, when placed in the context of the compromise of 1877 and the end of Reconstruction, unsettles the romance of reunion by making Isabel choose to face Osmond the Southerner. Rather than completely breaking with her unreconstructed husband, Isabel chooses to keep their marriage situated in-between reunion and divide. Isabel’s becoming southern as a way of critique, however, still marks a conservative bent because it requires her compromise with—if not her submission to—the institution of marriage and makes the reader appreciate it. Habegger states that Isabel’s return indicates “a very conservative sort of responsibility, which finds freedom only in the acceptance of traditional forms” (*Henry* 159), though it surely demonstrates James’s “realistic sense of the power of cultural institutions” as another critic notes (P. Armstrong 132). At the allegorical level, the novel’s ending might represent the counterrevolutionary impulse embedded in Goethean bildungsroman as Moretti puts it, for what happens at the end of *Portrait*’s plot seems to be “a southern-dominated reunion,” to borrow Michael Gilmore’s phrase in his reading of *The Bostonians* (222).

Predicated on what I have examined in this chapter’s second half, the following discussion aims to complicate this type of argument by considering the crucial role Ralph plays
in Isabel’s return to Rome. I read Isabel’s decision as an act of responding to what Ralph had invested in her and of becoming a spectral fulfillment of their vision. In order to make sense of this argument, we need to examine the two crucial facts Isabel comes to realize toward the end of the novel: first, the relationship between Madame Merle and Osmond and the fact that they arranged Isabel’s marriage to Osmond to give money to their daughter Pansy; second, the fact that it was Ralph, not Mr. Touchett, who had given a large fortune to her.

The first discovery makes it necessary for Isabel to reconsider her former conviction that since “the sole source of her mistake had been within herself” and “[t]here had been no plot, no snare,” the “only one way to repair” such a mistake is “to accept it” (PL 391). Instead, she now realizes that “what she believed had been her free choice was really determined by forces outside her knowledge and control. What she had taken for freedom was really determination” (Jöttkandt 78–79). Yet rather than just a revelation of horrible reality, this discovery “might offer Isabel relief,” as Jöttkandt rightly points out: “it might absolve her of responsibility for her unhappiness and provide her with an excellent reason for getting out of her disastrous marriage. This is, in fact, what Henrietta and Caspar Goodwood urge. After all, if she was not responsible for her choice, then surely she has no further duty towards her marriage and her husband and should be free to go” (79).

In that case, why does she still choose to return to Osmond? In her insightful and thorough reading of the novel, Irene Ramalho Santos offers a powerful answer to this question: Isabel’s subsequent behavior indicates that she loves individual freedom more than she loves self-righteousness. If Isabel’s discovery washes white the guilt and responsibility of her misery, it also deprives her, to her mind, of human dignity and tragic stature. There is only one gesture left for Isabel: to invest with freedom,
retrospectively, her initially determined, conditioned choice. Thus, in sanctioning her first act, in turning it, retroactively, into a free act, Isabel finally creates (or invents?) her real freedom, the liberty of fully expanded consciousness, backwards and forwards, in complete, calculating control itself. (125)

Since Isabel has not acknowledged publicly that Madame Merle arranged and controlled her choice to marry Osmond, the status of Isabel’s first choice depends on what path she takes in this second crossroads. Her decision now, according to Santos, is to choose to repeat the same choice once again, this time with her free will, and in so doing, remake the first choice to have been free. Jöttkandt elaborates this strange temporal paradox by way of psychoanalysis. Just as the “fetishist’s refusal to give up the fetish object is . . . the act of remaining faithful to that original choice to desire it,” writes Jöttkandt, Isabel’s “decision to return to Osmond carries the burden of remaining faithful to an act of free choice which can never actually have taken place in time. Her second choice, in effect, causes the first as a free rather than determined act precisely because, like the fetishist, she remains faithful to it. Had she given it up and followed Caspar back to America, her first choice would indeed be revealed as determined.” In this sense, Isabel’s return “must be seen as the phenomenal expression of a strictly unphenomenalizable but necessarily presupposed act by which she originally ‘chose to choose’” (84).

I would like to develop Santos’s and Jöttkandt’s fascinating observations by highlighting Ralph’s crucial role in Isabel’s final decision. Why does Isabel have to remake her first choice retrospectively to have been free? Why doesn’t she want to admit that her first choice was determined and unfree? Santos argues that it is because “she loves individual freedom more than she loves self-righteousness” (125) and also is due to her “longing for some heroic deed in her life” (128). Jöttkandt states that an absolute freedom “beyond our determined realm of space and
time . . . can be attested to only in a paradoxical and retroactive way” because it is “impossible” (unphenomenalizable) and “because, James, like Kant, rejects the aesthetic solution of a Schiller or an Osmond” (84). My answer to the question is that Isabel chooses to remake her first choice to have been free by repeating it because of the other fact she comes to know at Ralph’s deathbed. Thus, we need to examine the relation of his legacy to her decision.

Isabel finally realizes that a large portion of the money she got after Mr. Touchett’s death came not from the dead father, but from his invalid son. This is her second discovery: Ralph made her rich enough to marry Osmond. In addition to Madame Merle’s plot in her marriage, there was Ralph’s will. To be more precise, his money set Madame Merle’s plot in motion: it activated her ambition as Pansy’s mother. Furthermore, quite contrary to his original intention to make her free—“If she has an easy income she will never have to marry for a support. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free” (PL 176) says Ralph to his father—Isabel feels burdened with the unexpected inheritance and becomes obsessed with the idea of making a right use of it. That is what she realizes when she looks back her motive to marry Osmond during her midnight self-reflection: “And then her mind wandered off to poor Mr. Touchett, sleeping under English turf, the beneficent author of infinite woe! For this was a fact. At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience. . . . Unless she should give it to a hospital, there was nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she was as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond” (412). Back to the “English turf” of Gardencourt, Isabel now comes to know “the beneficent author of infinite woe” indeed was Ralph.

Ralph knows all about this. In their last conversation in his deathbed, he confesses to Isabel how he feels about it. Responding to Isabel’s question (“Is it true—is it true . . . [t]hat you
made me rich—that all I have is yours?”), he acknowledges that his act was a mistake and that it “ruined” Isabel, repeating the word of regret: “But for that—but for that—.” Isabel, “wish[ing] to say everything,” tells him the truth: “Yes, he was in love with me. But he would not have married me if I had been poor” (554). I argue that the point of this painful and moving conversation is that through this act of “looking at the truth together,” Isabel comes to know how much she owes him. “Oh Ralph, you have been everything! What have I done for you—what can I do to-day?” (553), says she. Realizing where her inheritance comes from, she wonders what she should do in response.

Her answer is to make Ralph free by remaking her first decision as an act of free choice. As Santos and Jöttkandt have argued, if she renounces the consequence of her first choice (her marriage to Osmond) and follows what Henrietta and Goodwood urge, it means that she publicly confirms that her first decision is actually determined. And since Ralph’s money made possible Madame Merle’s control over Isabel’s marriage in the first place, her divorce becomes a decisive proof that his investment in Isabel was a harmful failure, and as a result, her inheritance from Ralph becomes meaningless. On the other hand, if her first choice is remade to have been free by her repeating that choice, then Ralph’s money, freed from any guilt and responsibility, instead becomes the condition of possibility given to Isabel, just as Ralph originally wished it to be. Ralph made Isabel’s freely-chosen mistake possible. In this sense, Isabel’s return to Rome is less a return to Osmond than to Ralph: it retroactively gives meaning to Ralph’s act and actualizes what he invested in her. She is fully ready to inherit him now.

To support this argument, let me briefly examine two more crucial moments at the end of the novel. Firstly, the final chapter details “Ralph’s testamentary arrangements” (559) about which Mrs. Touchett explains to Isabel.
“Some of them are extremely peculiar,” said Mrs. Touchett; “he has left considerable sums to persons I never heard of. He gave me a list, and I asked then who some of them were, and he told me they were people who at various times had seemed to like him. Apparently he thought you didn’t like him, for he has not left you a penny. It was his opinion that you were handsomely treated by his father, which I am bound to say I think you were—though I don’t mean that I ever heard him complain of it. (560)

As Mrs. Touchett’s comment clearly demonstrates, Ralph’s decision not to leave Isabel any money this time works as a reminder of what he did last time. Listening to his mother’s explanation, Isabel must recognize his intention in this second choice: by leaving her no more money, Ralph reactivates his first choice and tells her that he still believes in what he has invested in her. In fact, this is what he means in his last word to Isabel: “You will grow young again. That’s how I see you.” Even after his death, his legacy is not dead—nor is his love, as he declares: “But love remains” (556).

Isabel’s encounter with Ralph’s ghost is another crucial moment which corresponds with this reading of the novel’s closure. Ralph’s spectral presence in the text is a reminder to both Isabel and the reader that he continues alive in his legacy to Isabel whose promise is not yet fulfilled. Sharing the whole truth with Ralph (and the reader) at his deathbed, Isabel “apparently had fulfilled the necessary condition” (557) to see the specter of what Ralph envisions in her, to which she is to be attentive as his “sister”—she calls him her “brother” in the end—in her final decision. Thus, Isabel’s return to Rome becomes her act of reconceiving Ralph’s inheritance not as a burden but as a possibility. Inheriting Ralph in the spirit of fraternal love instead of
submitting to Osmond’s authority, Isabel finally embraces and embodies Ralph’s vision of her as a soul-nation allegory—as “an Americana,” as James originally conceived it.

Conclusion

*Portrait* is at once a critique and fulfillment of the promise of the Great American Novel. As I argued in Chapter 1, the Great American Novel is a project of literary nationalism searching for the American bildungsroman and its soul-nation allegory that mediates between regions, especially the North-South divide, before and after the Civil War. Isabel’s story as a whole, and her decision at the end in particular, meets and unsettles this condition in two ways. First, choosing to become southern in her return to Rome, Isabel works as a mediating figure situated in-between North and South as well as reunion and divide, while criticizing from within the romance of reunion that many fictional and nonfictional narratives presuppose and promote in postbellum period and particularly in the wake of the centennial celebration and the Compromise of 1877. Second, by employing Ralph as a supportive spectator and benefactor whose imaginative and financial investment in Isabel makes her a soul-nation allegory, *Portrait* foregrounds and questions “the integrative and conciliatory functions of national allegory” (Esty 225n57) embedded in the idea of Great American Novel without entirely abandoning it. Whereas Isabel’s dilemma discloses the male-centered ideology of bildungsroman anchored by its basic concept of self-development of the nationally representative soul, she finally chooses to embody a form of nationhood in actualizing what he invested in her. In this way, *Portrait* lays bare the

---

18 In her penetrating reading of queer kinship between Isabel and Ralph, Dana Luciano argues that Isabel’s “imagined fraternal relation to Ralph . . . stands starkly in opposition to Osmond’s traditionalist understanding of the patriarchal ‘form’ of their marriage . . . Rather than representing her submission to that marriage, Isabel’s return to Rome (and to Pansy) extends the form of queer kinship she had begun to construct with her invalid cousin” (215).
metanarratives of the concept of the Great American Novel and dramatizes the way they work: that is why I call it a novel about the Great American Novel.

Therefore, it is incorrect to say that “the GAN idea was seldom explicitly framed as a gendered concept” (Buell, Dream 31), because its ideological cores—the romance of reunion of divided sections and the soul-nation allegory mediating regions—are gendered concepts. James, along with Stowe and Howells, is highly attentive to this point. The twenty-first century reader might assume that Isabel is a typical Jamesian American girl in Europe, akin to Daisy Miller, Milly Theale, and Maggie Verver. However, Portrait is James’s first big novel featuring a woman as protagonist. And when James first expressed his dream of writing the Great American Novel in his essay in 1870, he already imagined that it should be a story of a woman: “I can almost imagine, indeed, a transient observer of the Newport spectacle dreaming momentarily of a great American novel, in which the heroine shall be infinitely realistic, and yet neither a schoolmistress nor an outcast” (Collected 762–63). From its inception, James realized that his Great American Novel should be a female bildungsroman that reconsiders the idea itself.

My dissertation has used the concept of the Great American Novel as a strategic framework for understanding the cultural ascendance of realism. Much more than a naïve expression of literary chauvinism, the rise of the idea of the Great American Novel marks a transformative moment in the decades before realism becomes institutionalized as a “new school” in the 1880s. American literary realism emerged out of its engagement and negotiation with the Great American Novel.
Works Cited


