"I Don’t Want to Cook": Reconfiguring the Domestic Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

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“I Don’t Want to Cook”: Reconfiguring the Domestic Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

By

Rida Leonard

Claremont Graduate University

2023
Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Rida Leonard as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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Abstract

“I Don’t Want to Cook”: Reconfiguring the Domestic Space in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

By

Rida Leonard

Claremont Graduate University: 2023

In the scholarship that considers ways in which the concept of domesticity features in the lives of black and white women in history, there is less discussion of how these women’s unique challenges led them to alter the traditional domestic space. This dissertation first assesses a range of nineteenth-century American newspapers to understand the prevalent social milieu and then closely analyzes select literary texts of the time, to argue that the distinct racial circumstances that framed black and white women’s struggles enabled them to reform the domestic space as needed. Analysis of the nineteenth century press reveals that while white women resist an ideology of womanhood that restrains their potential to housekeeping, black women battle the impact of slavery.

Through a comparative analysis between texts featuring white and black women, I show that black women’s history of slavery and continued racial discrimination makes them vulnerable to the additional challenges of familial dissolution, racially motivated violence and stigmas of incompetence associated with the black identity. My study emphasizes that these distinct
experiences translate into the differing kinds of domestic spaces that white and black women create. White women reform the domestic domain to pursue their aspirations beyond the scope of marriage and motherhood, whereas black women advocate for a private realm that facilitates their work in the public space, enabling them to uplift themselves, and the black community at large. Ultimately, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersection of race and gender in showing how matters of race impacts nineteenth-century American women’s struggle of altering the traditional view on domesticity to create a version that tends to their desires.
For my loving husband, Timothy Dean Leonard. Thank you for your unwavering support in all of my dreams.
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My family deserves all the praise. I’m grateful to my parents Lt. Col (Rt.) Parmenas B. Mall and Amber Mall for their financial and moral support throughout my educational journey. Shaiyanne (Sheikhu) Mall is my childhood companion who has motivated me through the years. Nosheen (aunt) and Bimla Samuel (grandmother) opened their home to me in the US. My in-laws Frank and Nina Leonard’s appreciation of my academic pursuits is invaluable. Katherine Leonard’s wild escapades added comic relief to this otherwise challenging task of writing a dissertation. And there’s Tim Leonard, my safe haven. His continued faith in my abilities brought me the peace of mind I needed to complete the program. Finally, I’d like to pat the back of 23-year-old Rida who arrived in the US several years ago with big dreams.

Thank you God for the life I have and everything in it.
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Introduction

The domestic space, an arena where routine functions of everyday living take place and domesticity, a term used to discern this seemingly established system within the private realm is ironically regarded as the most non-static space and unstable concept. Scholars of nineteenth-century American literature and culture unanimously agree that notions such as domestic and domesticity are protean. For example, Nina Baym considers the term “domestic” as “not a fixed or neutral word” (26). Amy Kaplan considers domesticity as “more mobile and less stabilizing” (43). While most scholars observe the variable nature of the terms domestic and domesticity, few critics such as Stacey Gills and Joanne Hollows reason this mutability in detail. According to Gillis and Hollows, “meaning of domestic culture is produced, maintained, reworked and challenged within and across different historical formations” (xi). Gills and Hollows further note that “meanings attached with a domestic culture undergo historical transformations” and that “even within a historical period, the meaning of domestic culture will be differentiated by ethnicity, race and class and across material contexts” (32). Domesticity cannot be considered fixed, stable, or universal because cultural movements throughout history as well as gender and racial differences continually mold the home space. Women of different ethnicities and class status have frequently questioned the spatial boundaries between the public and private domain. My dissertation probes this mutability of the domestic space by focusing primarily on women’s experiences in nineteenth-century American literature to consider ways in which racial differences play a role in “challenging” and “reworking” the conventional connotations associated with the domestic space.

Traditionally, the private realm of the home was seen as white women’s proper place and involvement in home making tasks as their obvious work. From a young age, women were
trained in home making activities such as cooking, cleaning, and needlework to ease them into their later roles as mothers and wives. Married women were expected to make the home a haven that supports their husbands’ success in the public space and ensures that their children are adequately raised in line with Christian principles. Gillis and Hollows note that women’s presence in the domestic space and their involvement in homemaking activities reinforced the “association between home and femininity” (4). The scholars explain how women’s devotion to the domestic space and everything it entailed was seen as a measure of their femininity. While some critics consider domesticity as a concept that cemented women’s qualities in their roles of wives and mothers, others reviewing the black familial structure note that the term domesticity is not always equivalent to marriage and motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins points out that black women’s familial design and lifestyle in general “deviates” from the standard family model (45). Collins reasons that black women’s history of slavery “provided no social context for privatized motherhood, as a stay-at-home occupation” (50). Contrary to white women for whom domesticity implied marriage and motherhood, black women’s experiences of familial separation and abuse in bondage deprived them of a stable private space.

While existent criticism discusses the concept of domesticity in relation to black and white women, less attention is paid to how black and white women’s distinct challenges have led them to reshape the traditional domestic setting. Prominent nineteenth century texts such as Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1854), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) and Charlotte Gilman Perkin’s stories “Three Thanksgivings (1900),” “The Cottagette” (1910) and “Turned” (1911) feature women that challenge the norms governing traditional domesticity to reform their domestic spaces. In these reformed spaces, women exercise freedom and pursue their personal aspirations. Literary texts featuring black women such as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of*
a Slave Girl (1861), Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy (1892) and Pauline Hopkins’ Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South (1900) also present women as inhabiting spaces that allows them greater access. For example, Linda Brent from Incidents makes consistent efforts to be reunited with her children. Sappho Clark from Contending Forces forms a family unit by marrying Will and accepting her son by the novel’s close. Harper’s Iola Leroy too finds joy and stability in her marriage to Dr. Latimer. Recovering from the impact of slavery and racial discrimination, the black female protagonists in these texts seek stable familial structures that ensures their sense of security and facilitates their individual goals.

This dissertation will closely analyze the distinct experiences of black and white women in the aforementioned texts to show how these experiences shape the domestic space. In comparing narratives featuring white women to those portraying black women, I show how these female characters, in creating and reforming domestic spaces not only expand the meaning and implications of domesticity but also offer an alternate lens to view nineteenth-century American womanhood. Women in Fern’s, Chopin’s, Gilman’s, Jacobs’, Harper’s and Hopkins’ texts aspire for economic independence, indulge in personal hobbies and prefer a marriage based on choice and mutuality to advocate for a domestic design and a form of womanhood that is more accommodating of their individual desires.

An analysis of domestic spaces in Fern’s, Chopin’s, Gilman’s, Jacobs’, Harper’s and Hopkins’ texts necessitates first, an understanding of the nineteenth-century cultural milieu and the implications of traditional domesticity for black and white women. This chapter therefore examines select magazines and newspapers from the 1800s that were aimed at white women and the African American community. It also considers the input of literary scholars such as Barbara Welter, Gerda Lerner, Patricia Hill Collins and Deborah White that have commented on black
and white women’s response to the norms governing the private realm. A combined study of select historical and literary sources helps build a historical context, offering useful lenses to study the distinct experiences of black and white women in the domestic space.

A study of nineteenth-century Women’s magazines provides insight into the traditions related to white femininity. *American Ladies Magazine, The Lady’s Home Journal, Harper’s Bazar, The Godey’s Lady Book,* and *Good Housekeeping* were popular women’s periodicals at the time that reflected the expectations associated with women. The content of these journals included short stories centered on themes such as marriage and the importance of women’s virtuousness. Some articles also provided biblical teachings and instructions on home making tasks such as needlework and meal recipes. The overarching purpose of these magazines was to train young girls into becoming socially acceptable mothers and wives. For example, an entry entitled “Etiquette and Good Manners” (1886) from *The Ladies Home Journal* emphasizes the “great importance” of good manners at the table (4). The article presents seating at the dining table as an apt position where the “innate refinement of the person is more fully exhibited” (4). While this entry highlights importance of women’s good mannerisms, another entry titled “At Home” speaks more directly to the qualities young women should inculcate in preparation for marriage. “At Home” (1835) presents a short story about the character Anna, whose dedication to the parental home and “domestic charities” at once attract Robert, a potential suitor (451). Robert appreciates Anna’s “loving and kind” nature conveying the overarching message that “if [a woman] has not loved the home of her childhood, she will never love the home of her husband” (451). The article encourages young women’s commitment to the domestic space showing how having an amiable behavior can increase their prospects for marriage. Marriage is thus presented as the reward of good behavior and the ultimate goal for women.
Although most women’s magazines encouraged marriage, there were a few periodicals that cautioned women about this institution. Magazines conveyed the long-term impact of marriage, advising women to be prudent when deciding to step into the role of a wife. “Marriage of Madam Roland” (1835) for example, encourages girls to seek a “man” rather than a “boy.” It further states that “a girl’s future life is a most precious thing, and it ought to be precious to her than to anyone else. The happiness of a lifetime is a serious thing with which to take any chances.” The article cautions young girls against making hasty decision, instructing them to be vigilant and value the level of maturity in a man when choosing a spouse. Notably, there were other articles that also highlighted the benefits of women marrying the partner of their choice. For example, the article “Maxims on Marriage” (1836) from *American Ladies Magazine* critiques the idea of “marry first, love will come later” stating that “a thousand things may happen to make the state but barely tolerable, even when it is entered in with mutual affection” (430). The article further states, “How much easier and pleasanter it is for a woman to obey the man of her choice, than one she would not have had could she have avoided it!” (430). Another entry titled “The Girl Who Was Married to The Man She Did Not Like” (1834) from the same magazine depicts the grief of young female character who is forced to marry a man whom she sees as an “old creature” (503). As narrated, “the poor girl wept more freely, for she knew that no mortal eye would witness her sorrow” (503). Both pieces emphasize the value of considering women’s desires in a marital alliance as it is “easier” and “pleasanter” for women to submit to a man of their choosing (503). Neglecting these desires leads to unhappiness and resentment among women which can consequently lead to unsuccessful marriages.

It is worth noting that at a time when most magazines emphasized marriage and women’s devotion to the home, there were some articles that highlighted women’s desire to break away
from the traditional norms. “Marriage of Madam Roland” (1835) from the American Ladies Magazine follows the conversation between a mother and daughter revealing the new aspirations of the younger generations. The daughter tells her mother, “I hate servitude, but I do not think myself made for empire; it would only embarrass me: my reason finds it quite enough to take of myself” (361). The daughter further expresses that if she were to marry, it would be to a man “who would make his happiness consist in contributing to [hers]. Here, the daughter puts forward the novel ideas of women’s independence and a marriage model that is based on a mutual happiness of both partners. To her daughter’s views, the mother responds, “Happiness, daughter, does not always consist in that perfect conformity of ideas and affections which you imagine; were it so, a happy couple would be a phenomenon” (361). The dialogue between the two characters reveals the ideological discrepancy between different generations of women. As the daughter envisions a life of independence and a marriage where her desires are considered, the mother is quick to discard these ideas as farfetched. In calling her daughter’s thinking as imaginative, the mother communicates the reality of women’s position in nineteenth-century America where singlehood is not encouraged, and marriages are more hierarchical than equal. Although the article acknowledges the unconventional views of young female readers, it still counters these views with real life lessons, guiding the women towards the traditional design.

A piece titled “The Birthday Gift” (1834) from the American Ladies Magazine offers more insight into what this traditional design entails. The article presents the husband as the head of the home and instructs women to respectfully follow the lead. As narrated, “It is the husband’s place to go forward and set her example and she, with a grateful mind and glowing heart, will follow in his footsteps, and even outstrip him in disinterestedness, without forfeiting the modesty so lovely in her character” (382). The article further states that if the “husband ever regards his
companion as his equal, she may, without lowering her own dignity in the least, of her own free choice, treat him as a superior.” In a similar vein, the article “Literary Notices: The Wife, And Woman’s Reward External Developments Of The Organs Of The Mental Faculties” (1835) also reinforces the wife’s image as the follower in asserting that a woman who “looks forward to becoming the wife of her beloved” should demonstrate love that is “humble, trusting, and willing to be guided” (533). The articles offer a view into the real-life dynamics between a husband and wife delineating the hierarchy existent in nineteenth-century marriages. Idea of equality and mutuality appear “imaginary” as the mother figure (from Marriage of Madam Roland) puts it since the wife’s subordinate position at the time was seen as an important factor in maintaining the equilibrium in marriage (361). In presenting the husband as the leader and the wife a follower, these magazines instruct women to cultivate humility, modesty and a stance of submission that maintains the man’s sense of superiority and leadership in the home.

While some articles addressed the role of the husband, others discussed the image of the ideal wife. An article “A Good Wife A Sermon of Rev Dr. Bishop” (1835) from the American Ladies Magazine further outlines the characteristics of a noble wife. As narrated, “The good wife is an affectionate woman…Every domestic, and every friend, and every stranger, and the friend of every distant friend and acquaintance, finds immediately at home, while under her roof, and while partaking of her hospitality” (228). The article depicts the wife as a compassionate individual who extends love to her immediate family and to everyone around her. With her generosity and warmth, the ideal wife welcomingly makes her home a haven for friends and relatives. Her hospitality reflects her skills in homemaking, her positive character traits and the ability to care for her family.
In addition to propagating the image of the ideal wife, the magazines also emphasized the role and duties of a good mother. The magazines offered advice on subjects such as raising children, ways to encourage family bonding, time saving techniques in the kitchen and incorporating Christian faith in the experience of motherhood. For example, one article titled “The Cradle” (1889) from The Ladies Home Journal is aimed at new mothers and offers advice on how to cope with a growing infant. The article specifically highlights the importance of a restful sleep for the infant. As narrated, “…as soon as practicable, baby should be taught to go sleep regularly, and by all means in a crib where nature’s sweet and restful repose will be refreshing and baby wake[s] up in a good humor” (9). The article further cautions about the act of rocking the baby to induce sleep suggesting that “it should be early abandoned, and even when essential used in most careful moderation.” Articles as “The Cradle” were especially helpful for new mothers as it provided counsel on the specific needs of the baby and lessons on adopting or discarding certain practices that would improve the baby’s health. Another similar article that provides advice on how to meet the growing needs of children is the entry “Helpful Hints For Mothers” (1889) which offers useful instructions regarding children’s outgrown garments. The article highlights the experience of one mother who shares her sewing trick, “While making the dresses I was careful to have neat little tucks in the sleeves just above the embroidery that could easily be let down as they were outgrown…” (9). In suggesting ways to increase the life and usage of children’s clothes, the article trains women to cost effectively manage children’s requirements. Articles directed at young mothers were thus helpful in terms of providing these women with the necessary information regarding children’s various stages of growth and on how to prepare for these different stages.
In particular, the need to plan and prepare was emphasized in articles directed at mothers in larger families. For example, “The Young Mother in the Home: How One Mother with Five Children Regulates Her Day” (1907) is a lengthy piece that instructs mothers on how to use their time wisely and increase their overall efficiency. The article proposes a plan for a single day starting from morning to evening and shows its reader the significance of well-established system. The piece demonstrates that developing a schedule can help young mothers reach a point where they realize that “with five children to look after—and system, life is easier than it used to be with only one—and chaos.” The article emphasizes that if all tasks such as preparing meals, bathing the baby and supervising older children are carefully organized, the mother and father can even “have their time together.” Another article “Family Pleasures” (1889) also encourages an organizational system conveying how planning activities “in which every member of the family can partake” is conducive to family bonding. The article promotes “simple pleasures” such as reading story books of travels, music, a set of checkers, a box of dominos, fishing excursions, picnics and drives (10). These pleasures when planned and incorporated into daily life create a “close bond” between parents and children, subsequently leading to a healthy family dynamic. Mothers in larger families hence found such articles useful as they learned new and innovative ways to engage their families and increase their own efficiency.

In addition, to counseling specifically new mothers and mothers in large families, women’s magazines provided helpful pointers for women in general regarding domestic work. “Good Housekeeping: As I Learned It From My Hired Girl” (1887) from the Arthur’s Home Magazine for example, advices readers on focusing on one task each day as opposed to attempting to complete several. The article identifies “trying to do a little of everything in one day, and doing no task thoroughly” as a common problem in the approach to housekeeping (97).
It instead suggests “having one day for each kind of work and doing that work thoroughly” to avoid a pile up of unfinished work. In a similar vein, “Housekeepers: Helps and Economies in Housekeeping” (1888) also provides useful housekeeping information. The article emphasizes the uses of buttermilk in referring to it as “a great cleanser and purifier” that dispels odors and fungus (378). The piece also encourages women to discover “convenient and economical ways of doing things” on their own with “actual experience and practice” (378). It appears that while these journals reinforced women’s traditional roles and duties as mothers and wives, they also provided information that could make homemaking relatively easier and convenient.

Apart from suggesting practical systems to manage the household, women’s magazines also emphasized the importance of incorporating Christian faith in everyday living. Articles advised women to read the Bible, attend church and manage their lives and domestic circles in a way that reflect Christian virtues. One article “The Destiny of a Woman” (1836) from the American Ladies Magazine shows the positive influence of religion on women. As narrated, “…it is only when woman is under the influence of the Christian religion that she develops the loveliest form” (383). Another article “They Who Were Never Brides” (1898) from The Ladies Home Journal also emphasizes the importance of faith in asserting, “A good woman never gets far away from feeling that the church and home stand side by side in their effect upon the people” (14). It is worth noting that while most articles emphasized the value of Christian teachings in broad terms, there were few that included mentions of specific biblical books and verses. For example, “A Good Wife A Sermon of Rev. Dr. Bishop” (1835) highlights the book of Timothy and Samuel advising women to read them closely and study the lives of female characters in these books. In drawing reader’s attention to these characters and emphasizing the value of Christian faith and church in general, the magazines presented the Bible and the pulpit
as the source of wisdom for women as opposed to the outside world. Women that followed Christian teachings were seen as embodying the “loveliest form” and “goodness” as they selflessly dedicated their lives to the advancement of the family life (228).

One of the ways in which magazines encouraged women to build a family-oriented home culture and strive for efficiency in housekeeping was by showing them how their efforts contributed to societal progress at large. In demonstrating to women that their hard work and practice of high moral standards mattered beyond the immediate parameters of the home, the magazines highlighted the long-term impact of women’s roles and responsibilities. For example, “Domestic Department: The Importance of Good Housekeeping” (1875) from *Ohio Farmer* conveys that “our women readers would forget how important this question of good housekeeping really is, or how much it conduces to the welfare of our race” (108). The article here specifically emphasizes the role women’s domestic prowess plays in the progress of the white community. The article further notes that women’s faithfulness to their families and to the “home duties” is crucial to the “elevation and glory of nations, and to the general good of society” (108). Since stable homes nurture a stable future generation, good housekeeping “elevates” society. The article motivates its female readers in affirming the value of their work and reminding them that in taking care of the home front, they too are an integral part of society and are effectively contributing to the welfare of the community.

Notably, in addition to emphasizing women’s responsibility towards the home and family, the magazines also highlighted the importance of women’s physical grooming. Magazines advised women to dress well and look presentable as outward appearance was seen as a reflection of character. “Women’s Fashions” (1878) from the *New York Times* notes that “clothes are indications of taste in other things than dress only.” “Mr. Beecher’s Letter. I: XI.
Modern Fashions” (1887) from *Christian Union* identifies these “other things” as women’s “genius for domesticity” (7). According to “Mr. Beecher’s Letter,” tastefulness in women “creates good order and good taste in homes, refines conduct, blossoms in apparel, regulates etiquette, and everywhere in the realms of home seeks to secure elements of the beautiful” (7). Women’s good aesthetic sense was valued as it indicated their ability to cultivate beauty and order in every aspect of their lives such as home related activities and individual conduct and mannerisms. A poorly dressed woman would “strike everyone with a sense of incongruity” as stated in “The Household: Women’s Dress” (1875) from *Christian Union* since a shabby exterior would imply a disorder of inner values, and the inability to nurture stability in everyday life and relationships (7). Women were therefore encouraged to appreciate and incorporate beauty in their personality to convey a positive impression of their character and skills.

The emphasis on women’s attire explains the wide circulation of fashion magazines that kept women abreast with clothing trends at the time and provided lessons on embroidery and sewing. *Godey’s Book and Magazine* was one very popular magazine that showcased patterns for women’s dresses and accessories. In the 1854 addition of the *Godey’s* for example, readers are shown visuals of the “polka jacket,” (see Fig. 1) a form fitting attire that was tight at the waistline to give women a more flattering appeal. The magazine defines the jacket as “exceedingly pretty and elegant, and well calculated to show off the figure to an advantage” (294). Single women may be at the “advantage” of winning the interest of a potential suitor while married women may continue to look attractive for their husband which would be favorable for the
marriage in the long term. The magazine thus demonstrated to women on how to groom themselves and look their best.

The magazine also included sketches of specific embroidery stitches showing how these can be useful for making women’s apparel, children’s clothing and even home items such as table mats, and table runners. The Herring Bone Stitch (see Fig. 2) was a popular embroidery stitch mainly used for borders and cloth trimmings. The magazine provides detailed instructions on how to create these diagonal stitches and its many variations to suit different patterns. It instructs women to note the slanting position of the needle guiding them on when and how to change its position to create a fine design. Such detailed instruction conveyed the intricacies of home activities inspiring women readers to appreciate these nuances.

In addition to highlighting the details of embroidery, the magazine also emphasized the use of other types of needlework such bead work. The Bead Basket (see Fig. 3) is an illustration of how “simple patterns” can be used for a “very pretty effect” (295). The magazine informs that cotton is used to give the item its “regular roundness” and that the white and steel beads knitted in each pine give the basket its interior structure. The magazine further explains how the use of ribbons and different fabrics such as silk and wool “improves the effect” [of the basket] considerably (295). The illustration showed women readers how their skill in needle work will aid them not just in designing fashionable apparel but also in
creating useful items such as a basket that holds and transport goods. In providing such detailed step by step instruction with illustrations, the *Godey's Book* taught women to develop finesse in their work and see their handicraft creations as meaningful contributions to the home.

An examination of nineteenth-century women magazines conveys the expectations associated with womanhood at the time. Clearly proficiency in domestic science was encouraged more than formal education amongst young girls. Single women were advised to cultivate humility and gentility in their personality to improve their marriage prospects. Married women were expected to submit to the husband’s leadership and manage the home in a way that ensures a comforting environment for the family. Moreover, women were continuously instructed to polish their skills in homemaking and find ways to increase their efficiency in roles of mothers and wives. While a study of women’s magazines provides a contextual understanding of the notions regarding white femininity, the work of literary scholars such as Barbara Welter, Marie Molloy, Nicole Tonkovich and Gerda Lerner further highlights white women’s position as they navigated the expectation surrounding traditional domesticity.

Scholars writing about nineteenth-century American womanhood note that notions of obedience, godliness and sacrifice associated with women at the time created the image of an ideal woman, also known as the “true woman.” Barbara Welter identifies the true woman as one who depicted the virtues of “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” asserting that these attributes “spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife-woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power” (152). Welter explains that the ideal woman retained Christian virtues, practiced high standards of morality and obediently committed herself to the service of her home. Her identity was mainly tied to her role as a sister, mother and a wife and her social standing too depended on
these roles and how well she performed her duties. Welter’s discussion of the ideal woman and the print content of the time that enforced women’s devotion to the home convey the demarcation between the public and private space in nineteenth-century America. In the private domain of the home women cooked, cleaned and raised children while men as the sole breadwinners worked in the public space to financially support their families.

The division of spheres led to a hierarchy between men and women’s positions in society. In the public space men explored new financial opportunities such as seeking employment, establishing a business and owning property—all of which helped them achieve personal growth and social prominence. Women however had little to no position outside the domestic space as their sole purpose was to ensure the welfare of the family. Writing about the impact of the public and private divide, Marie Molloy notes,

It was an ideology that kept women in their proper social and familial roles, by severely circumscribing their autonomy beyond the household and limiting their influence even in church and education. By telling women that their moral influence and power lay in the home and domestic sphere, men tried to limit women’s sphere of independence, and thus bolster their own position. (16)

The division of spheres pronounced the existent gender inequality as men enjoyed the privileges of unchallenged access to the public space while women’s autonomy was “severely” restricted “beyond the household.” In the marketplace, men achieved professional success and acquired skills to thrive in the world which strengthened their position in the public arena and in the home. Women on the other hand, were kept in their proper place as mothers and wives and were subordinate to men who retained all authority when making major decisions regarding the household.
The gender inequality that emanated from the notion of separate domains ultimately “deepened” the culture of women’s dependence on men (Epstein 79). With limited formal education and no prospects of employment, women experienced little agency even over their own lives. Nicole Toknovich writes about women’s limited influence in the home in stating that “even property had more agency than she” (131) She explains that the ideal woman “must accommodate herself to a husband whose actions are not predictable; to children who grow, learn and depart from her home; to temperamental domestics who come and go and to fluctuating social responsibilities” (Toknovich 131). In the process of “accommodating” themselves to the needs of the family and submitting to “social responsibilities”, women retained little sense of self and depended on the male figure to direct their lives. Fathers, brothers and husbands were seen as figures of authority in the home and women relied on these male heads for financial, moral and physical support.

In the mid and latter half of nineteenth century, a confluence of various historical movements resulted in a transformed outlook of the ideal American women which subsequently altered the contours of traditional domesticity. In the mid 1800s, America saw the industrial revolution, a period of major technological development that replaced manual labor in factories and agriculture. The innovation of steam powered engines and electrical motors created employment for rural women whose skills in handicrafts were still relevant to select manufactures. As Thomas Dublin notes, “With the decline of handloom weaving after the mid-1800s, rural store-keepers and urban manufacturers continued to supply farm women with raw materials for fabrication” (32). To supply manufacturers with handloom products, women engaged in “outwork,” a form of remote employment where women wove the products in their home (Dublin 32). This system of paid labor initiated a change in the domestic scene as women
became financial contributors in the household which eventually paved way for their economic independence.

The advances in technological innovations at the time also prompted the migration of young men to the West who moved in search of employment opportunities. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg identifies the migration as a “grand exodus” to the “West and the urban frontier” that meant “spinsterhood” and “economic dependence” for women living in their hometown (81). Singlehood encouraged women to seek employment and strive for financial stability. Moreover, women’s entry in the public space prepared them to fill more public positions during the war when men left for the battlefield. Susan Cruea explains that “necessity forced many women to forsake True Womanhood in order to fill positions left vacant by men who had gone off to fight during the Civil War. Women took on the roles of teachers, office workers, government workers, and store clerks” (191). Working in blue and white-collar jobs, exposed women to the commercial sector, and boosted their confidence as they recognized their potential for achievement in tasks beyond homemaking. While lower and middle-class women entered the public space to become breadwinners, upper-class women also gained more visibility by exploring educational opportunities and improving their employment prospects. Gerda Lerner informs that affluent women felt that “their own career expectation [had] been encouraged by widening educational opportunities” and their “potential for power had been enhanced” in the cultural shift (12). A change in mindset thus occurred across all strata of women in this period of transition. Middle class women created a space for themselves in male oriented jobs and upper-class women with a new realization of their “potential for power” gained influence by joining clubs and participating in activities centered on women’s rights and progress.
Ultimately, women’s increasing prominence in the public realm and their new outlook challenged the ideals of self-sacrifice and obedience that the old model of true womanhood proposed. With access to education and opportunities for financial independence, women in the late nineteenth century represented what France B. Cogan defines as “Real Womanhood,” a revised version of “true womanhood” which allowed women to retain their position as loving wives, mothers and daughters without foregoing their sense of self. Cogan explains,

Far from assuming that women were hysterical, and biologically weak specimens from birth easily subdued, and dominated by male force, strong emotion and male rationality, the Real Womanhood ideal offered American women a vision of themselves as biologically equal (rationally as well as emotionally) and in many cases markedly superior intellect to what passed for male business sense, scholarship, and theological understanding. (5)

The modified model of womanhood challenged ideas of weakness and submissiveness associated with women, paving way for an ideology that began to recognize women’s ability to succeed in affairs beyond the scope of housekeeping. Working alongside men in the public realm motivated women to envision a lifestyle based on gender parity rather than hierarchy in professional and personal lives. In the domestic space, women moved away from a subordinate status, adopting a more assertive position which enabled them to communicate their opinions, contribute to discussions and actively take decisions.

An investigation of white femininity in nineteenth-century America therefore helps understand the traditional expectations associated with womanhood and how in a period of political change, women challenged these conventional expectations to create a private space that allowed them more freedom. Although the concept of divided spaces is useful to study
nineteenth-century women’s experiences at the time, more recent scholars have argued that this model does not account for factors, such as the perspective and position of African Americans. You-Me Park and Gayle Wald challenge white women’s subordinate image in the private space stating that, “Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson took great care to portray bourgeois white women not merely as victims of domestic enslavement but as the powerful overseers of their households, as adept at enforcing the rule of racial and class superiority as the plantation overseers charged with enforcing the will of the slaveholding master” (269). Park and Wald call attention to black women’s experiences in the domestic space to show how aspects of race and class complicate the binary of public and private. While white women strived for the preservation of the self in a society that demanded their complete devotion to the home, black women suffered the impact of slavery. During slavery, African Americans experienced the loss of home, familial separation and physical abuse. Post emancipation, the African American community continued to face racial discrimination and social ostracization. In the discussion that follows, a study of nineteenth-century black press and the work of select black scholars highlight the challenges African Americans especially women faced while recovering from the impact of slavery. An examination of the black community’s circumstances is necessary to understand how these unique experiences shaped the African American domestic setting.

Contrary to the press targeted at white women that intended to inculcate finesse in its readers, the black press took on the more rudimentary task of acquainting the black community with their basic human rights after years spent in slavery. At the time, the mainstream print culture neglected and/or presented African Americans in a negative light by underscoring the community’s low literacy rate and projecting them as incapable workers. It was this lack of positive representation in the dominant press that eventually led to the inception of Freedom’s
Journal, the first African American newspaper founded in 1827 that depicted the black community’s aspirations. The North Star, The Colored American, The Cleveland Gazette were other newspapers that were established shortly afterwards to help the black community achieve more visibility. These newspapers kept the black community abreast with current social and political affairs while also encouraging their moral and formal education. Overall, the purpose of the press was to uplift African Americans by instilling unity in the community and motivating its people to seek formal training which would eventually improve their social image and ease their reintegration into society.

One of the ways in which the newspapers instilled a sense of solidarity in the community was by reminding African Americans their suffering in slavery. Articles revisited the past emphasizing the brutality and injustice that the community suffered. For example, one article from The North Star notes, “The condition of slaves in this country is analogous to that of the ancient Greeks and Roman, and not that of the feudal times. They are considered not as person but as THINGS” (1). The same paper also reports an eyewitness’ sighting of the treatment of southern slaves, “They would order them to open their mouth, then press back their lips with their two thumbs. On a window sill lay a large pile of manacles, some were constructed of a large iron with handcuffs on each side, so as to form a row” (1). The description conveys the extent of physical abuse that the black community endured in slavery. In comparing the slave population to “things” and highlighting their physical torture, the North Star emphasizes the dehumanization of the African Americans.

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In addition to reporting physical violence, the black press also highlighted the psychological impact of slavery on the black community. An edition of the *Freedom's Journal* for example, communicates the long-term trauma caused during bondage, “much of the happiness or misery we experience through life depends on the impressions we receive in childhood” (1).² Emphasizing that childhood memories are important to one’s mental health, the newspaper calls slavery “dangerous” for those who are “born in the midst of slavery” and are “always degraded throughout their youth.” In a similar vein, another article titled “Original Communications. American Colonization society” (1827) from the *Freedom's Journal* also notes the mental stress of slavery. According to this article “masters are not only incapable of developing the intellect of their slaves, but they generally had a strong propensity to prevent their development” (2). Much of the content in the earlier newspapers highlighted the black community’s physical abuse and how this physical trauma stymied their mental growth. Jacqueline Bacon further explains the purpose of printing such content in stating *Freedom's Journal* brought to light that many Americans would rather avoid and constantly reminded free African Americans of the oppression faced by their “brethren who were still in bondage” (212). Emphasizing the blacks’ suffering was not only a way to condemn the atrocities committed under slavery but also a way to unite the free African Americans with the bonded community in the knowledge of their collective trauma. This sense of shared suffering would eventually bring the African Americans together in actively campaigning against the injustice of the past and in later years.

Newspapers published after the abolition of slavery critiqued the continued discrimination of the black community in public spaces. The press called out the still prevalent pro-slavery mindset that deprived African Americans from quality education and employment opportunities. An article titled “The School Question. Mixed and Separate Schools” (1883) terms racially segregated schools as “hot houses for prejudice” (2). The article advocates for mixed schools as a measure to counter the “unjust discrimination in the selection of studies for the colored and white schools” (2). Since schools for black children follow a poor curriculum, a more uniform education across racial lines in mixed schools will bring about greater social equality.

While some articles condemned the poor education system for blacks, others discussed the marginalization of the community in the marketplace. One article from The Colored American identifies the insecurity of the white community as the reason for the black people’s social exclusion. According to the article, proslavery groups are concerned that the “free negro will work so much better than the white laborer, that the latter will be injured by the pressure of the negro competition” and “that the negroes are so eager for work as to leave none for white work men” (1). The article discusses how the black people’s experience in and willingness to perform manual labor posits a threat to the white community. It appears that in an effort to protect their own position and maintain their stronghold as a racial community, white people in prominent posts have sidelined African Americans. The black press thus advocates for racial diversity in schools and in the workplace for better representation of the black community in society overall.

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Along with highlighting the pressing issues that were impeding the black population’s progress at the time, the press also intended to motivate African Americans on an internal level. Newspapers encouraged the black community to be cognizant of their present position and make an internal resolve to better themselves. A piece titled “Advertisement” (1883) from the *Cleveland Gazette* states,

People are beginning to think for themselves, and to regard authority much less than argument. Men and women are no longer willing that a few individuals should dictate to them what must be their sentiments and opinions. They claim the right to solve for themselves the great questions of the day and demand that the general good of humanity shall be respected. As the result of this general awakening, we see, on every hand, unmistakable evidence of reformatory action. (2)

The article conveys how a “general awakening” has prevailed amongst African Americans as they are now more familiar with their rights. This new awareness has equipped them with the knowledge and confidence to maintain their opinions and not be easily subdued. Here, the paper’s attempt to motivate its black readers resonates with what Bacon calls “self-help” (109). According to Bacon, “the most meaningful and effective self-help efforts were those directed by the blacks themselves” (109). In sharing about the black community’s new awakening, the paper too promotes the concept of self-help by urging readers to “think for themselves” as a fresh understanding of the self and the existing situation forms the basis of communal reform and progress.

In an effort to encourage a mentality that is geared to self-development, the press further instructed the black community to eschew surface level racial politics and focus on concrete measures that would improve the community as a whole. One article titled “Mr. Laws and The
Newspapers” (1885) from the *Washington Bee* projects the black community’s need to “outlive complexions” as a cause of their social regression (3). The piece further asserts, “Having about twenty complexions to the race, if we are to strive to outlive complexions, which range from blackest to the whitest, then we will have no time for the improvement of the race such as moral, religious, and political improvements, which constituted the truest equality and independence of American citizenship” (3). The message here appears as an attempt to frame the black community’s understanding of what equality and independence mean. By discouraging the obsession over color differences and the need to surpass the white community, the piece motivates African Americans to value themselves as they are and work towards their moral and practical training which would strengthen individual character and the community as a whole.

In order to promote moral education in the black community, newspapers highlighted the importance of reading the Bible and attending church. The church was seen as the source of religious and ethical guidance while lessons from the Bible were seen equally important to enrich character. Writing about the insight that the Bible provides, an article titled “Notices of Books” (1848) from *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* printed prior to the abolition of slavery asserts that the “light of the Bible” helps “distinguish man from a brute” (2). In a similar vein an article titled “The Scriptures as a Specimen of Literature by R. G. Cogswell” (1848) from the same newspaper states about the Bible, “Its material for the exercise of deep thought, for cultivating the taste, for invigorating the imagination and for eliciting the best feels of the soul, is rich and exhaustless. Its weighty doctrines, the hope it enkindles, the fears it arrays, alike prove its divine” (4). In earlier newspapers, the Bible is projected as an uplifting tool for the black community that was at the time suffering from physical and mental abuse in bondage. The “weighty” biblical doctrines and lessons were considered to inspire hope and positivity for
African Americans as they navigated through fear and uncertainty. This tradition of promoting the Bible as a source of moral education and character reformation continued after the abolition of slavery. However, in later newspapers, visual advertisements were also incorporated to further appeal the black audiences. A visual from (See Fig. 4) from *The Colored American* shows how the Bible was sold at cost effective deals with “beautiful illustrations, colored maps and concordance” to provide the black community an affordable and an enhanced learning of Christianity. Strategies as these were implemented to foster optimism in the black community as they recovered from a history of abuse.

It is worth noting, that in addition to publishing material that was geared at black people’s character development, newspapers also provided practical information needed to succeed in the public space. While most magazines addressed the importance of quality education, some also informed readers about employment opportunities available to African Americans. For example, “Mr. Laws and The Newspapers” (1885) from *Washington Bee* presents newspapers as a possible source of earning for the black community. As stated, “Not only can newspapers be run by press boys but large stores and industrial enterprises for the employment of salesmen and clerks from among the young ladies and gentlemen of our own race” (3). According to the article, a platform such as the press that highlights the voice of the black people can empower the community directly by offering its people positions within its organizational structure. A 1900 edition of the *Colored American* similarly informs that “the South need skilled workmen in every
industry and offers splendid chances to trained Negros.” Moreover, newspapers published at the turn of the century printed advertisements for jobs (see Fig 5) that could further socially elevate African Americans. In Fig. 5 the “enclosed 2c stamp for reply” is indicative of the monetary incentives that were dispersed to encourage black people’s applications to potential positions. Information related to existing and new opportunities was readily circulated to help the black community’s entry into the workforce, giving them a chance to improve their economic situation.

Although magazines exclusively for black women were not published till well into the 1900s, nineteenth-century African American mainstream newspapers did acknowledge women’s efforts and push for their progress. For example, “Platform of the National Colored Convention” (1883) from the Cleveland Gazette recognizes “the great sacrifice of women” in the black community’s struggle to freedom (2). Another article “Our Washington Letter” (1883) from the Cleveland Gazette encourages black women’s education by dissuading the community from “educating boys at the expense of girls.” The article further explains that “the mother exercises more influence in molding the character and thus shaping the destiny of the child than the father, and that she should be properly fitted by education for the responsible nature and society require she should assume.” The article emphasizes how educated women can positively shape domestic spaces by extending their well-informed and cultured influence over the family they raise. At a time when the black community was attempting to restore their home life after years of familial

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Fig. 5 Job Advertisement. The Colored American. 1900

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separation during slavery, women’s education and personality development were seen as vital elements to further this cause. Here it is important to note that while the black press endorsed women’s advancement, it also instilled beauty and fashion ideals that contradicted the very notion of racial pride that it upheld. Newspapers advertised bleaching creams and hair straighteners setting new standards of beauty. In Fig 6, “two shades lighter” skin is shown as desirable while Fig. 7 hails “straight, soft, pliable and glossy hair” over black women’s original hair which is considered “harsh and stubborn.” Here, the longing for Caucasian features can be seen as black people’s, especially women’s way to acquire what Nowlie M Rooks calls “class mobility with African American communities and social acceptance by dominant culture” (26). Since coarse hair and skin were seen as reminders of African American’s unkempt condition under slavery, the glossy hair and fairer skin offered the community a chance to depart from the old image and potentially attain a degree of social approval.

A study of the 1800’s press indicates how the black and white community were at different stages of development in nineteenth-century America. The content of white women’s magazines that focuses on topics such as time management, garment designs, and continued enforcement of high moral standards in marriage and motherhood indicates that the white
community had an established domestic setting. While advice on various home related topics aided white women in *refining* this established space and its systems, the black community was working towards *creating* a stable home space after years spent in bondage. The content of the black press mainly focused on topics such as seeking employment, developing character, pursuing education—all of which would help the community create a steady domestic space.

An assessment of the white and black communities’ diverse historical backgrounds explains how the experiences of women within these communities were also different. Traditional ideas of femininity did not apply to black women given the lack of a home, familial relations and education they experienced. Prominent black scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Deborah Gray White agree that considering black women were striving for basic human rights, their priorities differed from white women. White writes, “The memories of these former slaves suggest that girls were not kept close to home in the exclusive company of women and were not socialized at an early age to assume culturally defined feminine roles (93). White explains that from the outset, the lack of a stable family relationships prevented black women from practicing traditional feminine roles. Unlike white women, black women were not raised with the notions of propriety and decorum.

Slavery did not only prevent black women from experiencing the comfort of a home in their childhood but in later years also deprived them from the security of being in steady marriages. Dorothy Sterling explains that slave weddings “could be terminated at will by the master” and that “slave women had no power over husband, children or even her own body” (37). Sterling’s assessment of the lack of security black women experienced in marriage is further reinforced in Patricia Hill Collins’ discussion of black women’s familial structures. According to Collins, “By denying enslaved African women marriage, citizenship, and even
humanity, slavery provided no social context for issues of privatized motherhood as a stay-at-home occupation” (50). Contrary to white women who received advice on making their marriage and bonds with their children long lasting, black women faced the constant threat of losing their family to slave trade. With no sense of ownership over children and a marital alliance susceptible to “termination,” black women’s domestic domain did not essentially exist.

White’s, Sterling’s and Collins’ assessments about black women’s lives are thus useful in understanding the connection between black women’s history of deprivation and their move towards stable familial structures. Here, it is worth noting that although black women sought stability, they did not merely subscribe to the traditional domestic living that white women upheld. Rather these women shaped the domestic space according to their needs. As Bart Landry notes, “Freed from the constraints of the master-slave relationship, [African-Americans] looked forward to enacting their own strategy for survival and for allocation of family roles” (32). In Jacob’s Incidents, we see this strategy based on survival when after fleeing to the north, Linda Brent only sees her children briefly and moves between Boston and New York to escape recapture. Like Brent, Harper’s protagonist Iola also forms a unique domestic space in rejecting the social prospects of marrying a white man as Dr. Gresham. Iola instead chooses to marry Dr. Latimer, who like her, takes pride in his black ethnicity. Hopkins’ protagonist, Sappho Clark also, only marries Will after revealing her past to him. Jacob’s, Harper’s and Hopkins’ texts reveal how black women assured their security and sense of self in designing the parameters of their domestic space.

For black women however, embracing a domestic space did not only ensure stability but also allowed them to move away from a degrading outlook associated with their history of slavery. Margaret Murray highlights the importance of “home-making” amongst black women as
means of progress. She writes, “we give lessons in simple sewing, in house cleaning, in street and church manners, and in every line which goes to make young womanhood purer and nobler. Much of the social purity literature that is given out to these girls, and here and there is a seed being sown which will bring forth a better wifehood and motherhood” (58). In the years following the abolition of slavery, lessons on housekeeping and purity literature helped black women build a consistent home life which would eventually aid their integration in a society that had previously reduced them to mere chattel. In aspiring for nobility and purity, these women worked towards erasing the stereotype of hypersexuality associated with their bodies to embrace a more positive image.

A study of black and white women’s distinct experiences in history reveals their unique struggles in and with the domestic space. As Carolyn Karcher puts it, “white women needed to liberate themselves from an ideology of true womanhood that defined them as rarified asexual beings” (788), whereas black women had to combat “unending sexual harassment, concubinage, rape and rupture of family” (787). The pressure of upholding high moral standards, observing subservience in marriage and practicing self-sacrificial devotion to the home prompted white women to create and negotiate the existent domestic space in a way that would allow them more independence. While white women resisted a view that thwarted their individuality, black women battled the brutalities of slavery. After years spent in bondage, these women moved towards steady familial structures and systems to gain a sense of security and social prominence.

My dissertation therefore considers these racial differences to study how women’s diverse experiences in nineteenth-century American literature have altered the contours of the domestic space. In my reading of Fern’s, Gilman’s and Chopin’s texts, I argue that women in these narratives rework the norms of the traditional domestic domain to create a space that
facilitates their ambition to lead a life beyond the scope of marriage and motherhood. My reading of Jacob’s, Harper’s and Hopkins’ texts emphasizes that while black women also reform the domestic space in prioritizing the self, their experiences of abuse, familial separation and continued racial discrimination complicate the notion of the domestic space in the African American context. Ultimately through a comparative analysis between texts featuring white and black women, I show how nineteenth-century women have challenged the ideology surrounding traditional domesticity in unique ways to create one that is more accommodating of their desires. This investigation is important as the focus on women’s efforts in American history provides a context to understand women’s position as professionals and homemakers we see in American literature and culture today. Women’s resistance to traditional norms in the past created fresh possibilities for domesticity and set the foundation for the more independent female figure we see in present America.

To trace how women’s diverse experiences have shaped domestic spaces in America over the years, I first analyze the notion of domesticity in the antebellum context, the period before the official abolition of slavery. The discussion in chapter one ““A home of her own”: Ruth Hall and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” follows an analysis of Fern’s and Jacobs’ texts to show how against a background of active slavery, black and white women experience different pressures with regard to the domestic space. Burdened with the duties involving marriage and motherhood, Ruth endures the expectations associated with white femininity, whereas Linda Brent, the protagonist of Incidents suffers the loss of a personal domestic domain as a slave woman. Ruth’s new home, a room that she occupies as a desolate, widowed single mother and Linda’s hiding place, a small garret that saves her from the master’s abuse are studied as spaces of sustenance that provide the women some relief from their oppressive circumstances. In her
one room home, Ruth establishes her herself as a successful writer while the garret functions as a productive space for Linda as here, she initiates her journey to freedom and a reunion with her children. Although far from ideal, these small spaces denote huge liberating potential for both women as these modified spaces are accommodating of their desires and guarantee their independence.

In chapter two “‘An indescribable oppression’: Women’s Mobility in Iola Leroy and The Awakening” the antebellum women’s struggle to create domestic spaces is developed further in a post-reconstruction context, the years following the abolition of slavery. This chapter follows an analysis of Iola Leroy and The Awakening to argue that matters of race such as familial separation, fragmentation of community and the desire to celebrate ethnicity make black women’s mobility different from white women. As a newly emancipated slave woman, Iola’s struggle entails rejecting the domestic design of her ancestors that is based on racial passing. By engaging in mobility that features in explicit ways of forming alliances with other former slaves, doing community service and choosing a spouse that shares her aspirations, Iola espouses a type of domesticity that provides her the security of a family and also supports her individual goals. Contrary to Iola, Edna combats the expectation of self-sacrificial submission to the domestic space. Her mobility begins on a relatively internal level and is at first expressed in passive forms. I maintain that by withdrawing from household chores and then indulging in hobbies such as swimming, reading and painting Enda bonds with the self and forms a sense of home within the space of her own body.

Further building on the understanding of women’s negotiation of traditional domesticity during post reconstruction, chapter three “‘It’s not the only way’: Redefining the Domestic Space in Hopkins’ and Gilman’s Writings” discusses women’s experience of navigating
domesticity at the turn of the century. In my reading of Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, I argue that by realigning the physical architecture of home, Ma Smith redefines the domestic space from a private realm to a communal space of black women’s collective growth. As Ma Smith converts her private mansion into a boarding house, she achieves financial independence for herself while also empowering other women associated with business. These women engage in progressive discussions, lead subsidiary businesses and seek employment to support themselves. Gilman’s texts on the other hand reveal ways in which women alter the internal dynamics of the home. In analyzing Gilman’s female characters that are presented in different stages of their life such as widowhood, singlehood and divorce, I contend that these women question the values governing the traditional domestic space to negotiate relationships and create spaces that offer them greater freedom.

In the concluding section, I arrive at the understanding that black and white women’s diverse experiences in the domestic space reveal their distinct position in nineteenth-century America. White women are combatting a model of femininity that limits their potential to marriage and motherhood. In reforming their domestic realms, the women adopt an ideology of domesticity that is more accommodating of the self. Black women’s position however is more complicated as these women are twice marginalized because of race and gender. In the African American context, the collective experience of slavery in the past makes domesticity more of a communal experience. With their established domestic spaces as a solid base, black women seek public roles to seek positive representation for the self and the community at large. I hope this comparative study of nineteenth-century black and white women’s experience in and with the domestic space offers useful lenses to further explore the continued developments in the American domestic scene.
Chapter One: “A home of her own”: Establishing home in *Ruth Hall* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Published less than a decade apart from each other, Fern’s *Ruth Hall* and Jacob’s *Incidents* have garnered attention for their discreet thematic similarities. In both texts, scholars observe the common portrayal of a female protagonist who works hard to regain her dignity after facing losses and humiliation. Noting the similar trajectories of Ruth Hall and Linda Brent, Joyce W. Warren considers “*Ruth Hall* [as] closer to the slave narrative of Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) than to the novels written by middle-class white woman of the period” (84). According to Warren, both Ruth Hall and Linda Brent resist “attempts of others to force submission” (84). Jennifer Larson further relates the story of Ruth Hall to “typical events in women’s slave narratives: Ruth is separated from her home and is sexualized by the men at the boarding house” (549). Larson here, compares Ruth’s circumstances of familial separation and objectification with female slaves. In the scholarship that traces the link between the Ruth Hall and Linda Brent and encourages a reading of *Ruth Hall* in the same light as a slave narrative, what is overlooked is the inherently different nature of black and white women’s struggles.

Lauren Berlant hints at this difference in revealing the pro-slavery sentiments of Fern’s brother Nathaniel Parker Willis who hired Harriet Jacobs for a period and features as Mr. Bruce in *Incidents*. Berlant points out that Willis “did not overtly support his wife’s attempt to purchase the manumission papers that would enable [Jacobs] to get her freedom” (279). This information about Willis reveals the disparate mindsets of white and black families with regards to slavery. Maria A. Windell further affirms this difference in disclosing about Fern’s mistreatment of
Jacob’s daughter, Louise who at the time was working as a governess for Fern’s daughter. Windell identifies this moment of abuse as the “collapse of sympathy binding Fern and Jacob” (114). These episodes of conflict between white and black people’s sensibilities that Berlant and Windell reveal, indicate that despite having a similar trajectory in some respects, Ruth and Linda’s positions starkly vary. This existent comparative discussion on these novels warrants further attention as Ruth’s and Linda’s individual circumstances reveal black and white women’s distinct challenges and position in antebellum America.

Although both women resist “forced submission” as Berlant notes, the racial circumstances that frame their struggle are very different. While Ruth battles the notion of subservience and other limiting traditions related to white femininity, Linda as a black woman directly suffers the impact of slavery. By closely analyzing select episodes from *Ruth Hall* and *Incidents*, this chapter studies Ruth and Linda’s distinct experiences of oppression in their existing home space, and their consequent efforts at creating an alternate domestic realm for themselves where they are safe and self-governing.

In *Ruth Hall*, Ruth’s sense of detachment from her parental home in the opening scene is one instance that highlights women’s struggles in their existent home space. On the eve of her wedding, Ruth restlessly awaits her unknown future. Fern writes, “…Ruth could not sleep. This was the last time she would sit at that little window. The morrow would find her in a home of her own. On the morrow Ruth would be a bride” (3). Ruth’s alienation in the very home she grew up, underpins the engraved conditioning that the parental home is not hers. She associates the notion of owning her “own” space with marriage which implies how marriage was inextricably linked to nineteenth-century women’s identity. Susan K. Harris emphasizes this link in asserting that “in Ruth Hall, the marriage opening signals a thematic focus on mid nineteenth-century
American definitions of womanhood” (619). Harris presents marriage as a defining element of nineteenth-century womanhood explaining that women were valued for their ability to secure a husband. Writing specifically about Ruth’s restlessness as she gazes into the sky, Micki Nyman states “Ruth does not merely wonder if she should marry; she considers other options. Her inability to know the future is catalysed in the stars that refuse her an answer” (147). It appears that marriage is the only option for a better future available to Ruth. Her “inability to know the future” indicates that she is not trained to know, or look forward to anything other than a wedding day. For Ruth, marriage then is a question about survival as she is not equipped to be self-sufficient. Writing about women’s practical need for marriage, Frances B. Cogan explains that “it was the result of painstaking attempt to avoid disaster, rather than to assure bliss” (103). Marriage saved nineteenth-century women from the “disaster” of financial insecurity and social exclusion. It provided them a home, prospect of a family and some hope for independence in the new domain that they can call their own. Fern thus coveys Ruth’s struggles from the start of the novel in highlighting her isolation from the parental home and an impending marriage that is based more on necessity than desire.

In the scenes that follow in Ruth’s marital home, Fern highlights the challenges associated with the role of a wife. Ruth’s hope of experiencing freedom and ownership in her new home is let down when she is faced with the expectations related to her duties as a wife. Mrs. Hall (Ruth’s mother-in-law) makes these expectations clear to Ruth in a series of instructions. For example, Ruth is to “avoid anything that looks frivolous” such curls and silk stockings (Fern 13). She tells her, “I hope you won’t be always running home, or running anywhere in fact. Wives should be keepers at home” (Fern 13). Talking about women’s tasks, Mrs. Hall asserts, “And Ruth, if you should feel the need of exercise, don’t gad in the streets.
Remember there is nothing like a broom \textit{and} a dust-pan to make the blood circulate” (Fern 13). Mrs. Hall’s instructions here resonate with the housekeeping guidelines printed at the time that called for women’s sacrificial devotion to the domestic space. She dissuades Ruth from going out on the streets as she considers these as activities that can potentially divert Ruth’s attention from the home. Writing about the general outlook of marriage, Nancy’s M. Theriot states “Young women were presented an image of marriage in which the emotionally nurturing, moral and submissive wife devoted herself to the service and care of a distant authoritative man” (69). In light of Theriot’s explanation, we see how the mention of a broom and dust-pan are emblems of house-keeping tasks that Mrs. Hall uses to teach Ruth “devotion” and “service” to her marital home and relations. Through Mrs. Hall’s instructions, Ferns highlights the challenges that married women faced as their mobility outside the home is monitored, and their behavior in the home is directed.

Mrs. Hall not only attempts to control Ruth’s physical movement but also intends to curb her mindset. For example, she warns her against reading novels calling them “trash” (Fern 14). She tells Ruth, “I have a very select little library, when you feel inclined to read, consisting of a treatise on ‘The Complaints of Women,’ an excellent sermon on Predestination, by our old minister, Dr. Diggs, and Seven Reasons why John Rogers, the martyr, must have had ten children instead of nine (as is generally supposed); any time that you stand in need of rational reading come to me;…” (Fern 14). Mrs. Hall values “rational” over pleasure reading. The titles of her collection suggests that the books are didactic in nature and written with the purpose of reforming individual behavior. For Mrs. Hall, reading only matters if it provides lessons for practical life. Since the fictional writing does not directly instruct or guide its readers, she deems them as trash. Martyn Lyon’s view regarding the perception of the novel in
nineteenth-century America explains Mrs. Hall distaste for the genre. According to Lyon “The novel could excite the passions, and stimulate the female imagination. It could encourage romantic expectations that appeared unreasonable; it could make erotic suggestion which threatened chastity and good order. The nineteenth-century novel was thus associated with the (supposedly) female qualities of irrationality and emotional vulnerability” (319). Lyon’s commentary reveals how the novel was seen as something that could potentially lead its readers astray. Ideas of fantasy, romance and imagination that the genre inspired endangered the cultural ethos of a time when women were expected to focus solely on home affairs and excel in their domestic duties. Thus, in critiquing novels, Mrs. Hall snubs any creative impulse in Ruth that could potentially interfere with her performance as a wife.

For Ruth, the marital home thus becomes a confining space of gendered expectations. Her hopes of experiencing freedom are soon diminished under the weight of responsibilities made known to her. As Jennifer Harris notes, “Ruth moves from unhappy home to unhappy home with little if any power within or control over the spaces in which she resides” (345). Ruth’s loss of control in her parental and marital home is linked to the position women held in nineteenth-century America. As a young girl, Ruth is relatively neglected in her parental home while the “world smiled on her brother Hyacinth” (4). After marriage, this neglect and gender disparity continues when she is expected to entirely focus on domestic affairs and is reminded that her husband, Harry’s needs supersede hers.

While Ruth’s existent home is limiting because of the traditional norms associated with nineteenth-century womanhood, Jacob’s protagonist Linda’s parental home is unstable because of the perils of slavery. In the opening chapter of Incidents, we find that Linda will have a new home following her mother’s death. As narrated, “I was told that my home was now to be with
her mistress; and I found it a happy one” (Jacobs 753). For the black community under slavery, home as a physical space was transient. Slave girls as Linda were circulated amongst slave holders as needed, depriving them the comfort of a permanent home and family life. Wilma A. Dunaway explains how the concept of home played out in the lives of slave community, in stating that the “legal homes of slave fathers were their assigned work sites, while their families lived in the mothers’ cabins” (64). Dunaway’s statements emphasize the lack of a permanent home that slaves experience. In Linda’s case, the new mistress’s home will be Linda’s new “work site” which she must learn to adjust to and call home. Interestingly, the opening chapters of both Ruth Hall and Incidents present heroines that are on the verge of beginning a new phase in life. While For Ruth, this phase entails finding a voice in the regimented design of marriage, for Linda this new journey involves the struggles of living as an adolescent slave girl combating vulnerability because of gender as well as race.

In addition to highlighting the black community’s deprivation of a permanent home, Jacob also shows how slave women are particularly unsafe in the work site they are supposed to call home. Linda’s new workplace leaves her exposed to the sexual advances of her owner, Dr Flint. In her narrative, Linda describes her teenage years as a “sad epoch” in her life (Jacobs 773). She narrates,

My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt…. He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same
roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. (773)

Linda’s teenage years are “sad” as her position as a young girl make her susceptible to Dr. Flint’s sexual abuse. His advances appear as what Carolyn Van Thompson calls “psychological violence [that] lays the foundation of physical violence” (130). Dr. Flint psychologically violates Linda by using foul language to coerce her into submission and instill persistent fear in her. As a slave woman, with no permanent home and an inconsistent family life, an illusion of control over her own body is the minimum she has. For Linda then, the threat of rape is the “most elemental form of terrorism” as this is an attempt to take away from her, the only thing she could potentially retain control of (Davis 96). Moreover, her struggle here is not just to limited to protecting herself physically. She must also show resistance to keep her spirit intact in face of Dr. Flint’s polluting language and the “unclean images” his behavior incites. With her reactions of “hatred and disgust”, Linda combats Dr. Flint’s immediate physical advances and his overall corrupting influence that threatens the “pure principles” that define her core.

Jacobs further shows that slave women as Linda also suffer because of their tense relationship with the mistress. Dr. Flint’s sexual interest in Linda changes the dynamics between her and Mrs. Flint. Linda narrates how she had become “an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred” (779). Moreover, like her husband, Mrs. Flint also carries out a form of verbal torture on Linda. As narrated,

She now took me to sleep in a room adjoining her own. There I was an object of her especial care, though not of her especial comfort, for she spent many a sleepless night to watch over me. Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she
whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer. (779)

Linda describes a time when although safe from Dr. Flint’s abuse, she is vulnerable to Mrs. Flint’s “whispers” that are equally terrorizing. Mrs. Flint’s intention of keeping Linda close is not to necessarily protect her but mainly to monitor the interaction between the young slave girl and her husband. The eerie image of a figure bent over Linda conveys the extent of control and watchfulness that the mistress exerts. However, here the mistress’s insomnia and uncanny behavior also communicates her own predicament. bell hooks offers some insight into general psyche of the mistress figure during slavery. She explains that the mistress “feared that her newly acquired social status might be threatened by white male sexual interaction with black woman. His sexual involvement with black women (even if that involvement was rape) in effect reminded the white female of her subordinate position in relationship to him” (154). Mrs. Flint’s intimidating presence can thus be seen as a reflection of her own fear and bitterness about her inferior status. Instilling terror in Linda allows Mrs. Flint to experience a level of control she is unable to exert in her marriage, and preserve her position in the house that is already comprised by her husband’s interest in another woman.

Linda’s and Ruth’s existing homes are thus sites of oppression where the women must resist pressures intended to restrain them. While Linda battles the continuous psychological turmoil emanating from both Dr Flint’s and Mrs. Flint’s menacing presence, Linda experiences persistent trauma because of Mrs. Hall’s stifling expectations. Under the weight of these obligations, Ruth “bursts into tears” (Fern 15). In the days that follow, Ruth continues to live apprehensively in her marital home. As narrated, “Ruth kept her wise little mouth shut: moving, amid these discordant elements, as if she were deaf, dumb, and blind (Fern 17). To Ruth, the
only way to survive the pressures of this new space is through patient endurance. Susan K. Harris reads Ruth’s initial silence as complicit behavior in her own torture. According to Harris, “Ruth retreats from conflict rather than meeting its challenge, thus acting in complicity with her own oppression” (620). The reasoning of Ruth’s passive endurance is present in Linda’s rhetorical question to the reader, “But where could I turn for protection?” (Jacobs 773) About her own experience of passive tolerance, Linda narrates, “No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case there is no shadow of law to protect from the insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men” (Jacobs 773). Like Linda, Ruth too at the moment does not see any opportunity that could protect her from the surrounding hostility. She understands that her parental home is not an option as her parents would not shelter her. Linda too, knowing that she does not have a home of her own initially resigns to her fate in slavery.

However, it is worth mentioning that for both Ruth and Linda, these periods of hardships are also moments of awakening and self-realization. For example, Ruth’s experience of living with her in-laws makes her realize the importance of having a personal space. In the midst of restrictions and rigid expectations, Ruth recognizes her need for independence. Myki Nyman discusses how the marital home is a space of growth for Ruth. Nyman notes “While Ruth is often portrayed at a residence, such as typically represents domesticity in the nineteenth-century American novel, that residence is reformulated as threshold, evoking the point of departure rather than that of stasis” (149). Ruth’s shared home with the in-laws can be seen as a space of departure as it is here that Ruth understands the extent of her suppression and hopes of changing her situation. She is able to do this successfully when she moves out with Harry and daughter Daisy to their own house where she is her “own mistress” (Fern 24). In her new house “Ruth
danced about, from room to room, with the careless glee of a happy child, quite forgetful that she was a wife and a mother; quite unable to repress the flow of spirits consequent upon her newly found freedom” (Fern 149). In this “careless glee,” Ruth feels liberated from Mrs. Hall’s judgments and decorates the new space to her own liking. The décor of “white curtains,” “muslin cloth” and flowers represents what Nyman calls Ruth’s “evolving consciousness” as she moves from one residence to the next recognizing her own desires (149). Peter Dedek writes, “Women of the middle and upper class began to create residential interiors designed to reflect not only their socioeconomic status and sophistication, but what they considered to be their individual interests and personalities as well” (740). In light of Dedek’s explanation we see how Ruth exercises her “individual interest” in designing the interior of her new home and in doing makes the space her own.

While Ruth’s self-awareness is apparent in the way that she begins to take some control of her lifestyle, Linda’s “evolving consciousness” becomes visible when she begins to envision a life beyond slavery. Her romantic interest in a free “young colored carpenter” and hope of building a life with him are figurative steps towards freedom. However, Linda soon realizes that her union with this man will not be possible under slavery. She narrates, “My lover wanted to buy me; but I knew that Dr. Flint was too wilful and arbitrary a man to consent to that arrangement” (783). Her belief about Dr. Flint’s is proven correct when he physically assaults her for wanting to marry the carpenter. Although Linda’s hope to be with the man she loved remains unfulfilled, this unfulfilled dream evokes in her a permanent desire to seek freedom. Recognizing the extent of Dr. Flint’s control on her life she narrates, “Again and again I revolved in my mind how all this would end” (788). Gloria T Randle identifies Linda’s sentiments at this point as the “loss of her emotional innocence” (48). Thomas Doherty in “Harriet Jacobs'
Narrative Strategies: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” notes that Linda becomes “willfully more defiant” after her “ill-fated romance” (80). Thus, like Ruth, the oppression that Linda faces, becomes “a point of departure” that stirs her consciousness.

In her newfound self-awareness, Linda attempts to recover her self-esteem by engaging in a relationship where she is treated relatively kindly. Still vulnerable to Dr. Flint’s abuse, Linda forms sexual liaison with Mr. Sands, a “white unmarried gentleman” (Jacobs 800). Describing her relationship with Sands, Linda asserts that “to be an object of interest to a man who is not married, and who is not her master is agreeable to the pride and feelings of a slave, if her miserable situation has left her any pride or sentiment” (Jacobs 801). She explains, “There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (Jacobs 801). Since Linda feels deprived of dignity and agency in a forced relationship with Flint, she finds it somewhat appealing to engage in a relationship that allows her a voice. Jennifer Larson explains that “Linda takes Sands as a lover to assert her sexual autonomy. In so doing, she defies the deviant intentions of Dr. Flint, who seeks to create an aberrant domestic space in which she would serve as his concubine” (548). Lynette D Miles comments on Linda’s relationship with Sands, “As a female slave, Linda/Harriet does more than struggle with slavery, she fights to gain memory of her body, her memory and herself” (19). In light of Larson’s and Miles’ observations, we see how a relationship with Sands enables Linda to oppose Dr. Flint’s advances and build an alternate space for herself where she takes control of her body and retains a sense of self. Dr. Flint had earlier claimed Linda as “her property” and so by giving herself to Sands, Linda deprives Dr. Flint of that sense of ownership (Jacobs 773). While some scholars understand achieving “sexual autonomy” as the purpose of Linda’s intentional relationship with Sands, others also note a
practical reason for it. Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of Afro-American* writes,

[Linda] thought that in his fury Dr. Flint would sell her to her newly acquired love and that it would be easier in the future to obtain her freedom from her lover from her master. Linda’s reasoning was shown to be motivated by consideration not only for her own welfare but also for improving the chances of survival for any children she might bear. From her experience she knew that Dr. Flint sold his offspring from slave woman and hoped that if her children were fathered by Sands he could buy them and secure their future (58).

Linda’s tactful approach is apparent in the way she uses the knowledge of Dr. Flint’s character to her own advantage. Her approach is risky, yet brave. She intends to aggravate Dr. Flint in a way that could potentially make him get rid of her. Moreover, knowing that her children (if she bears any) will be separated from her, Linda plans to secure a safer future for them. Thus, it appears that Linda’s hardships not only provoke her take control of her present but also motivates her to alter her future.

Linda recognizes that her relationship with Sands is not socially or morally acceptable; however, she reminds readers that traditional ideas of propriety do not apply to slaves. Writing about her relationship with Sands, Linda narrates, “There may be sophistry in all this; but the conditions of a slave confuses all principles of morality” (Jacobs 801). She further asserts, “I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others” (Jacobs 802). Linda explains that since black women’s circumstances are starkly different than white women’s, they should not be judged by the same norms as white women. Drawing the reader’s attention to the unique experiences of slaves, Linda states, “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never
knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another” (Jacobs 801) Linda employs sentimental tactics to highlight how the dehumanized condition of slaves does not permit them to abide by ideas of piety and chastity associated with white womanhood. Writing about Linda’s sentimental approach, Rachel McLenan maintains,

By encouraging empathy, Jacobs attempts to collapse the distance between herself and the white reader—indeed she incites readers to consider how white and black woman alike suffer as victims of the institutions of slavery. A white female reader may well know what it is like to be a ‘chattel’ and to fear a tyrant within the institution of marriage in nineteenth century, provoking comparison between the role of slave holder and husband and condemning the discourse of paternalism used to justify the authority of both. (61)

Linda appeals to readers’ emotions by establishing a commonality with white women’s experiences. In drawing a parallel between the husband figure and the slave holder, she reminds white women that just as they are facing pressures of marriage, she too has faced oppression under the institution of slavery. However, here it worth noting that Linda’s attempts to limit the emotional distance with reader, underpins her insistence of the real tangible distance between them. Asserting that “you never knew what it is to be a slave,” Linda maintains how the white community did not suffer the abuse of slavery. She encourages readers to not judge her behavior based solely on social standards but to consider her unique circumstances.

Linda’s appeal to the readers appears more than just an invite to reflect on her circumstances. By establishing a common ground with readers and highlighting her misery as a slave woman, Linda justifies her relationship with Sands and reclaims her virtue. Linda’s
confession to Aunt Martha (her grandmother) about her relationship with Sands and the resultant pregnancy highlights the inaptness of conventional womanhood. Aunt Martha initially responds, “O Linda! has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother...Go away!” (803). Later, when Linda explains the extent of her suffering, Aunt Martha listens to her in “silence” (Jacobs 804). As narrated, “I told her I would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness. I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, “I forgive you;” but she looked at me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured, “Poor child! Poor child!” (Jacobs 804). Some critics have studied Linda’s confession as representative of her loss of virtue. Hazel Carby for example states, “The struggle of Linda Brent to retain some control over her sexuality climaxed in a confession of her loss of virtue” (58). Sarah Way Sherman further writes that “Linda has no ideology or language to justify her choice” (174). While such observations are valid to the extent that Linda has lost her virtue by conventional nineteenth-century standards, they overlook that it is in this act of crying, asking for forgiveness and highlighting her suffering that Linda justifies her choices and subverts conventional womanhood to form one that is more appropriated to slave women as herself. Linda’s feelings of shame and Aunt Martha’s initial harshness indicates that the ideology of true womanhood resonated with black women. As Lynette Myles in notes, “The grandmother’s reaction to Linda’s wrong doings demonstrates that African American women maintained the same values for a virtuous woman as their white counterparts” (19). Linda’s cries then show that despite the knowledge, slave women as herself found it impossible to abide by social standards of morality when they are struggling for basic physical freedom. Aunt Martha may not have uttered the exact language of forgiveness, but her “silence,” the “gentle hand on Linda’s head” as well as the words
“poor child! Poor child!” reflects a deep understanding of Linda’s situation and an unspoken support of her actions. Their unity in this moment shows how black women have had to bend traditional ideologies to repurpose them in a way that will secure their well-being.

Both *Ruth Hall* and *Incidents* present motherhood as physically debilitating yet emotionally mobilizing. The moment of childbirth is elevated in Fern’s writing: “Hark! to the tiny wail! Ruth knows that most blessed of all hours. Ruth is *mother!* Joy to thee, Ruth!” *(Fern 19).* Fern’s celebratory language to emphasize the childbirth implies how Ruth in embracing motherhood, has met another condition of the socially acceptable ideology of womanhood. However, in the same celebratory clause, Fern highlights Ruth’s exhaustion. She is “pale” and lies “motionless upon the pillow” *(Fern 19).* These images describing Ruth’s initial experience of motherhood forecast her journey ahead as she experiences the trials of fulfilling her role as a mother. These trials are made known to her from the start when she is once again faced with Mrs. Hall’s criticism. Mrs. Hall tells Ruth, “Of course, you intend, when Mrs. Jiff [the nurse] leaves to care of the baby yourself; a nursery girl would be very expensive *(Fern 22).* When Ruth informs her of an arrangement of the nurse, Mrs. Hall reprimands her, “…it was only his morning that the doctor and I figured up the expense it would be to you, and we unanimously came to the conclusion to tell Harry that you’d better take care of the child yourself. I always took care of my babies. You oughtn’t to have mentioned a nursery girl, at all, to Harry” *(Fern 22).* Mrs. Hall further dismisses Ruth’s “feeble” health saying, “‘Pooh! pshaw! stuff! no such thing. You are well enough, or will be, before long” *(Fern 22).* Mrs. Hall reminds Ruth of her responsibilities as mother. In asserting that Ruth should not have mentioned the nursery girl to Harry, Mrs. Hall indicates that Ruth must prioritize the well-being of her family before her needs. Barbara Leslie Epstein explains how the nineteenth-century print culture “emphasized the importance of mother to the children, and her particular
qualities of tenderness and affection” (77). Epstein further writes that “…woman’s sacrifice of her own needs to the needs of others—not only husband but the children as well—[was seen] as the source of special morality, the near sanctity of her role” (77). Mrs. Hall’s criticism resonates with the values promoted in nineteenth-century culture that expected the mother to “Pooh! Pshaw!” her own needs and tend to the requirements of the family. In response Mrs. Hall comments, Ruth ask, “Will you please hand me that camphor bottle?” said Ruth, laying her hand upon her throbbing forehead. Although Ruth is silent in this moment, her throbbing forehead implies a repulsion to Mrs. Hall’s statements. Nancy Walker observes that Ruth’s silence in moments of criticism during the early chapters of the novel “suggests a lack of reverence for convention that will increasingly characterize Ruth’s perspective” (49). Thus, in these moments after childbirth, Ruth’s silence represents the gradual shaping of her own perspective as one that is not consistent with the traditional views of Mrs. Hall’s.

Ruth’s silence, however, breaks in successive episodes when within a short period, she faces the loss of her first-born Daisy and husband, Harry. As a widow of two daughters (Katie and Nettie), Ruth is dependent on her in-laws who refuse to care for her. Eventually after some negotiation, Mr. and Mrs. Hall agree to take the children in on the condition that Ruth will disown them. Ruth’s father informs her, “The doctor has very generously offered to take both your children and support them. It will be a great burden off your hands; all he asks in return is, that he shall have the entire control of them, and that you keep away” (Fern 79). In a “perfectly clear and distinct” manner, Ruth responds, “I can never part with my children” (Fern 80). For the first time Ruth outrightly denies a suggestion presented to her. While earlier Ruth may have combatted criticism and hostility from her maternal family and the in-laws with silent tolerance, this time she vocalizes her views. This interaction between Ruth and her father is important also because here,
Ruth conveys her own vision of a home. When her father insists that the children “will have a good home, enough to eat, drink, and wear and be taught---” Ruth immediately retorts in the “same clear low tone,” “To disrespect their mother” (Fern 80). In short crisp statements, Ruth rejects her father’s idea of a “good home” especially when the cost is disregarding their mother. Ruth’s indifference to comfortable living that the Halls’ can offer resonates with an earlier interaction she has with her friend Mary Leon. Married to a wealthy man, Mary adorns envy worthy jewels and wardrobe. In a private moment, she confides in Ruth, 

I have all those pretty toys to satisfy my heart-cravings; they, equally with myself, are necessary appendages to Mr. Leon’s establishment. Oh, Ruth!” and the tears streamed through her jeweled fingers—“love me—pity me; you who are so blessed. I too could love; that is the drop of poison in my cup. When your daughters stand at the altar, Ruth, never compel them to say words to which the heart yields no response. The chain is none the less galling, because its links are golden. (Fern 57)

Mary’s confession reveals the hollowness of her luxurious lifestyle as the expensive items that she owns are only to sustain her husband’s glamorous image. These costly pieces or “pretty toys” as she puts it, do not amount to inner contentment or peace. On the contrary, she calls them chains that imprison her in an unhappy marriage. Lyn Mahoney, writes, “Obsessed with physical beauty Mr. Leon loves his wife for her value as a “toy” to be outfitted and shown off.” Joyce W. Warren in an introduction to Ruth Hall and Other Writings also maintains, “Mrs. Leon is a passionate intelligent woman. Her husband, however, does not regard her as a person, but simply as a possession” (xxvi). Ruth’s brief interaction with Mary early on in her marriage shows her that social standards of good living are meaningless when individuals within the home are not cherished. Aligning with Mary’s advice, Ruth does not agree to anything which her “heart yields
no response” when the Halls’ offer is presented to her. By rejecting their proposal, Ruth defies the “links of gold,” that could confine her children to a social façade. Ruth instead chooses to adhere to her own vision of an alternative home for her children where she is valued.

Deprived of financial security and familial support, Ruth and her children are forced to live in a boarding house. Fern describes the ambiance of Ruth’s new home as one “...where one plate suffices for fish, flesh, fowl, and dessert; where soiled tablecloths, sticky crockery, oily cookery, and bad grammar, predominate; where greasy cards are shuffled, and bad cigars smoked of an evening…” (87). The details of the boarding house highlight Ruth’s transition from an educated class to a public space of lower income group. The “soiled table clothes, sticky crockery” and “oily cookery” are in direct contrast to the “white curtains,” the “tulip-shaped vase” and the “gilt saucer” that Ruth once used to decorate her own private home (Fern 32). Unable to afford washing and ironing, she wears her clothes “rough” dry and engages in domestic labor such as cooking and cleaning to sustain herself and the children. Ruth’s ability to navigate these tough conditions has attracted scholarship that considers Ruth’s poverty to be a period of growth for her. Writing about Ruth’s indulgence in domestic labor, Laura Smith contends,

Doing work she once had servants to do, Ruth meets up close the soil and seams of her family’s garments and linens. She can chart their unique signs of use and deterioration; she can invest her care in maintenance. While she has lost material markers of domestic womanhood, even occasionally wearing her clothes rough-dry (un-ironed) (74), she gains the intimate knowledge of her object self and the investment of her labor that is part of her domestic potential. (349)
In the past, Ruth was not seen as capable of the upkeep of the domestic space. Mrs. Hall, for example considered Ruth “useless” and “never” believed that Ruth “would work to support her children than to give them up” (Fern 83). However, in her present circumstances Ruth is familiarized with her undervalued “domestic potential” as she becomes an effective care giver, providing clean clothes and cooked meals for her family. As Smith explains, Ruth may have lost “material” emblems of traditional upper-class womanhood such as a suitable attire and a decent looking house, she has however gained new knowledge of her capabilities as a single mother.

Living in the boarding house becomes even more profitable for Ruth when in addition to practicing useful domestic work, she also seizes opportunities for employment. In her new lodging space, Ruth has access to knowledge in the public domain which facilitates her search for a paid position. For example, she learns about a job vacancy by overhearing fellow boarders talk about a primary school teacher who has contracted consumption. Highlighting the usefulness of the boarding house, Elizabeth Klimasmith and Betty Klimasmith note that “boarding houses and lodging houses in Ruth Hall are settings where boundaries maintaining a discreet subjectivity break down” (42). The scholars further state that the “boarding house allows Ruth to make interpersonal connections that engender and sustain her agency” (42). David Faflik also maintains, “Fern’s heroine experiences her most profound period of self development in the metropolis, in accordance with the pluralist terms of urban co-occupancy” (96). In the communal environment of the boarding house, the common knowledge of Ruth’s financial struggles gives her greater visibility, improving her prospects for networking and potential employment. For example, Mrs. Millet encourages Ruth’s idea of seeking a teaching position, “There is nothing to prevent you from trying” (Fern 120). On seeing Ruth’s eagerness for the job, Mr. Develin also tells her, “I don’t know you’ll stand as good a chance, Mrs. Hall, as anybody else; you can
apply” (Fern 125). Although Ruth is unable to secure the position, her connections made in and around the boarding house prove more productive than her former friends who refuse to mingle with her. Contemplating Ruth’s poverty, Gertrude and Mary decide that Ruth’s troubles are “none of [their] business” and that they “can’t keep her acquaintance” (Fern 100). Fern shows that Ruth is better off without such friendships as these women are dependent on their “husband’s money” whereas Ruth, through her new association with the working class is on a path of financial independence (Fern 100).

The value in Ruth’s decision to build an alternative lifestyle for herself is further emphasized as Fern highlights the fate of Ruth’s former upper-class contemporaries. The “very beautiful” Mary Leon whom Ruth was in awe of, lies dead in the Insane Hospital (Fern 57). On visiting the corpse of her former friend, Ruth learns that after Mary fell ill, Mr. Leon committed her to the hospital and left for the Continent. Prior to her death in the hospital, Mary left a written message for Ruth, “I am not crazy, Ruth, no, no—but I shall be; the air of this place stifles me; I grow weaker—weaker. I cannot die here; for the love of heaven, dear Ruth, come and take me away” (141). Reduced to a mere showpiece of beauty and wealth, Mary is institutionalized when she is no longer useful to Mr. Leon. Her final note to Ruth communicates the extent of her suffering as lonely, neglected and incapacitated. Mary’s confinement in the asylum appears in direct contrast to the visibility and access that Ruth has been achieving. Writing about Mary’s detention, Robert Gunn refers to the hospital in *Ruth Hall* as a “space that is neither private nor public” (34). Gunn terms this place as “a purgatorial space of suspension in which one is installed as an entity of public custodianship, yet hidden from view” (34). The asylum becomes a space of suspension as it isolates its patients from the outside world, obstructing their ability to communicate and improve mentally. Unlike Ruth who is avidly roaming the city streets in search
of employment and interacting with others, Mary is forced into alienation and driven to physical and mental deterioration. Scholars consider Ruth’s learning of Mary’s condition instrumental to her self-growth. Linda Grasso reads Mary’s final note as a message that “women must shed their dependent identities and learn the mysteries of survival from those of who have left a permanent record of their sufferings.” (153). Grasso continues, “Learning this lesson, Ruth completes the final stages of her conversion experience. Because the murdered body of Mary Leon symbolically represents the deadly consequences of female dependency, when Ruth insists on seeing it, she acts of a ritualistic departure from traditional womanhood and all its pernicious associations” (153). Micki Nyman also considers Ruth’s visit to the asylum as a transformative moment that motivates Ruth to improve her situation. Nyman draws a parallel between Ruth’s physical descent into the vault containing Mary’s corpse and her social downfall. She states, “Ruth is situated on a ‘threshold sensibility’ in this moment because she has poor health, cannot support herself and her two daughters, and hence cannot descend any lower on the social ladder. Ruth reaches a psychological low point at the bottom of steps, after which the intensity of desire, insight and experience coalesce into self-discernment” (148). Ruth’s newfound insight and discernment in this episode becomes evident when she “shudders” at the thought of living at the asylum and deliberately ignores Mr. Tibbett’s (the hospital Superintendent) comment on Mr. Leon as a “fine young man” (139). Ruth recognizes Mr. Leon’s self-centered act of committing his wife to a hospital and understands that she must be self-sufficient and in control of her life to avoid a fate as Mary’s.

Shortly after her visit to the Insane Hospital, Ruth relocates to a room in “lower part of the city” (Fern 144). In this new location, the sight of a newspaper carrier reminds Ruth of her own skill at writing. She quickly thinks to herself, “why not write for the papers?” (Fern 145).
Ruth remembers how in boarding school, an editor would “take down her compositions in shorthand as she read them aloud, and transfer them to the columns of this paper” (Fern 145). Recognizing her forgotten talent, Ruth begins her search for a position as a columnist and eventually finds a position in the “office of The Standard” (160). In this new role, Ruth must deliver her work according to set standards for type setters while simultaneously mothering her children at home. Fern describes a scene highlighting Ruth’s diverse responsibilities: “Scratch—scratch—scratch, went Ruth’s pen; the dim lamp flickering in the night breeze, while the deep breathing of the little sleepers was the watchword, On! to her throbbing brow and weary fingers” (161). The scene aptly captures the professional struggle of a woman who practices commercial work from the domestic scene while watching her children. Mary Kelly introduces the concept of “literary domestics” to describe the unique situation of nineteenth-century women writers that have gained public recognition from the home space. Kelly describes these writers as “women of the home who simultaneously came to assume the male roles of public figure, economic provider, and creator of culture. They became hybrids, a new breed or, again, literary domestics” (111). Kelly further maintains that “material needs”, “inadequate income” and “ill health of their husbands” were aspects that “fundamentally altered and enlarged the literary careers” of these writers (145). In light of Kelly’s discussion, we see how the lack of familial support and financial crisis had led Ruth to occupy a “hybrid” space that allows her to gain a footing in the public space while still attending to her domestic duties. As a budding columnist, Ruth takes a step towards altering the paradigm of her domestic space by treating it as a provisional workspace that will help accommodate her needs.

Ruth’s inhabitation in what Kelly terms as a “hybrid” space is closely associated with her work in the public arena. Under the self-created pen name, Floy, Ruth writes for the masses
gaining public recognition and appreciation. One reader writes to her stating “I don’t know who you are, and I don’t ask; but I take the ‘The Standard,’ and I like your pieces (Fern 173). Another states, “For you are ‘dear’ to me, dear as a sister on whose loving breast I have leaned, though I have never saw your face” (Fern 174). It appears that while Ruth may have lost support from her blood relations, she is regaining a productive substitute for a family in her readership. Elizabeth Klimasmith and Betty Klimasmith comment on the connection Ruth develops with her readers:

Importantly, the success of Ruth does not depend on familial connections or an objective examination process in the ways that her attempts at careers as seamstress, washerwoman, and teacher do; modern urban subjectivity revolves around creatively adapting to a changing environment rather than playing established roles. Ruth’s successful authorship depends on two interrelated networks: the network of publishing industry that disseminates her materials and the network of readers who integrate “Floy” known as Ruth in the press, into their personal lives. (47)

Although the novel does not directly disclose the content of Ruth’s columns, letters from readers indicate that Ruth, through her writing has tapped into the emotions of her audience by broaching genuine everyday issues. She writes about “real stuff” as acknowledged by one reader which brings her close to what Klimasmith and Klimasmith term as “modern urban subjectivity” (Fern 174). In writing about issues that deeply resonate with the masses, Ruth has learnt the skill of “adapting to a changing environment” and finding a unique space in the “personal lives” of the readers. This recognition in the public space in turn enables Ruth to shape her domestic space as she gradually begins to make ends meet.

While gaining reader acceptance helps Ruth achieve financial security, learning new business tactics furthers her professional growth and builds her self-confidence. For example,
cognizant of her growing popularity Ruth immediately signs a contract from the ‘Household Messenger’ when she receives an offer for better compensation. Shortly after signing the new contract, Ruth’s interaction with Mr. Lescom and Mr. Tibbett’s (editors of The Standard and The Pilgrim respectively) highlights her newfound business acumen and the ability to stand her ground. Ruth meets Mr. Lescom’s demand for longer articles with the demand for higher remuneration. She tells him, “…an article is an article, some of my shorter pieces being the most valuable I have written. If you would like more matter, Mr. Lescom, I wonder you have not offered me more pay” (189). When Mr. Lescom dismisses Ruth’s demand and undervalues her skill, Ruth is quick to respond, “I have had and accepted a better salary than you pay. My object in calling this afternoon was to inform you of this; and to say that I shall not be able to write any more for the ‘The Standard’” (Fern 190). Leaving Mr. Lescom “astonished” and speechless, Ruth asserts her professional worth as well as her knowledge about the publishing business (Fern 190). Larson explains,

Fern represents the development of Ruth’s assertion of self and her acquisition of knowledge about the marketplace, embodied in her ability to negotiate it. *Ruth Hall* then, is portrait of Ruth’s acquisition of market savvy that facilitates her ability to evaluate independently her own value. With this acquisition comes the ability not only to evaluate her worth, but also to speak on her own behalf, thereby establishing the terms of that worth. (349)

Ruth’s work for ‘The Standard’ not only helps her secure a position in the field of writing but also familiarizes her with the internal workings of this business. Earlier, Ruth responded to Mr. Lescom’s unjust questions with silent “dignity” and as “a novice in business matters” “accepted the terms, poor as they were” (Fern 168-69). However, now, fully aware of her professional
worth, Ruth, with renewed confidence actively negotiates the terms and conditions presented to her. Her conversation with Mr. Tibbetts that follows next further foregrounds her ability to navigate through the politics of the market place. When Mr. Tibbetts commands to Ruth that she “shall not” leave, Ruth “rising and standing erect before him,” responds, “I have yet to learn that I am not free to go, if I choose” (202). She further asserts, “I am not to be frightened, or threatened, or insulted” (202). Tibbetts’ choice of words highlights ways in which men in authority attempt to deprive women of all control in the public arena. Ruth then through her equally firm responses and composure reclaims this power, asserting that she has the sole control of her life.

As the novel progresses, Fern shows how Ruth’s relationship with her writing also alters bringing about further self-development and self-confidence. Ruth receives an offer of $800 to sell the copyright of her written pieces. Although the money is sufficient to ease Ruth’s financial constraints at the time, the choice to forgo the copyright is not an easy one for Ruth. After a moment of consideration and calculation, Ruth decides, “No, gentlemen, I will not sell you my copyright; these autograph letters, and all the other letters of friendship, love, and business, I am constantly receiving from strangers, are so many proofs that I have won the public ear” (Fern 198). In this moment, Ruth sees her work as an extension of herself that will not be quantified by others. Larson contends that here Ruth’s ownership of her work contrasts Mary Leon’s lack of agency “in relation to the self” (352). By retaining the copyrights, Ruth consciously does not “reproduce [a] system under which [women as herself and Mary Leon] have no legal rights” (352). In earlier episodes Ruth had verbally reclaimed power in front of authoritative figures such as Mr. Lescom and Mr. Tibbets. However, this time by rejecting a commercial offer she does the same in business terms defying the systemic undermining of women. Larson describes
this moment as reflective of Ruth’s “understanding of the marketplace as a realm in which one cannot only secure material needs, but as a space in which one can also assert individual worth and feel rewarded” (352). Ruth gains a fresh perspective of the public arena with the understanding that participating in the commercial realm is not only a means to make ends meet but also a space where she can reinvent herself. Thus, in forgoing $800, Ruth denies a short-term monetary profit for a long-lasting sense of “individual worth.”

By the novel’s close, Fern presents her heroine in absolute control of her life and financially able to create her desired home space. Following the success of her book, Ruth immediately secures her daughter, Katy who was temporarily staying with the Halls. Shortly afterwards, Ruth’s growing success enables her to become a bank stockholder giving her a prominent position in the public domain. Jennifer Harris notes that Ruth’s ownership of the shares “symbolizes her financial freedom and her public investment, as well as the public investment in her. In this way she moves from being property to owning it” (356). The growing appreciation of Ruth’s work turns into public investment in her skill and talent, putting her at par with male contemporaries in the public domain. As Samuel Otter notes, “Fern invests the stock certificate, the emblem of male success with female significance. She validates female speculation and extends its terms and contexts” (236). Fern challenges the traditional notion of property ownership as an “emblem of male success” in the commercial sector. In extending this success to her protagonist, Fern shows how women are equally capable of being investors in the marketplace. Richard H Brodhead maintains, “the bank stock [Ruth] owns at the end of Ruth Hall suggests a second possible attainment newly open to the woman-celebrity of this time: not just wealth but the pleasure that wealth brings as a marker of achievement and entitlement” (55). “This pleasure that wealth brings” to Ruth is best expressed in one of the final scenes of the
novel when knowing about her mother’s stock certificate, Nettie states, “We are proud of her” (270). Ruth’s success may have earned her space in the commercial sector, the real value of this victory is realized in the fulfilment of her dream for her children. Ruth had envisioned a home with “comforts for Nettie and Katy,--clothes earned by her own hands” (233). She had believed that the “mother can—the mother will” support her children and so, in Nettie’s pride for her mother, Fern shows how Ruth’s commercial success has led to the simultaneous creation of her desired domestic space.

Scholars writing specifically about domestic spaces in nineteenth-century American literature have noted how the original home base is often a contentious space that female characters have had to leave behind. Nina Baym refers to the home as a “detention camp” where the heroine at first is not “loved or valued” but rather “exploited and neglected” (37). You-Me Park and Gayle Ward further state, “It is certainly true that for some women (especially those with the class privileges) leaving home has been liberating” (269). Ruth Hall follows a parallel trajectory where the absence of love and the threat of continued neglect and exploitation of her children forces Ruth to seek home elsewhere. Jacob’s Incidents too charts a similar pattern whereby the desire to protect her children motivates Linda to recreate a safer home.

The experience of motherhood is also as emotionally uplifting for Linda as it is for Fern’s heroine. Earlier Linda may have preferred death over slavery; however, now she desires to persevere for her children. Linda herself admits, “I had often prayed for death; but now I did not want to die, unless my child could die too” (807). Linda further narrates that shortly after giving birth, Dr. Flint continued his visits, to look after my health; and he did not fail to remind me that my child was an addition to his stock of slaves” (803). Although in this moment of post-partum Linda is “too feeble” to retaliate, her reaction to the potential loss of her children is evident in a
later episode when Flint poses a similar threat. Linda describes that his threat “lacerated [her]
heart” (822). Thinking about the possible separation from children, Linda narrates, “This
reflection made me clasp my innocent babe all the more firmly to my heart” (822). Linda’s
maternal instincts translates into a firm resolve to seek a better future for her children. The image
of Linda holding the child close to her heart depicts how maternal love supersedes her sense of
fear and feelings of helplessness. Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Viewing motherhood as a symbol
of power can catalyze Black women to take actions that they otherwise might not have
considered” (194). Collins highlights motherhood as an empowering experience for women as it
encourages them to push against limitations. Linda’s maternal instincts gives her the ultimate goal
of protecting her children against slavery. She narrates, “I had a woman’s pride, and a mother’s
love for my children, and I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should
rise for them. My master had power and law on his side; I had determined will. There is might in
each” (Jacobs 831). In this moment, Linda identifies as a woman and a mother—identities that
she is stripped off under slavery. Through self-definition, Linda sees herself as equally
competent as Flint and recognizes an inane ability to alter her present circumstances for a better
future for her children.

In Linda’s firm’s resolve to protect her children, we also see ways in which she fights the
circumstances imposed on the slave community. Her grandmother, Aunt Martha generations
before her were forced to resign to their fate in slavery. When Linda shares her decision of
leaving Flint’s plantation, Aunt Martha responds with resistance, “Must you go?” (831). In hopes
of keeping the family together, Aunt Martha has never considered fleeing in fear of familial
separation. As Carolyn Soriso states “Aunt Martha’s love for her family forces her into
preferring that they remain slaves rather than escape North, which she believes would end either
in permanent separation or death” (6). Unlike Aunt Martha, Linda recognizes that familial togetherness at the cost of bondage is “too high to pay” (Soriso 6). Linda as Soriso notes, “follows her own notion of truth” discerning that temporary separation from her children in pursuit of eternal freedom from slavery is more fulfilling. Linda moves away from traditional systems governing slave communities by adopting a type of domesticity where although physically separated from her children, she is constantly watchful for their greater good.

To escape bondage, Linda hides in “a small shed” in Aunt Martha’s house (Jacobs 859). The “nine feet long and seven wide” garret is infested with pests with “no admission for either light or air” (Jacobs 860). Linda suffers for “air even more for light” (860). However, the love for her children enables Linda to endure the tough conditions of the garret. Even in “stifling air,” Linda is “not comfortless” as she continued to hear the voices of her children, Benny and Ellen. Shibhaji Mridha argues, “[Linda’s] body undoubtedly suffers from long years of imprisonment, but not her soul. She finally manages to escape to become a free woman with the hope of making a free home for her children. Motherhood and Linda’s sense freedom are so intricately linked in her imagination that they feed off each other in the narrative in such a manner that their existence in isolation seems impossible” (861). Mridha explains that the love for her children and the hope of freedom keeps Linda’s soul intact which enables her to survive confinement. The experience of motherhood is “inextricably linked” to her desire for freedom as it is maternal love that motivates her to envision a better future. It is also worth noting that Ruth’s physical separation from her children does not prevent her from mothering them. After Linda punches a hole in the wall using a gimlet, “a pen like instrument” (Wardrop 213), the garret gives her the vantage point of what Georgia Kreiger refers as an “unseen observer” who can “pull strategic strings” to protect her children (616). For example, she relays her sighting of a conflict between Benny and
Dr. Flint to Aunt Martha asking her to “not allow the children to be impertinent to the irascible man” (Jacobs 862). Linda is cautious that her children do not do anything to provoke Dr. Flint’s dangerous rage. Moreover, during Christmas, she makes “new garments and little play things” for her children and “puts things into their stockings” (Jacobs 864). The garret operates as an unusual yet effective space that enables Linda to parent her children while also safeguarding herself from Dr. Flint’s abuse.

The shed however becomes more than a space of survival for Linda. It also becomes a constructive domain as during her hiding, Linda continues to engage in activities that reinforce her goal of freedom. The “one hole about an inch long and inch broad” that Linda makes in the wall not only admits light in the dark space but also facilitates a view of the surrounding sights and sounds which helps determine her next move (Jacobs 861). For example, from to time, Linda writes letters “dating them from various places” to maintain the ruse of her escape to the North (Jacobs 881). Writing about Linda’s act of making a hole in the wall, Daneen Wadrop writes,

That scene begins in claustrophobic darkness and as a result of her action changes to one in which light begins to filter in, she to let her vision ray out, the narrative to shape itself to her purposes. The symbolic breakthrough is not one of initial literacy, but rather one of being able to initiate henceforward an exchange of letters in order to countermand Flint’s advances and aggressions, and resist slaveholding in general. (213)

Wadrop considers the piercing of the wall as symbolic of Linda’s continued resistance to slavery. By breakthrough the wall, Linda has pushed against the limitations of the tiny space imposed on her because of her bondage. The outside view not only gives her an immediate view of the Flint planation but also keeps her informed of the sufferings of other slaves. For examples, she learns of a slave woman and her child who was sold to a Georgia trader after her mistress finds out that
her husband is the child’s father. Another time, she sees a slave woman being “stripped and whipped” after some “trifling offense” (Jacobs 866). Such incidents of slave abuse consistently remind her the slave community’s suffering motivating her to strategize her writing to resist Dr. Flint’s advances and “slave holding in general.” Assessing Linda’s activities of writing and sewing during hiding, Carla L Peterson considers the garret a “transformed productive domestic space (159). Peterson further states, “Such a reconstruction of this place of confinement forces a reassessment of the dominant culture’s assumed notions of domesticity” (152). For Linda, since traditional domesticity is equivalent to bondage, she adopts a domestic setting that keeps her involved in her children’s life from a distance while simultaneously fueling her hatred for slavery. Thus, in the makeshift domestic space of the garret, Linda carves a space of survival and progress by continually engaging in productive activities that keep her mobile and motivated about her goal of freedom.

Linda’s period of hiding also highlights the unique role of family in helping her maintain a provisional domestic space. Initially, Betty, a fellow slave houses Linda in her own cell. During her hiding in the garret, aunt Martha, uncle Philip and aunt Nancy work in tandem to ensure Linda’s survival in the small space. Linda narrates, “My food was passed up to me through the trap door my uncle had contrived; and my grandmother, my uncle Phillip, would cease any opportunities as they could to mount up there and chat with me about the opening” (860). Anne Bradford in “Harriet Jacobs at Home in “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl”” notes that Linda is “thoroughly anchored in her community” (34). Harryette Mullen similarly maintains that Linda is “sheltered by the community of slaves” (252). Interestingly, the support Linda receives from her family and acquaintances directly contrasts the hostile role of family in Ruth Hall. Unlike Linda who is showered with material and moral support, Ruth experiences
most backlash from within the home. Nina Baym considers the father, brother, and in-laws in “Ruth Hall as “villains” (253). Lauren Berlant in also faults the men in Ruth’s life for letting her “fall between the cracks of patriarchal protection by abandoning her emotionally and financially during her early widowhood” (430). The differing role of family in Linda’s and Ruth’s individual circumstances is telling of the diverse configurations of domestic spaces in the lives of black and white women. Ruth faces patriarchal pressures from within the home as her family discourages financial and emotional independence. On the contrary, the black community’s collective struggle against slavery helps Linda find home in relationships even outside her immediate blood relatives. While Ruth loses the safety of a domestic space in her parental and marital home, Linda experiences a sense of home with her relatives while also discovering a new domestic in the slave community at large.

As a runaway slave, Linda however is unable to retain the home that her community provides. When she finally escapes to the North after a long period of confinement, the risk of repossession prevents her from uniting with her children. Still, the escape to the North proves beneficial for Linda as here she finds paid employment which shapes her social and political awareness. For example, while working for Mrs. Bruce as a nursemaid, Linda learns of the disparity within the black community in the north. Linda narrates an episode when in Rockaway other nurses “only one shade lighter than her” gave her “a defiant” look (Jacobs 920). Her employment at the Bruce household also earns her a trip to England where Linda for the first time experiences a society without racial discrimination. Linda finds her visit “memorable” as she was “treated according to [her] deportment, without reference to [her] complexion” (Jacobs 926-28). Linda’s employment empowers her economically and psychologically. Jennifer Larson calls paid work for women as Linda “liberating” (550). Larson maintains, “Work is not just an
economic necessity for these women; it becomes an avenue through which they can explore their identities and their oppressions” (550). Working for Mrs. Bruce exposes Linda to the status of the black community in different social environments, local and abroad. She recognizes that although not bonded to a master, black people are still oppressed when dismissed or unacknowledged in specific public settings. Linda’s increasing social awareness shows that while she may have not procured her own home in the literal sense yet, living with Mrs. Bruce has enabled her to secure a space of knowledge and financial independence that could potentially set her on a path of securing her own independent home in the future.

An analysis of *Ruth Hall* and *Incidents* highlights the differing connotations of domestic spaces for black and white women. Both of these antebellum works provide an insight into the differing social pressures that nineteenth-century women experienced. While white women like Ruth battled ideas of patriarchal female submission and subordination in the domestic sphere, black women like Linda wrestled with the instability emanating from the lack of permanent home under slavery. Despite the differing situations presented in these texts, the commonality between them is their depiction of women “whose circumstances do not allow them a livable domestic space” (Larson 549). Dissatisfied with their existent spaces, Ruth and Linda challenge traditional ideas of womanhood to occupy spaces that offer them greater visibility and freedom. It is worth noting that in embracing independence, Ruth and Linda do not altogether negate notions of unconditional love and sacrifice associated with conventional domesticity. Instead, by working towards physical, emotional and financial freedom, both women adopt what Larson terms as “renewed domesticity that is both satisfying and matriarchal” (550). In this “renewed” domestic space, Ruth is a devoted mother as well as a strong-minded professional. Unlike her marital home where she “smothered” her emotions and kept “her wise little mouth shut,” this
renewed personal domestic realm gives her complete freedom of expression and practice. Linda too, after Mrs. Bruce purchases her freedom, inhabits a “renewed” space where she is “no longer afraid to unveil [her] face and look at people as they passed” (943). Although not physically with her children in a “home of [her] own”, Linda is at peace in this new domestic setting, knowing that she and her children are no longer at risk of bondage (Jacobs 945).
Chapter Two: “An indescribable oppression:” Women’s Mobility in *Iola Leroy* and *The Awakening*

The previous chapter establishes that while white women as Ruth Hall have a designated domestic space, black antebellum women as Linda Brent are denied the luxury of a private space under slavery. Ruth’s struggles involve revising the patriarchal design of the domestic sphere by discarding notions of submissiveness and dependence associated with traditional domesticity. Linda, on the contrary, in the absence of a home survives in makeshift domestic spaces and works towards building a private sphere from scratch. Further developing this understanding of antebellum women’s struggle in another context, this chapter focuses on women’s post-Reconstruction experience of navigating domesticity. The Reconstruction period followed the Civil War (1861-65) and entailed the governments’ efforts to uplift the African American community after a history of slavery. Betteye Stroud and Virginia Schomp explain that during the reconstruction period “schools were opened to educate the former slaves while also providing them hiring opportunities and “acres of land” for living space (7). In order to help the newly emancipated black community the government took measures to improve black people’s educational, employment and residential status.

The Reconstruction era thus saw African Americans’ as making attempts to reform their social standing. Writing about the literary presentation of this communal desire to succeed, Claudia Tate identifies post-reconstruction black female characters as “fundamentally different from their antebellum counterparts in that their quests, while implicitly racial, also evolve from decidedly self-conscious, individuated, bourgeois desire” (87). According to Tate, post-emancipation from slavery, black women were cognizant of their social position and so their
mobility was based on self-knowledge as they aspired towards progress. Frances Watkins Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1900) offer the scope to study this “self-knowledge” of post Reconstruction characters in their depiction of female characters who recognize their social marginalization and subsequently work towards attaining more visibility. While Iola identifies access to education and employment as means to counter racial discrimination, Chopin’s protagonist Edna learns the importance of prioritizing the self in a marriage that overlooks her personal desires. In an effort to study these differing mobilities of post Reconstruction women more closely, this chapter will first examine Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892) followed by a close analysis of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1900) to show black and white women’s distinct experiences and their consequent impact on the domestic realms they create.

Scholarship pertaining to *Iola Leroy* so far has mostly assessed ways in which Harper’s protagonist, Iola, diverges from the model of the tragic mulatta—a trope used to classify the biracial woman who is destined for downfall on account of her mixed racial heritage. The vulnerable mulatta typically takes refuge in her light skin, fearing that the disclosure of her racial identity will result in discrimination and social isolation. Considering how Harper’s heroine, Iola takes pride in her black ethnicity, most scholars have noted how she deviates from the image of the tragic mulatta. For example, Anna Shannon Effenbein notes that Iola “subverted” the “standard tragic mulatta plot” in which “the light skinned woman of mixed race chooses to pass as white and then suffers degradation at the hands of white men or death from despair” (319). Effenbein emphasizes that Iola’s agency lies in her ability to embrace her black identity despite possible social humiliation. In a similar vein, Christina Palumbo-De Simone “maintains that “unlike the traditional tragic mulatta, Iola is able to use the horrors of her slave experience to
become a more caring and socially conscious person” (113). Palumbo-De Simone argues that experience of slavery enables Iola to grow a social awareness and empathy for the black community. Criticism regarding Chopin’s *The Awakening* also follow a similar trajectory wherein scholars have studied how the novel’s protagonist, Enda Pontellier deviates from social convention. Teresa Heffernan notes that Edna “refuses the forced submission to a paternalistic social order, understanding marriage as another form of death, a loss of self (32). Constante González Groba further identifies Edna as the “precursor of those fictional women who reject the emptiness and oppression of domesticity and the cultural imposition of separate spheres” (288). Heffernan and Gonzalez note how Edna rejects the patriarchal design of marriage and pressures of traditional domesticity. While most scholars of *Iola Leroy* and *The Awakening* have assessed the heroines’ struggle for self, few have addressed in depth how matters of race impact this departure from tradition. As a former slave woman, Iola recognizes the importance of embracing her racial identity at a time when despite the official abolition of slavery, African Americans still faced discrimination. Her experiences of racial and social prejudice guide her to seek a domestic setting that is based on the equality between partners and a shared pride in their racial identity. On the contrary, Gilman’s protagonist Edna seeks solace in herself on recognizing the weight of her responsibilities as a mother and wife. Therefore, an analysis of *Iola Leroy* and *The Awakening* in this chapter will show how racial concerns impact women’s mobility and their interaction with conventional domesticity.

In *Iola Leroy*, the protagonist, Iola’s mobility post emancipation is essentially determined by the travels imposed on her during enslavement. Following Iola’s father Eugene Leroy’s death, his wife, Marie along with their children, Iola and Harry are remanded into slavery for being of mixed blood. As a slave, Iola is separated from her family and forcibly relocated multiple times.
In the words of union soldier, Tom Anderson, “Dey tell me dey’s been selling her all ober de country kentry” (38). Iola’s experience of being sold “all over the country” exemplifies what critic, Anna Pochmara in calls “forced movement.” Further elaborating on the concept, Susan L Roberson associates “forced relocation” with “the dehumanization of the enslaved person, to the unsettling of self, family and community and to continued dependence on an abusive system (98). Scholars explain how forced movement deprived slaves of a sense of belonging as they grappled with the loss of home, familial relationships, and a damaged self-esteem. A view of Iola’s background of enslavement is important, as it is the experience of an imposed movement that directs Iola’s self-motivated path post-emancipation.

After being rescued by the Union soldiers, Iola immediately begins working as a nurse in the local hospital. As narrated, Iola “adapted herself to the position with a deep sense of relief and “applied herself readily to her appointed tasks” (Harper 40). Iola’s enthusiasm in her new role shows how she uses her education and refined mannerisms towards a productive cause (Harper 39). Tate’s explanation about the post Reconstruction characters’ motivation offers a useful lens to discern Iola’s efforts at the hospital. According to Tate, “By the turn of the century the black heroic character no longer appears as one of many, engaged in a representative, collective, or communal struggle for meaning and direction. The characters’ motivating desire no longer arises from group ambition but from individual longing to emulate an exemplary model” (86). Tate asserts that post reconstruction characters are motivated more by an individual desire to progress rather a communal ethos that united their antebellum predecessors. Tate’s contention seems valid to a certain extent, considering that Iola’s readiness to accept employment as a nurse depicts a personal desire to progress from a victimized position. However, her sincere “gentle ministrations” towards the afflicted community indicates that this individualistic mobility is still
directed towards communal work (Harper 40). Elizabeth Young considers Iola’s efforts as a form of “war work” explaining that the hospital is “both a refuge from slavery and an arena for struggle against it” (209). As a former slave, Iola is sympathetic and compassionate towards others who like her have incurred loss because of slavery. In helping these people, Iola joins the black community’s collective effort against slavery. The hospital thus shelters her from bondage, while also providing her a space where she can use her restored physical mobility to stabilize others.

While Iola’s physical efforts as a nurse depicts how she uses her newfound physical freedom, it is her evolving belief system that shows how the experience of slavery has transformed her. Iola’s interaction with Dr. Gresham after he proposes marriage to her is a significant moment in the novel as it presents the notion of mobility as more of an internal process that determines Iola’s subsequent actions. Dr. Gresham is introduced as a “member of a wealthy and aristocratic family, proud of its lineage, which it could trace through generations of good blood to its ancestral isle (Harper 54). Iola too “admired” Dr. Gresham and admits that she “do[es] like him” (Harper 93). However, despite these feelings of admiration and respect, Iola refuses Dr. Gresham’s advances, reasoning that she will not enter a marriage at the cost of concealing her black identity. She asks Dr. Gresham, “should the story of my life be revealed to your family, would they be willing to forget all the terrible humiliations through which I have passed? I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment” (Harper 97). Iola’s refusal highlights how her lived experience as a biracial woman shapes her view of an interracial alliance. Since in the past, white slaveholders, have subjected her to “cruel indignities” attempting to break her spirit, Iola understands that hiding her true ethnicity now will only make her more vulnerable and fearful. Embracing it, however, will set her physically
and psychologically free. Teresa C. Zackodnik writes about the unique experience of the mixed-race character in identifying the mulatta as a “figure of hybridity who reaches across, challenges, and confounds the color line” (xii). Zacknodnik’s observation of the mulatta figure explains how Iola’s biracial identity provides her an access to both the black and white community. This unique mobility across the “color line” enables Iola to discern white sensibilities while also being fully aware of the black community’s apprehensions. Her rejection of Dr. Gresham emanates from this dual experience as she refuses the sense of alienation that a veil of concealment will incite.

Iola’s rejection of Dr. Gresham’s proposal is an interesting contrast to her mother, Marie’s acceptance of an interracial marriage. A series of flashbacks reveal that Iola’s father, Eugene Leroy was a wealthy Creole planter of “Fresh and Spanish” descent while Marie was a slave girl who nursed Eugene back to health in a period of sickness (Harper 56). Seeing Marie’s devotion, Eugene decided to “reward her care” by marrying her (Harper 63). Marie too saw this as an opportunity to escape the life of a “lonely slave girl” who was “liable to [being] bought and sold, exchanged and bartered” (Harper 66). However, Marie’s escape is only temporary as following Eugene’s death, she along with her children is deceitfully forced to slavery. Iola’s knowledge of her parents’ history combined with her own lived experience as a slave inform her decision making process when faced with Dr. Gresham’s proposal. As Kathleen Pfeiffer notes, Iola’s response precludes a domesticity modeled on the acceptance of interracial marriage and a national history reconciled to integration. By rejecting Gresham’s proposal, Iola resists the offer that her mother accepted; she refuses, in a sense, to marry her father. But more specifically, she rejects her father outright by explicitly denouncing the decisions
that shaped his life and that created hers: Iola will not partake in the same sort of union from which she herself was born” (30).

Iola has lived through the degrading results of her parents’ union and so, she aspires for a domestic setting alternative to what Marie had chosen. Although Eugene treated Marie kindly, he did not share nor understand her racial concerns. As noted in Iola’s recollection, “My father does not think as she does” (Harper 84). Marie was continually tormented by the thought of “how there might be screw loose somewhere” and the “children and her might be reduced to slavery” (Harper 70). Moreover, by accepting marriage as a reward, Marie had unknowingly also consented to an unspoken yet definite hierarchy in the marital relation. Iola recognizes this inherent inequality of experiences and position in an interracial alliance, knowing that marrying Dr. Gresham will potentially give his family the same kind of leverage that Eugene’s cousin Alfred Lorraine had which he used to debase Marie and the children immediately after Eugene’s death. Iola embodies what Hazel Carby calls a “vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between the races, and at the same time, an expression of the relationship between the races” (89). As a living “expression” of an interracial relationship, Iola has “explored” Marie’s unique challenges of passing and the consequent impact on future generations as herself and brother, Harry. Thus, by refusing Dr. Gresham, she avoids a fate as her mother’s and realizes her own vision for a life partner and a home. She states, “To the man I marry my heart must be as open as flowers to the sun” (93) and that a “palace like home” that Dr. Gresham can offer will not erase her longing for her mother (Harper 98). Iola’s rejection of Dr. Gresham’s proposal therefore highlights her inner mobility, a state that underpins her personal growth from past experiences. Learning from Marie’s circumstances, Iola comes to understand her goal of creating a unique domestic space. In this domestic setting, she envisions the comfort of her family lost to her
because of slavery and companionship of a man with whom she can be “open” about her experiences and racial ethnicity.

Although Iola initially envisions home as a space where she is reunited with her family, her travels, and efforts to seek employment slowly expand her notion of the domestic space as a more communal than an individual realm. For example, the local school where Iola teaches becomes a space of new relationships and collective bonding. In this school, Iola earns the “confidence and co-operation of the students’ parents” and the students too, show their appreciation for Iola by “bringing fruits and flowers for her that gladdens her lonely heart” (Harper 118). By revealing the dynamic between Iola and her students, Harper shows how these students almost become a surrogate family for Iola enabling her to experience a sense of home with them, in the absence of her immediate family. With this newfound sense of community, Iola enthusiastically instructs her students by “laying the foundations of good character” in her children” and not limiting her teaching to “only rudiments of knowledge” (Harper 118). Iola’s efforts towards mobilizing the black community from a grassroot level almost presents her as a reformer whose goal is no longer restricted to simply uniting her immediate family. Cassandra Jackson argues that “it is as a teacher that Iola initiates her role as a black community activist” (554). Jackson further emphasizes the significance of black educators: “By taking the initiative to establish schools despite white opposition, risking their own safety in the name of education, many black schoolteachers demonstrated their commitment to black progress and defined themselves as community activists” (555). For Iola, the school almost becomes an alternative home space as she develops a sense of community in the freedmen who also saw her as “their friend” (Harper 118). In showing Iola’s commitment to this new family
who equally value her, Harper redefines the domestic domain as a space that not only shelters immediate blood relations but also extends to accommodate a community.

While experiencing a sense of belonging with students at the school, show Iola the different possibilities of what home and family could mean, it also expands her idea of womanhood when faced with racial discrimination during the search for employment. At the school, “very soon Iola realized that while she was heartily appreciated by the freedmen, she was an object of suspicion and dislike to their former owners” (Harper 118). Moreover, when working as saleswoman in the North, Iola immediately senses “a chill in the social atmosphere of the store” after her ethnicity becomes common knowledge” (Harper 161). Following Iola’s forced resignation, she is laid off again at another store when fellow women workers complain to the manager about her being a “colored girl” (Harper 162). Soon after, she is also denied boarding when the matron of the house learns of Iola’s racial identity. The series of rejections that Iola faces especially by women represent what Leslie Petty calls “larger patterns of black women’s exclusion from female communities in the real world” (Harper 81). This repeated sense of exclusion that Iola faces in the public space shows her the importance of women’s self-sufficiency and independence. She tells Uncle Robert, “I have a theory that every woman ought to know how to earn her own living. I believe that a great amount of sin and misery comes from the inefficiency of women” (Harper 160). In attributing women’s misery to their state of dependence, Iola emphasizes the value of financial security especially for black women. Christine Palumbo De-Simon refers to Iola as “strong, determined and career-oriented” stating that “by rejecting standard images of womanhood, Harper’s novel suggests that women like blacks, must choose their own identities and discard the labels. In taking pride in her black womanhood, Iola negates the tragedy of being black and being a woman in male-dominated
society” (133). Iola’s consistent efforts to seek employment despite facing hostility on multiple occasions presents her as negating the notion of tragedy associated with her black ethnicity and promoting a narrative of resistance.

Iola’s meeting with members of the black community, especially women, in the latter half of the novel further underscores black women’s abilities and ways in which traditional domesticity could be used for political purposes. Robert’s relative, Aunt Linda for example, contributes to community work in domestic expressions. Post-emancipation she arranges prayer meetings for the black community, offering a space where family members separated during slavery can potentially reunite. In one of these meetings, she reminds Robert, “An’ dere’s dat ole broken pot we used, ter tell ‘bout de war” (192) The use of an old broken pot as a substitute for a microphone reminds readers of how former slaves incorporated emblems of domesticity into their resistance efforts. During the war, Tom, Robert and Aunt Linda conversed in secret code language of domesticity to keep each other apprised. On one occasion, Robert sneaks in the kitchen where Aunt Linda is working and informs her, “Splendid news in the papers. Secesh routed. Yankees whipped ‘em out of their boots. Papers full of it. I tell you the eggs and the butter’s mighty fresh this morning” (Harper 17). Harper decodes this language for readers by explaining, that if slaves “wished to announce a victory of the Union army, they said the butter was fresh, or that the fish and eggs were in good condition. If defeat befell them, then the butter and other produce were rancid or stale” (Harper 16) The coded language exemplifies what Teresa C. Zackodnik calls the use of “enforced domesticity for subversive ends” (95). The very tasks of domestic work that was “enforced” to confine Aunt Linda to the domestic space as a slave becomes her means of political involvement. When Robert conveys positive news about the war to Aunt Linda, she responds saying that “ole Missus’ face is newspaper nuff for me”
Aunt Linda is not literate, yet from within the realms of the kitchen, she is receptive to her mistress’ expressions and Robert’s coded speech which enables her to be an active participant in community work. This involvement continues post emancipation as she summons former slaves including Iola for meetings. Iola finds Aunt Linda’s company “delightful” and takes interest in the “quaintness of [Aunt Linda’s] speech and the shrewdness of her intellect” (139). Aunt Linda may not share Iola’s refined language and education but her ability to rally the black community shows that she has a voice and knows how to assert herself.

The meal that Iola shares at Aunt Linda’s home with Robert and Uncle Daniel is also an important moment considering it depicts how traditional domesticity is appropriated for progressive means. Aunt Linda opens her home to Iola, Robert and Uncle Daniel treating them to “light and flaky” biscuits, preserves and “jelly as bright as amber” (Harper 131). In her home, the black community discuss “army reminisces and recollections of the days of slavery” (Harper 135). Harper describes the atmosphere in Aunt Linda’s home, “Aunt Linda sat at the table in such a flutter of excitement that she could hardly eat, but she gazed with intense satisfaction on her guests. Robert sat on her right hand, contrasting Aunt Linda’s pleasant situation with the old days in Mrs. Johnson’s kitchen, where he had played his pranks upon her, and told her the news of the war” (Harper 135). The scene indicates a close fellowship between the black community as they share a meal while reminiscing about the past and reflecting on their present. Earlier Aunt Linda used markers of domesticity such as “fish,” “eggs” and a “pot” to stay updated with, and relay the ongoings of the war, at present she uses her domestic skills in cooking and table decor to transform her private domain into a productive space that promotes dialogue and a kinship between the black community. To Iola, Aunt Linda’s gesture of hosting her friends appears “so motherly,” reminding her of “sunshiny days when she used to nestle in Mam Liza’s
arms, in her own happy home” (Harper 135). Aunt Linda’s maternal actions of showing love and care in domestic terms may project her as a traditionalist; however, she uses these domestic tactics to facilitate a discussion that can potentially encourage and prepare her community for greater political challenges that they might encounter in the future. Iola’s feelings of relaxation in Aunt Linda’s home “after the trying scenes through which she had passed” as well as her continued determination to reconnect with her family show how the home cooked meal has nourished former slaves as herself, both physically and mentally (Harper 137).

While Iola’s interaction with Aunt Linda shows how black women from an older generation wielded power through domesticity, her introduction to Lucille Delany indicates black women’s potential in more recent times. On reuniting with her family, Iola meets Lucille as Harry’s acquaintance. Lucille is a university graduate who dedicates her efforts towards “training future wives and mothers” (156). As narrated, “[Lucille] began on a small scale, in a humble building, and her work was soon crowned with gratifying success. She had enlarged her quarters, increased her teaching force, and had erected a large and commodious school-house through her own exertions and the help of others” (Harper 156). Lucille’s work is geared towards stabilizing former slaves as caretakers of their families since previously the system of slavery forced these women to neglect their own husbands and children. In empowering these women through knowledge and skill, Lucille helps them establish stable domestic spaces and by extension a steady home life. It is worth noting that Lucille’s name bears semblance with the real-life former slave and activist Lucy Delany. Born into slavery in Missouri, Delany eventually
secures her freedom through a lawsuit. Following emancipation, Delany became part of St. Louis Black community and led the black women’s Masonic movement. The hinted connection between Lucy Delany and Lucille Delany suggests black women’s ability to reform the community by taking positions of authority. Zackodnik explains the reference to real life Delany in stating, “implicit association with these real life revolutionary black subjects illustrates Black women as both refined and radical, virtuous and vehement, resisters of injustice and inequality” (80). Lucille is “refined” in her education and mannerism, and yet equally “radical” in terms of her business acumen directed towards women’s personal development. Her multiple facets echo Marie’s comment, “In you I see reflected some of the blessed possibilities which lie within us” (Harper 156). Lucille’s presence reminds the community especially women of their potential to foster secure domestic spaces while still having an identity of their own.

In Iola’s meetings with Aunt Linda and Lucille, Harper shows how her protagonist’s physical mobility initiates an inner progress. As Iola travels in search for her family, she interacts with various people, especially women who show her the multiple possibilities for the future. As a young girl in her father’s plantation and unaware of her racial ethnicity, Iola saw no harm in slavery. She tells her school friend, “I believe [the abolitionist] are prejudiced against us and want to get our property. I read about them in the papers when I was at home” (Harper 40).

Earlier Iola’s home was the safe and privileged vicinity of her father’s plantation that distorted her social reality. The privilege made her ignorant to the plight of the black community and later failed to protect her and the family after Eugene’s passing. At present, Iola’s experience with

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slavery and her exposure to the black community post emancipation has enabled her to conceive home differently. This renewed conception of home is implied when she rejects Dr. Gresham’s marriage proposal for the second time. She denies him stating, “My life work is planned. I intend spending my future among the colored people of the South” (182). It is worth noting that Iola’s earlier rejection emanated from a space of pain and discontentment with the white community, as she was recently rescued from slavery. Grieving familial separation, Iola’s idea of a home was limited to the close presence of her immediate family. She told Gresham previously, “I have resolved never to marry until I have found my mother” (Harper 98). However, this second rejection is based on a vision of a home that nurtures her resolve for social work. By marrying Gresham, Iola would have regressed to a home that could obscure her reality again. Instead of reverting to a life of privilege and ignorance, she chooses to form home with the black community where she sees the potential of progress and self-advancement.

Iola’s passion for community service leads her to meet Dr. Latimer, a mixed-race African American who like her is proud of his ethnicity and dedicates his life for the uplift of the black community. Their common goal of racial uplift brings them together in a “loving union” as husband and wife (Harper 206). In Iola’s marriage to Dr. Latimer, Harper shows the fulfillment of Iola’s desire for “love, home, happiness and social position” (Harper 98) Unlike the marital alliance that Dr. Gresham offered, this marriage is based on a mutual understanding of each other’s pasts and an appreciation of each other’s future aspirations. For example, seeing Iola’s enthusiasm for service, Dr. Latimer reminds her of the lack of literature written from black people’s perspective. He motivates her to channelize her “rich experience” into a “good strong book” that could inspire the black community (Harper 203). It appears that the couple’s shared vision of the black community’s progress also enables them to uplift one another as individuals.
After marriage, Dr. Latimer became known as the “Good Doctor” in the black community, while Iola “took her place in the Sunday-school as a teacher, and in the church as a helper. She was welcomed by the young pastor, who found in her a strong and faithful ally. Together they planned meetings for the especial benefit of mothers and children” (Harper 216). Iola’s embraces a domestic setting that allows her to freely move into the public space while still retaining a steady home life. As Carla L Peterson also notes, “Iola works to redeem her race not by remaining by the hearth, but my mediating between the private and public spheres within the black community—between home, church, and school” (102). Iola has learned the varying possibilities of what the home for an educated woman as herself could look like. By moving between the public and private, Iola creates a system that allows her to mediate between her home life and professional endeavors.

As a post reconstruction black woman with increasing mobility in the public space and a parallel internal growth of new ambitions, Iola redefines traditional domesticity and womanhood at large. Earlier, in community meetings, Iola identified the need for “noble earnest men and true women” (Harper 191). Over the course of her post emancipation journey, Iola recognizes what makes men and women “noble.” While noble men realize their responsibilities and do not “shirk their burdens” onto their “wives’ shoulders”, true women retain the Christian moral values while also exploring their latent potential as workers and leaders in the public realm (Harper 176). Contrary to the womanhood of silence and submission that Marie embraced, Iola represents a newer, revised domestic model that encourages women to develop a strong individuality and consider embracing more public positions as they become mothers and wives.

Harper’s novel shows how the instability during slavery motivated black women to reconsider the dynamics of their new reconstructed home post emancipation. Instead of
replicating the old domestic space of limited access and control, reconstruction women such as Iola embrace a setting that values the self and still anchors them to their families and community at large. While an analysis of Harper’s *Iola Leroy* depicts how consequences of racial inequality led black women to redesign their home space, a study of Chopin’s *The Awakening* adds to discourse in highlighting the differing challenges of white women. Nineteenth-century white women battled with notions of submissiveness and sacrifice associated with traditional domesticity. Unlike Iola who in choosing marriage and a profession reintegrates into social fabric of the post emancipation era, Chopin’s protagonist, Edna gradually withdraws from society, losing interest in her role as a mother and wife. Therefore, to study the struggles of nineteenth-century white women in culture of gendered expectations, the remainder of this chapter focuses on Edna’s struggle with traditional domesticity as she rejects the socially assigned domestic space and finds a sense of home with the self.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin traces the foundation of Edna and Leonce’s marriage to an event of “pure accident” (62). Edna meets Leonce “in the midst of her secret great passion. He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her” (62). Edna and Leonce’s courtship almost reads like a romantic fairy tale of infatuation and flattery. Unlike Iola and Frank’s marriage which is centered on a mutual understanding of past experiences and future goals, Edna and Leonce’s marriage is based on fleeting passions which, “resembled many other marriages” of the time that became known as the “decrees of Fate” (Chopin 62). In giving into these momentary feelings and fanciful hopes, Edna impulsively abides by a culture that mandates marriage. Observing Edna’s hastiness, Esin Kumlu calls marriage an “indispensable fate which is a trick of the collective memory. As being married is the sole and ultimate way of
being accepted by the society, Edna unconsciously becomes part of that cycle” (104).

Considering Edna is raised in a culture that deems marriage a requisite for women’s survival and acceptance, she quickly accepts an alliance that offers her financial and social security. In this marriage shared “thought and taste” is a hope and not a guarantee (Chopin 62). Thus, the initial chapters of the novel establish marriage as less of a well deliberated outcome and more of a social construct that is regarded as the acceptable way of life, especially for women.

The absence of mutual understanding and shared interests in Edna and Leonce’s marriage explains the distance between the couple at the novel’s onset. For example, in the opening chapter of the novel, Leonce dismisses Edna’s choice to bathe in the sea as a “folly” (Chopin 44). On observing her as a “valuable piece of property,” he comments, “You are burnt beyond recognition” (Chopin 44). Leonce’s reaction to Edna’s sunburnt body reveals how he almost sees her as his prized accessory that must remain untarnished. Conceding to Leonce’s comment, Edna “critically surveys” her hands which further shows that she is accustomed to his sense of control over her. Margit Stange writes about dynamics between the couple,

In the context of the property system in which Edna exists as a sign of value, her body is detachable and alienable from her own viewpoint: the hands and wrists are part of the body yet objectified, held out and examined as if they belonged to someone else. Edna’s perception of her own body is structured by the detachability of the hand and arm as signs of Leonce’s ownership of her. (22)

Stange explains that Edna is isolated from her own body and viewpoint. In examining her hands analytically, she sees herself in relation to Leonce and silently permits his control and opinion on her body. Following this brief exchange, Leonce exits the domestic scene to play a game of billiards in Klein’s hotel as Edna accepts his uncertain return for early dinner. The dynamics
between the couple conveys ways in their relationship represents traditional nineteenth-century marriages that follows the demarcation of the public and the private space. Leonce as the sole breadwinner, sees Edna as the treasured possession of his home and considers his rightful place amongst men in the public space of the hotel. Through the couple’s short interaction in the opening chapter, Chopin provides a glimpse of the gendered roles in a conventional marriage of nineteenth-century America.

In subsequent episodes Chopin highlights the weight of these gendered expectations especially for women. For example, after Leonce returns from hotel Klein, Edna bears the brunt of his disappointment for responding to his “high spirited humor” with sleepy “half utterances” (Chopin 47). Agitated and discouraged, Leonce forces Edna to check their son, Raoul for fever. As narrated, “He reproached his wife with her in attention, her habitual neglect of their children. If it was not a mother’s place to look after children, whose on earth was it?” (Chopin 48).

Leonce’s thought process reflects the rigidity of gender roles. His expectation of Edna to attend to the children despite being fully awake and able himself shows how parenthood is not a shared responsibility between the couple. As a woman Edna is expected to sacrifice her sleep and take care of Raoul while Leonce in “half a minute” is “fast asleep” (Chopin 48). To Edna, the burden of these expectations become apparent as now “thoroughly awake”, she cries bitterly. Here, Edna is not only physically awake but also psychologically alert as she understands the growing weight of the duties imposed on her. Chopin writes, “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood” (Chopin 49). This moment of unexplainable anguish and oppression is a poignant moment in the text as it implies Edna’s stirred consciousness and an
aversion to the domestic burden forced on her. Her crying represents an instance of “awakening from” which Andrew James Parvantes describes as “those textual moments where women reject (or are called to reject) the psychic and social restrictions placed upon them by androcentric culture and by the individual men (husbands, fathers, sons, and so forth) who act its deputies” (509). In Edna’s solitude, the “strange and unfamiliar” feelings can be seen as a “call to reject” Leonce’s expectations of her as the sole caretaker of his house and children. At this point, Edna may not be fully cognizant of her desires; however, her earlier refusal to answer Leonce “when he questioned her” followed by a tearful episode of contemplation suggests that she is gradually moving on from traditional domestic persona (Chopin 48).

Edna’s transition from conventional domesticity becomes further apparent in her meeting with Adele Ratignolle, a friend from New Orleans who is also vacationing in Grand Isle. Adele has been married for seven and has been mostly pregnant throughout this time. While Adele’s conversations mostly revolve around her pregnancy, her activities too are centered around the domestic domain. For example, when visiting Edna, she remains preoccupied with the sewing of “a marvel of construction to enclose a baby’s body” (50). It is worth noting that even in her supposed leisure time of socializing with friends, Adele “often” takes the sewing along with her (50). The sewing kit appears as an emblem of domesticity, showing how Adele is entirely consumed by her role as a mother. Her commitment to the home echoes the image of the “good wife” propagated in the nineteenth-century press who considered the family’s needs as her “chiefly earthly concern.”

Danna Kinnison notes “Adele Ratignolle is the ideal wife and mother who never experiences an impulse that deters her from the sole concern of caring for her

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family” (22). Like most women at Grand Isle, Adele takes pride in her sole identity as the “ideal wife and mother.” Her complete focus on the home enunciates Edna’s deviation from tradition. For instance, when Adele attempts to interest Edna in sewing, Edna fails to “see the use of anticipating and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations” (Chopin 52). To appear amiable, Edna “cuts a pattern under Adele’s instructions”, however, her inherent lack of belief and interest in the venture conveys her resistance to the conventional role of the enthused mother (Chopin 52). In wanting to keep her summer recreational time free from domestic projects and obligations, Edna depicts the desire of prioritizing the self.

While interactions with Leonce and Adele make Edna realize her discomfort with social expectations, her meetings with Robert Leburn, a fellow acquaintance initiates the process of self-discovery. For example, when Robert invites her for a swim, hesitant at first, Edna agrees and finds herself enamored by the sea. Inexperienced in swimming, Edna still finds the sea “seductive” and “inviting” (57). At this point, Edna “begins to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (57). It appears that as Edna departs from tradition, she becomes familiar with her inner desires. In the process of this self-awareness, she becomes receptive to the natural beauty of the landscape around her. This moment of Edna’s growing awareness depicts what Andrew Paravantes calls a moment of “awakening to” (509). Paravantes defines “awakening to” as textual incidents where “women recognize (or are called to recognize) their ontological capacity for creativity and creation” (509). Edna’s recognition of her inner capacity is eminent as soon after realizing the beauty of the sea, one night, she takes a plunge into the water. Chopin describes Edna’s first swimming experience, “She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before” (73). Edna’s daring
and reckless swimming highlights her untapped creative potential. Her desire to “swim far out” can be seen as longing to push against all limitations that may curb or impede her capacity to succeed. Moreover, in her newfound ability of muscular coordination associated with swimming, Edna experiences a sense of control over her body. As Ann Heilmann points out, Edna’s midnight swim “establishes her sense of self-ownership, physical, mental and spiritual, which in turn triggers two fundamental insights that determine her progression from disengaged wife to autonomous subject: in control of her body, she becomes aware of its potential for pleasure and learns to claim her right to self-determination” (87). Earlier, Edna was almost alienated from her own body as she lived as a valuable in the Pontellier house where the mere sight of her bare fingers reminded her of missing wedding rings. The swim thus, enables Edna to form a raw, personal connection with her body, understand its potentialities and regain “a sense self-ownership” lost to her in marital obligations.

It is worth noting that Edna’s departure from social convention parallels her gradual indulgence in bodily activities. For example, earlier Edna’s retreats to crying in isolation after Leonce reprimands her for the neglect of their children. She then challenges herself to the muscularly strenuous activity of swimming “far out” shortly after realizing the weight of Adele’s responsibilities as a mother. Soon after her midnight swim, Edna is overcome with the “physical need of sleep” (78). As narrated, “She slept but a few hours. They were troubled and feverish hours, distributed with dreams that were intangible, that eluded her, leaving only an impression upon her half-awakened senses of something unattainable” (79). Edna’s indulgence in these bodily experiences of crying, swimming, and sleeping appear as her process of forming a unison with the self. In these moments of self-indulgence, Edna finds a productive space that awakens her desire for “something unattainable.” Here, Ali Madanipour’s analysis of viewing the division
of the public and private realm as reflection of the divide between the individual and society, helps explain Edna’s gradual withdrawal from society and bonding with the self. According to Madanipour, the public and private spheres are a “reflection of the deeper level relationship between the individual and society, between the self and the other” (5). Madanipour traces the concept of the private space into the personal space of the body and more specifically into the realm of the mind that harbors all “thoughts, feelings and desires” (14). Madanipour’s association of the private space with the body is useful in understanding Edna’s position as her mobility is expressed in her bonding with the self. As she engages in crying swimming and resting, she comes to terms with her own needs, retreating from the confining domestic realm of the Pontellier house to find a sense of home in the space of her own body.

As Edna becomes familiar with the self, she also distances herself from institutions that promote gender roles. For example, when attending the service of “a quaint little Gothic church” in Grand Terre, Edna is overcome with a feeling “oppression and drowsiness” (82). Chopin narrates, “Her head began to ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes. The onset of a headache appears as an expression of Edna’s dissent with what the church represents and preaches. Here, her bodily pain to a suppressive Christian ideology resonates with the bodily ecstasy she had earlier experienced in the freedom to “swim far out” (Chopin 73). Writing specifically about the teachings in churches during nineteenth-century America, Nancy Cott notes, “Drawing often on the text of Proverbs 31, they showed the model Christian woman to be a modest and faithful wife, an industrious and benevolent community member, and an efficient housekeeper who did not neglect the refinements of life. Fervently they described how pious women could influence others in the community and in their own families” (147). Cott presents the church as social body that enforced traditional domesticity by elevating women’s role as the
“modest” and “faithful” keeper of the home. Although Chopin does not reveal the content of the sermon in the novel, Edna’s sense of oppression implies a probable reaction to a preaching that endorses notions of piety and chastity. In an earlier conversation with Adele, Edna revealed that in matters concerning the church, she was previously “just driven along by habit” (Chopin 61). However, now with her understanding of personal preferences and desires, Edna rejects social orders that undermine her individuality. As Garnet Ayers Batinovich notes “Edna awakens not only to the realization that women are oppressed, but also to the understanding that religion is the source from which male-dominated society has learned to oppress women” (84). Edna’s understanding of religious institutions and its agendas explains why she finds the church’s atmosphere “stifling” (83). In embracing “open air,” Enda embraces a freedom of thought and being that transcends the physically and psychologically confining parameters of the church.

However, it is important to note that Edna’s recognition of her own desires does not entirely alienate her from the domestic space. Some critics equate Edna’s embracing of the self with her devaluing of everything that domesticity entails. Romanous Muoneke for example, identifies “Edna’s rejection of motherhood and wifehood” as means to “personal freedom” (69). Elaine Showalter also views Edna as “rejecting the domestic empire of the mother and the sororal world of women’s culture” (15). While such criticism is reasonable considering Edna does withdraw from obligations of the domestic space, it overlooks instances where she also embraces the nurturing role of a mother with her newfound understanding. For example, following her return from the church, Edna lovingly puts her son, Etienne to sleep. As narrated, “Edna took him in her arms, and seating herself in the rocker, began to coddle and caress him, calling him all manner of tender names, soothing him to sleep” (Chopin 87). Edna’s affection for her son and the desire to sooth and coddle him shows that she has also not entirely abandoned
motherhood. However, she does refuse to live as the traditional “mother woman” who “idolized their children” and “worshipped their husbands” (Chopin 51). In retaining the love and care for her children, while also considering personal needs, Edna calls for a revised domestic model where the cost of motherhood is not suppressing the mothers’ individuality (Chopin 51).

As Edna rejects the self-sacrificial notion of the “mother-woman”, she is drawn to Mademoiselle Reisz’s unconventional living. As a single woman, Mademoiselle Reisz is liberated from the demands of marriage and motherhood. She directs her energies towards her craft as a pianist. In Grand Isle, her music “sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column” (71). This bodily response to Reisz’s music shows how the chords at some level jolted Edna into recognizing her own untapped creative potential. In Reisz, Edna sees alternative possibilities for women that transcend the widely accepted notion of traditional domesticity. Ali Khoshnood notes, “Mademoiselle Reisz plays an important role in Edna’s awakening. Edna is stirred and moved by the fervid piano performance of Mademoiselle Reisz, a reclusive bohemian woman who seldom mingles with the city folk and who usually disregards the social norms of society” (568). This “disregard for social norms” inspires Edna, motivating her to locate Mademoiselle Reisz’s address following a return to New Orleans from Grand Isle. However, on meeting Mademoiselle Reisz, Edna is almost disillusioned by her “artificial flowers”, “shabby lace” and “bumpy sofa” (Chopin 114). Edna realizes how for Mademoiselle Reisz, the price of deviating from the norm has been financial insecurity and loneliness. As Wendy Martin notes, “Mademoiselle Reisz retreats into a solitary existence that is sometimes as confining as the web of domesticity” (26). The meeting with Reisz appears as another moment of awakening for Edna as she understands that while Adele’s self-sacrificial lifestyle is unacceptable, so is Mademoiselle Reisz’s “solitary existence.” At the end of their interaction, “new voices” trouble
Edna which can be seen as a self-realization of how her sense of fulfillment does not lie in a life of complete isolation (Chopin 116).

Recognizing that she is unsuited to the possibilities that Adele and Reisz represent, Edna carves a unique space for herself in pursuing her individuality from within the realms of her marital home. Leonce’s conversation with Dr. Mandelet reveals the details of this pursuit. He tells Dr. Mandelet, “She lets the housekeeping go to the dickens” (177). He further adds, “She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all acquaintances, and goes tamping about by herself, moping in the street cars, getting in after dark” (118). Edna’s behavior reflects a transition from an awakening that started on a psychological level to one that is now manifested in unrestrained physical ways. Earlier, Edna found her sense of freedom in solitary moments of crying, swimming and intrinsically recognizing her aversion to traditional ideas of womanhood. However, now in episodes of “tamping by herself,” “moping in the street cars” and turning away from all acquaintances,” Edna’s inner rebellion has found an outward uninhibited expression. Here, it is worth noting that this unrestrained physical expression is dependent on the very restrained quadroon nurse and other servants that manage Edna’s home while she actively pursues the route to self-discovery. The quadroon nurse, the little black girl, the maid, and the mulatto looking boy are silent black characters in the novel that run the domestic domain of upper-class Creoles. In the Pontellier home, the quadroon nurse looks after the children and the house maid takes care of other domestic affairs. Chopin narrates an episode that highlights the role of the domestic staff at the Pontellier home, “The quadroon sat for hours before Edna’s palette, patient as a savage, while the house-maid took charge of the children, and the drawing-room went undusted” (108). The scene presents the nurse and the house maid as key characters that facilitate Edna’s indulgence in hobbies such as painting. Writing about the significance of
Edna’s domestic staff, Michele Brinbaum notes, “Edna’s agency is measured against—indeed is contingent on—the necessarily muted quadroon” (80). Brinbaum explains how Edna’s newfound sense of control and the ability to pursue personal passions and interests is possible as she is able to delegate the duties associated with traditional domesticity to these submissive black servant figures who will obediently follow her orders. Thus, it appears that Edna’s pursuit of the self and the consequent readjustment of the model of traditional domesticity is contingent on the continuous reinforcement of racial and class structures.

Edna’s redefinition of the domestic space is not only apparent in her increasing absence from the home as Leonce complains, but it is also implicit in the new thought processes she brings in the private realm. In an attempt to diagnose her behavior, Dr. Mandelet questions Leonce, “has she been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?” Although Leonce clarifies that she “hasn’t been associating with anyone,” the novel itself unfolds the answer to Dr. Mandelet’s question in presenting Emerson’s writing as a probable influence on Edna. As narrated, “Then Edna sat in the library after dinner and read Emerson until she grew sleepy” (127). Considering that nineteenth-century philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson promotes ideas of self-sufficiency and individualism, Edna’s choice to read a writer as such, suggests how her choice of self-pursuit frames her recreational choices and vice versa. In his seminal 1841 essay, “Self-Reliance,” Emerson writes, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius” (19). The idea of believing oneself and leading a life based on what is true for the individual forms the crux of Emersonian thought. As Christopher Newfield notes, “Individualism is the most popular feature of Emerson’s thinking, as it is in nearly any modern system of thought” (6). By choosing to read Emerson in her leisure time, Edna introduces a new, self-
centered perspective in the domestic space, countering the inflow of Leonce’s conventional thinking that dictated the atmosphere of the Pontellier house. Her seating in the library is reminiscent of an earlier episode when Leonce reprimands her for neglect of the home and associates the idea of a “mother’s place” with housekeeping and caregiving. By resorting to the library and indulging in progressive reading, Edna not only undermines Leonce’s concept of a woman’s “place” but inhabits a literal and figurative space that ensures her “peace and comfort.”

Edna’s feelings of comfort in small, self-dictated spaces awakens her to the uneasiness in the “big” Pontellier house and the consequent realization of what makes a home (Chopin 134). In a conversation with Madmoiselle Reisz, Edna admits, “[that big house] never seemed like mine, anyway—like home” (134). Soon after, Edna decides to move into a small “four room house around the corner” which she finds “cozy, inviting and restful” (Chopin 134). Edna’s decision to leave the family house is a poignant moment in the narrative as it marks her transition from claiming space in the Pontellier house to owning one that absolves her from all social and marital responsibilities. Earlier Edna enacted her independence by withdrawing from conventional tasks associated with her role as a wife and mother; however, now she enforces her agency by moving into a house that she can call her own. To Edna, this pigeon-house, “at once assumed the intimate character of the home” as it did not bear Leonce’s influence in design nor atmosphere (Chopin 151). Unlike the family home that Leonce will remodel, according to the changes he “contemplated and desired,” (Chopin 150) the pigeon house is what Ken Egan calls Edna’s “private sanctuary” (151). In this private sanctuary, Edna maintains all control and is relieved from any conventional domestic trappings. Thus, with her reclaimed sense of ownership, Edna experiences home as a space that reinforces her inner “strength” and individuality (151).
Interestingly, the ability to command a personal physical space empowers Edna to further push the boundaries of traditional domesticity. For example, in the pigeon house, Edna gives in to Alcee Arobin’s “seductive entreaties” (Chopin 150). This implied sexual encounter presents Edna as subverting ideas of virtue that refrain women from experiencing sexual gratification in a marriage. Writing about married women’s sexual repression, Anna Kordas notes, “From the middle to the end of the nineteenth-century, the dominant model of female sexuality was one that stressed its subdued nature” (27). Kordas further explains, that women’s “sexual urges were connected to a desire for motherhood and not for sexual pleasure itself” (27). Kordas’ account regarding women’s “subdued” sexuality in nineteenth-century America further explains Edna’s lack of fulfillment in marriage. Unlike her relationship with Leonce, where sex was simply a means to reproduce, a liaison with Alcee enables Edna to enjoy sexual pleasure without any obligations and emotional attachments. In maintaining a loveless stance for Alcee, while still accepting of this new “kindled desire without any feelings of “remorse” and “shame,” Edna modifies the traditional idea of womanhood to create one that enables her to experience freedom in every way” (Chopin 139).

It is worth noting that for Edna, this sense of limitless freedom also extends to relationships in which she does feel sincere attachment. For example, Edna shares a profound bond with Robert as it is during her initial interactions with him in Grand Isle where she learns to prioritize herself. After Robert’s return from Mexico, Edna initially tends to him with “love and tenderness” (Chopin 166). However, on learning about Robert’s reservations to pursue a married woman, she corrects him, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both” (Chopin 167). Edna reprimands Robert for considering her as
a possession that can be “disposed of” or transferred over. She establishes herself as sovereign, belonging to neither Leonce nor Robert. Robert’s pale expression and quizzical response conveys the ideological discrepancy between them. His reaction, “What do you mean?” indicates an inability to understand and concede to Edna’s perception of love and relationships. While Robert associates romantic love with ideas of belonging and submission, Edna rejects everything that will require her to surrender the self. Her conduct represents what Kathleen Nigro refers as “new forms of behavior and thought” that enable her to maintain relationships on her own terms (93).

As Edna embraces this new sovereign self, she realizes how deeply anchored others around her are in a system she is trying to break away from. While Adele’s painful childbirth reminds her of the “torturous ways of nature that women must succumb to” (Chopin 170), Robert’s note of a final “goodbye” shows her how like Leonce, Robert is also incapable of transcending conventional social norms. Recognizing that there is “no one thing” that could fulfill her Edna journeys into the depth of the sea (Chopin 175). Edna’s suicide has attracted considerable debate. Some critics such as Dedria Bryfonski considers Edna’s suicide as a moment of “crowning glory” that reflects Edna’s “clarity with which she understands her own nature and the possibilities of life as she decides to end it” (109). While Bryfonski studies the suicide as representative of Edna’s command over her own fate, others view the act as a reflection of Edna’s failure. Kathleen Joslin attributes the suicide to Edna’s feelings of “depression, alienation and despair” that result from “removing the self from the social and domestic life” (179). Joslin presents death as the only possible option for women who denounce all social roles. In a similar vein, Molly Hildebrand identifies the only “logical” and “terrible” outcome of a woman who is seeking “rights and privileges unavailable to her as a woman” (189).
This chapter does not analyze the suicide as act of agency or an outcome of despair as viewing it absolute terms limits the scope of understanding what the death represents. The discourse here instead encourages a study that considers ways in which Edna’s death highlights the limitations to women’s mobility in nineteenth-century America. Edna’s final interaction with Adele and Robert show her that her new self cannot sustain in a society so strongly grounded in traditional social and biological roles. The suicide thus represents women’s consciousness of their desires, and a recognition of society’s inability to fully accommodate these desires.

A comparative analysis of *Iola Leroy* and *The Awakening* indicate ways in which post-Reconstruction characters use their newfound knowledge to mobilize themselves. Iola’s time spent in slavery and experience of continued racial discrimination following emancipation initiates her physical and a simultaneous internal mobility. Through her travels and interactions with former slaves and women activists such as Aunt Linda and Lucille Delaney, Iola learns about black women’s potential and the more progressive possibilities for their future. With this new knowledge Iola rejects the old domestic design of limited control that Marie embraced and creates one where she is on equal standing with her partner in terms of a mutual understanding of past experiences and shared vision of the future. Her home retains the warmth of the traditional domestic space, but also encourages her individuality and participation in overarching communal struggle for social prominence. While Iola’s mobility features in the struggle to create a domestic realm that supports her individuality and involvement in the communal progress at large, Edna Pontellier’s mobility is expressed in the struggle to break away from an idea of domesticity that confined white women to roles of mothers and wives. Edna’s mobility begins on an internal level as she recognizes her discomfort with the idea of self-sacrifice. Her withdrawal from domestic duties and pursuit of activities such as swimming, reading, and painting indicates ways in which
her inner mobility manifests in physical forms. Edna’s decision to “not look back” as she makes her way into the sea can at best, be viewed as her finding a sense of home with the self (Chopin 176).
Chapter Three: “It’s not the only way:” Redefining the Domestic Space in Hopkins’ and Gilman’s Writings

The previous chapter analyzes how racial concerns shape black and white women’s conception of domestic spaces. While in *Iola Leroy*, Iola’s history of enslavement encourages her to create a domestic space that ensures her personal freedom and supports her work for the black community, in *The Awakening* Edna’s disregard for notions of self-sacrifice and subservience associated with traditional domesticity motivate her to reject conventional womanhood and find a sense of home with the self. Further building on this understanding of women’s departures from conventional domesticity, this chapter focuses on nineteenth-century women’s experience of adjusting the physical and the internal design of the domestic space to meet their needs. In Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* (1900), Ma Smith earns a living by converting her private house into a lodging space for temporary boarders. The plot of Charlotte Gilman’s “Three Thanksgivings” (1909), also follows a similar trajectory where the protagonist, Mrs. Morrison hosts women’s paid club meetings in her house to gain financial independence. The female characters of Gilman’s “Turned” and “The Cottagette,” further challenge the conventional dynamics of relationships, altering the internal design of the domestic space in a way that offers greater freedom. Through a close study of Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* and Gilman’s short stories, this chapter examines the innovative ways in which black and white women use their newfound potential to repurpose the domestic space for commercial and personal gain. This investigation is important as it reveals ways in which differences in racial background and experiences impact the way black and white women perceive the domestic space. Ma Smith’s boarding house for example, reveals how in the African American context,
the home is less individualistic and more of a communal space that facilitates collective growth. In presenting the boarding house as a space where multiple women pursue employment, run subsidiary businesses and engage in progressive discussions, Hopkins redefines the domestic realm from the private space of a nuclear family to a shared realm that encourages the progress of a community. Gilman’s texts on the other hand, challenge the expectations associated with white femininity. In questioning values such as women’s subordination to male figures, submissiveness and dexterity in housekeeping, Gilman advocates for a domestic design that enables women to lead their homes and pursue their individual desires. A comparative approach between Hopkins’ and Gilman’s texts is therefore useful in evaluating ways in which black and white women at the turn of the century altered the physical and internal space of the home to meet their desires.

In the scholarship regarding Hopkins’ Contending Forces, the central topic of discussion has been the protagonist, Sappho’s dual identity as Sappho Clark and Mabelle Beaubean. Critics have mostly traced Sappho’s journey of first discarding and then embracing her identity as Mabelle. Gloria T. Randle notes that “the most crucial aspect of Sappho's psychic organization is her possession of two distinct identities” (205). According to Randle, Sappho “obliterates an entire persona” to shade herself from the traumatic past of physical abuse. In her new form, Sappho is “mature and self-possessed.” (Randle 205). T. Walters further notes that Sappho is “represented as two distinct identities” (59). Walters explains that Sappho’s current identity is “antithetical” to her past of rape, prostitution and the birth of an illegitimate child (60). While most scholars have studied Sappho’s experience of coming to terms with her traumatic past and the subsequent formation of a unified identity, few have discussed the crucial physical spaces that have facilitated this development. An analysis of physical spaces such as Ma Smith’s
boarding house and the convent therefore shows how these repurposed domestic spaces ultimately create fresh possibilities for black womanhood.

A subsequent study of Gilman’s select fiction further highlights white women’s experience of challenging the traditional values governing the home space. So far, scholars of Gilman’s work have noted her portrayal of the home as a confining space. Ann J. Lane observes, “In a sentimental era, family and home were sacred and yet in Gilman’s fictional world the home is a place one must flee” (xliii). Further commenting on Gilman’s dissent from the traditional home, Alys Eve Weinbaum notes that Gilman’s writing offers “utopian reproductive scenarios and alternative visions of maternity [as] blue prints of social change” (276). While most scholars have examined Gilman’s critique of conventional domesticity in her works as, *Women and Economics*, *Herland* and the widely discussed “The Yellow Wallpaper,” her short stories such as “Three Thanksgivings,” “Turned” and “The Cottagette” have gone relatively unnoticed. These stories deserve critical attention as they highlight ways in which women, at the turn of the century, contested the limitations of the traditional domestic space, creating new meanings for white femininity.

By late nineteenth-century, women’s desire for progress was inextricably linked to the developments in the marketplace. The rise of industrial activity and the consequent increase in employment opportunities encouraged women to apply their skill beyond the assigned domestic space and join the emerging working class. During this era of market revolution, boarding houses became popular as these public spaces, offered affordable housing for people that had moved to the urban areas to avail the new prospects that the city presented. Boarding houses were sometimes operated in the personal homes of families that had properties large enough to accommodate temporary lodgers. Depending on the agreement with the owner, lodgers were also
served meals in the common dining area which became a space for social interactions and consequently, new relationships. For the immigrant population in need of shelter, food and company, boarding houses were what Wendy Gamber calls a “domestic ideal that nineteenth-century Americans came to call the home” (4). In Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, Ma Smith’s boarding house represents this “domestic ideal” that provides its lodgers a sense of belonging as they navigate the urban milieu of nineteenth-century America.

Ma Smith is introduced as the widow of Henry Smith, who is striving to earn a living and support her children, Dora and Will. To pay the loan on the house and educate her son, Ma Smith rents out furnished rooms of her house while she and Dora “share the same sleeping room” and Will moves to the “attic chambers” (Hopkins 84). Ma Smith’s business gains traction as Will secures boarders for the lodging house from his work at a local hotel. Unlike her late husband who resorts to a small business of “repairing old clothes” after experiencing limited employment opportunities, Ma Smith creates a profitable venture by repurposing her personal mansion and acquiring customers using Will’s contacts (Hopkins 83). In presenting a black female character that spearheads a business in the wake of racial discrimination, Hopkins highlights the unique ways in which black women entered the realm of money-making and made a position for themselves in the public space.

Although typically the boarding house proprietor was seen as an aloof, distant character whose exchange with the lodgers was limited to the business matters, Hopkins’ Ma Smith, subverts this traditional image of a proprietor by developing a rather personal relation with her renters. As implied in her title “Ma,” Ma Smith is almost a maternal figure who customizes her services, making a conscious effort to create a homely environment for her boarders. Hopkins describes the Smiths’ attention to detail,
Dora lighted the lamps, drew the curtains and looked about the cozy kitchen with a satisfaction that might well be pardoned, for even in palatial homes, a more inviting nest could be found. The table was carefully spread with a nicely ironed cloth of spotless white, red-bordered napkins lay at each plate, a good quality of plated silverware mingled with the plain inexpensive whiteware in which the meal was to be served. (Hopkins 88)

The Smiths’ efforts at creating a welcoming atmosphere are not only limited to building a personal rapport with the customers. The lighted lamps, “cozy kitchen” and the “carefully spread table” highlight ways in which Dora and Ma Smith physically transform the space to make it more inviting and comfortable. Betsey Klimasmith considers these measures taken as representative of “both good management and the good taste that are equally important markers of domestic success” (13). With this “good management and taste” the Smiths mitigate impressions of chaos and unkemptness associated with the public space of the boarding house. In fact they use “red bordered napkins” and “iron cloth of spotless white”, to exercise a kind of sophistication that is traditionally associated with white women. Bridget T Heneghan explains the dynamics in a conventional white household kitchen in stating that the “use of white dishes and manners needed to handle specialized forks and plates indicated a degree of mastery usually withheld from slaves” (32). The Smiths’ aesthetic choices can thus be seen as ways of reclaiming and even refining skills that are least expected of them. In showing, Ma Smith and Dora’s sophisticated hospitality, Hopkins not only highlights black women’s domestic potential but also shows how this potential enables them to “claim and cling to [the] urban space” (Klimasmith 13).

It is worth noting that the Smith’s reformed domestic space not only benefits them but also mobilizes others associated with the business. For example, former slaves, Mrs. Ophelia
Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White operate a laundry business from Ma Smith’s lodging house. Raised on a plantation, Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White worked as a cook and house maid respectively. However, after securing their freedom both women envision a progressive lifestyle for themselves. Mrs. Davis tells Ma Smith, “yas’,m, I’m tired o’livin’ in white folkses’ kitchens” (Hopkins 105). Using their practical experience of working on “white folkses’ homes, Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White create something of their own. In this new venture, the women “engaged the rooms and prospered in their enterprise. The clothes under their deft fingers seemed to gain an added prettiness.” (Hopkins 106). The business provides Mrs. Davis and White financial security, independence, and a recognition in the public space that they had never experienced.

Siobhan Somerville points out how these women “do not engage in fantasies based on the romance conventions of finding a husband” but instead find comfort in an economic partnership (186). This partnership is profitable commercially and personally as the women support each other along the way. Thus, the growth of the laundry business shows how Ma Smith’s creative venture not only stabilizes her immediate family, but plays a bigger role in uplifting other communities of women.

One of the ways Ma Smith’s lodging house uplifts the surrounding community is by offering shelter which facilitates the boarders’ work in the public space. For example, Sappho, the new mulatta tenant with a history of abuse, finds a sense of financial autonomy in the lodging house. As a stenographer, Sappho is seen “passing in and out each morning with a package of work in her hand” (Hopkins 97). At other times, “the click of her typewriter could be heard from the “first front square” of the boarding house (Hopkins 97). The click of Sappho’s typewriter highlights how her position as a typist enables her to steer her life in a progressive direction following a history of trauma. Her progress reminds readers of Grace Montfort’s tragic end, who
decades earlier, under similar circumstances of sexual abuse presumably commits suicide. As narrated, “…Grace Montfort disappeared and was never seen again. The waters of Pamlico Sound tell of sweet oblivion for the broken hearted found within their soft embrace (Hopkins 71). Grace’s disappearance contrasts Sappho’s frequent movement in and out of the lodging house. Unlike Grace, who deprived of all support is lost into oblivion, Sappho’s shelter at the lodging house enables her to attain visibility and build a new life for herself. Katherine A Fama refers to the boarding house as a “crucial interim space of refuge and healing, sparing [Sappho] the fate of Grace Montfort and preparing her for a leadership role in educational uplift (211). The “cozy” ambiance of the boarding house heals and uplifts boarders like Sappho, encouraging them to move in the public space and envision a life not defined by a history of trauma.

In addition to facilitating the boarders’ monetary independence, the lodging house also enables its dwellers to exercise freedom in small, personal ways. For example, Ma Smith’s boarders are free to decorate their personal rooms which further supports their sense of autonomy. Sappho uses embroidered draperies to conceal the unattractive areas of her room. Hopkins narrates, “…white muslin draperies hid the unsightly but serviceable yellow shades at the windows; her desk and the typewriter occupied the center of the room, and a couch had been improvised from two packing-cases and a spring, covered with denim and piled high with cushions; two good steel engravings completed a very inviting interior” (98). Here, the décor choices symbolize the degree of freedom that boarders especially women have over their personal space. While the desk, and typewriter represent Sappho’s profession as a typist, the embroidered draperies depict her individual tastes—all of which she projects in her interior décor.
In personalizing her room, Sappho not only makes the room comfortable for herself but in extending its warmth to visitors, fosters a space of new relationships. For instance, Dora finds Sappho’s room “pretty” and the two “at once” become “fast friends” (Hopkins 98). Soon Sappho’s room becomes the friends’ regular meeting place. The women casually lounge in the room, discussing topics ranging from casual interests such as embroidery to more serious ones such as religion and marriage. When discussing about faith, Dora tells Sappho, “For my part I am sick of loud professions and constant hypocrisy” (100). She further reveals her thoughts about marrying John Langley, “I like well enough to marry him, but I don’t believe there’s enough sentiment in me to make love a great passion such as we read in books” (119). Dora’s confiding with Sappho suggests a building of mutual trust and understanding based on the commonality of gender, age group and racial identity. Katherine A. Fama writes about the inner workings of the lodging house, “Its parlors and private rooms accord single women friendship, community membership, and new, sustainable modes of independence” (198). Sappho practices “modes of independence” not so much by independently pursuing a friendship as Fama suggests, but more so by withholding any information that could reveal the past. Each time Dora asks for Sappho’s views on marriage, the latter avoids the question with a “comical twist”. It appears that in this cozy space of a budding friendship with Dora, Sappho still exercises control over how much access she wants to allow into her private world. Ma Smiths’ boarders thus experience a sense of independence in physically designing their personal space and navigating the relationships that occur in and around it.

Ma Smith’s boarding house however offers more than just a prospect for new relations; it also operates as a space for politically charged conversations. Ma Smith organizes a sewing circle at the back parlor of the house where black women from the church meet and sew
garments to contribute towards the church’s mortgage. As these women get together, they converse in detail about the future possibilities for the black community. Mrs. Willis, introduced as the “brilliant widow of a bright Negro politician” discusses the potential of black women. She motivates her fellow partners in the sewing circle, “you must fill the positions now occupied by your mothers, and it will rest with you and your children to refute the charges brought against us…” (Hopkins 148). Mrs. Willis uses the space that Ma Smith offers in her home to initiate discourse that can inspire women towards social progress. Her agenda echoes the motivations of enlightened middle class black women in history who according to Carla L. Peterson, “through the club movement, uplifted the race by reaching out to black women of the masses, combatting prostitution, promoting education and home building, [and] claiming political social rights for African Americans” (186). By encouraging young women’s education and their potential to acquire prominent roles in the public space, Mrs. Willis asserts how these women’s positive visibility can help discard negative connotations associated with the black identity.

One of these negative connotations that Mrs. Willis addresses is the discussion regarding black women’s virtue. Historically, the overarching white society considered black women as falling short of ideals of purity because of their physical liaison with white slaveholders during slavery. Ashamed of her past rape, Sappho wrestles with the idea of black women’s virtue and questions Mrs. Willis whether the “Negro women will be held responsible for all the lack of virtue that is being laid to their charge today?” (149) Mrs. Willis responds by first calling black woman an inherently morally “impregnable” and second, by expanding the definition of virtue. She defines virtue as the “strength to do the right thing under all temptations” and dissuades her listeners from confining the concept of virtue to “animal passions alone” (149). About black women’s low self-esteem following episodes of forced submission to men, Mrs. Willis asserts “I
believe that we shall not be held responsible for wrongs for which we have *unconsciously* committed, or which we have committed under compulsion. We are virtuous or non-virtuous only when we have a choice under temptation” (149). Mrs. Willis’ discussion highlights how standards of traditional domesticity do not apply to black women’s unique experiences that are defined by “compulsion” and “unconsciously committed acts” (149). In terming black women’s actions as compulsion driven and seeing their experiences as a form of “sacrifice,” Mrs. Willis not only enables her female listeners to reclaim their virtue but also hails their resilience, teaching them to find meaning in their past hardships. Ma Smith’s lodging house that inhabits such discourse then becomes more than simply a refuge for women like Sappho; it functions as a productive space that enables these women to reconcile with the past and progress forward.

Hopkins affirms the significance of women’s discussion as soon after the meeting, Sappho relieves herself from the weight of the past. She acknowledges her love for Will and the desire for a home, “I want him through life and beyond the grave, we two as one—my husband” (182). As Sappho admits to these inner desires, she unlocks possibilities of marriage and a family which she had earlier denied herself. Sappho’s moment of introspection is poignant, as it prepares her for Will’s marriage proposal that follows shortly afterward. When Will proposes, an elated Sappho is still troubled with her past. Just when she is about to divulge her history, Will “breaks in” saying, “I do not care for the past, all I ask is that you love me above all other men, as I adore you above all other women” (312). Here, Will’s physical interjection appears as a metaphorical intervention that underpins the irrelevance of the past. Sappho is literally prevented from divulging the details of her background as Hopkins shows that these details do not matter. In devaluing the past, Will urges Sappho to live in the present and embrace the prospects it brings. His sentiments echo Mrs. Willis’ when in an earlier conversation she tells Sappho, “Your
duty is, also to be happy and bright for the good of those about you. Just blossom like the flowers, have faith and trust” (157). Will represents this new opportunity of happiness in Sappho’s life that will enable her to “blossom” as she gains the security of a stable home. As Sappho accepts Will’s proposal she musters “faith and trust” to envision a sustainable future for herself.

However, although Ma Smith’s boarding house shelters Sappho, its public nature does not occlude the raw unfiltered exposure. Dora’s fiancé, John Langley intrudes Sappho’s room, threatening to expose her past if she does not give herself to him. He warns her, “I give you one week to think over what I have said” (Hopkins 320). The “nervous spasms” that Sappho experiences following this exchange, contrasts her “self-possessed” demeanor with which she first enters the lodging space. Gloria T Randle notes, “[Langley’s] intrusion into [Sappho’s] room at the boarding house violates her secure universe, rendering it henceforth uninhabitable; his intrusion into her past defeats her resolve to marry Will” (208). The change in Sappho’s demeanor suggests how Langley’s intrusion dispels her sense of safety, forcing her to at once, lose all self-confidence. From being a woman of “modest self-possession” (Hopkins 107) now, in this moment of confrontation, she is reduced to a mere “figure on the floor” who is exposed and vulnerable (Hopkins 320). Here, it is worth noting that for Sappho, the boarding house may have lost its validity as a secure domain, it still maintains its value as space of learning. For example, Sappho decides to accept Alphonse as her son shortly after her confrontation with Langley. This decision echoes the learning she had gained during her interactions at the lodging house. Back in Ma Smith’s parlor, Mrs. Willis encouraged women to discard feelings of guilt associated with the “wrongs committed under compulsion” (Hopkins 149). Sappho’s union with Alphonse thus depicts her new learning of recognizing the rape as a coercive act and
subsequently dispelling any sense of culpability associated with it. Kate McCullough considers Sappho’s decision to embrace maternity as an “act of resistance since it too is based on a choice, a choice to reclaim the child as hers, not the rapist’s” (41). Enlightened with a fresh perspective, Sappho “resists” the conventional narrative of shame and stigma surrounding rape, opting for one that enables her to see Alphonse, not a symbol of disgrace but a pure extension of herself. As Sappho vows that Alphonse “will always live with her,” she is overcome with “this new and holy love that had taken possession of her soul” (Hopkins 346). Her emotions at this point in the narrative indicate an experience of bliss and the “proper joys of life” that Mrs. Willis had earlier encouraged her towards. Thus, Langley’s threat may have jeopardized Sappho’s sense of security, the boarding experience overall is still uplifting for Sappho as it motivates her to confidently face and own the traumatic pieces of her past.

Contrary to the boarding house where the unfiltered exposure, exposes Sappho to humiliation by men like Langley, the convent offers a far more reliable and secure space. After fleeing the boarding house, Sappho at once finds comfort amongst The Sisters of the Holy Family. This is the second time Sappho seeks solace in the convent. Prior to her stay at the boarding house, Sappho recuperates from the rape at a convent in New Orleans where the sisters give her a new identity to allow a fresh start. In promoting the false narrative of Mabelle’s death, the sisters help Sappho leave behind the trauma associated with her past identity. After Langley threatens this new identity, Sappho suffering from “terrible strain upon the mind and body” yet again, finds solace in the convent (Hopkins 348). Her return to the convent indicates ways in which this female centric space rehabilitates women in need of empathy and encouragement. The significance of such female governed spaces is more explicit in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (1998) where the convent is presented as a safe haven for women that have fled spaces of
misogyny to find a sense of security in sisterhood. Pallas, a runaway girl (from *Paradise*) who has narrowly escaped from rapists, admires the atmosphere of the convent: “The whole house felt permeated with blessed malelessness, like a protected domain free from hunters, and exciting too. As though she might meet herself here—an unbridled authentic self but which she thought of as a “cool” self—in one of this house’s many rooms” (177). The convent not only shelters these women from men that are intent on violating them, but its gender exclusivity offers “exciting” opportunities of community building and coming to terms with the “authentic self”. Melanie Anderson identifies the convent in *Paradise* as a “spectral space where the resident women can turn their ghosted and powerless social positions of healing and growth” (85). The nunnery in Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* shares similar attributes of a home as this is where a powerless Sappho gains validation and discovers what Hopkins identifies as “perfect peace” (349). Safe from the toxic influence of men like Langley, Sappho, too experiences a “blessed malelessness” as she surrounds herself in the healing presence of the sisters who motivate and guide her. It is worth noting that the sisters not only extend moral support to Sappho but also help in concrete ways to ensure her financial independence. For example, at the convent, Sappho learns about an employment opportunity that will enable her to regularly meet with Alphonse. The Mother informs Sappho, “Monsier Louis of Opelauses is in want of a governess for his two grand daughters…He is an old man with a competency, and he will pay you well for your services. Alphonse can stay with us; you can pay a stipulated amount for his board and be able to see him every week. What do you think my daughter?” (352). In the nun’s strategic approach to address Sappho’s predicament, Hopkins highlights ways in which sisterhood is both psychologically and physically empowering. The sister provides an orphaned Sappho with a sense of belonging by calling her “daughter,” and then makes tangible arrangements to stabilize
this adopted daughter. The convent is thus as an organized domestic space, equipped with its own connections and systems which the sisters use to empower fellow women as Sappho.

In Sappho’s role as a governess, Hopkins highlights a unique convergence of public and private spaces. S. Brooke Cameron identifies this converge as a “liminal position between the home and work force” where the governess figure, especially in Victorian literature resides, and endorses “traditional gendered power structures” (44). Katherine Hughes further describes the governess as “a surrogate childless mother whose marriage prospects were restricted and who was sometimes mistaken for a servant” (xv). Within the context of white femininity, the governess was seen as marginal figure who through her teaching promoted conventional gendered values and needed to be redeemed and integrated into the more acceptable social realm through marriage. Hopkins however, subverts notions of social inferiority and exclusion associated with the governess in presenting her protagonist as the “moving spirit of the home” (Gilman 353). Sappho occupies a central position in her employer’s house as she gains the admiration of her “little charges” and the servants. Moreover, her hesitance to accept Monsieur Louis’s marriage proposal further highlights how unlike the typical governess figure, Sappho does not need to be “rescued” through a forced alliance. As a governess Sappho is not confined, but liberated from tradition as this employment opportunity facilitates her non-conventional status as a working unmarried mother. In this homely environment, Sappho retains her financial independence and continues to heal emotionally, which enables her to wholeheartedly accept the marriage proposal of her choice at the novel’s close.

In the era of continued racial discrimination in which Contending Forces is set, Hopkins redefines the domestic domain from the private space of a nuclear family to a communal realm of collective social growth. Ma Smith’s boarding house and The Sisters of the Holy Family are
institutions that promote a more purpose driven domesticity. Using her skills of homemaking, Ma Smith repurposes her private mansion into an empowering space of progressive conversations that facilitates women’s financial independence and provides them opportunities of intellectual growth. Similarly, the convent, with its gender exclusivity provides women as Sappho a space of healing, enabling them to regain their physical and internal strength. Sappho and Will, “united by love, chastened by sorrow and self-sacrifice” also intend to combine their efforts “to bring joy to hearts crushed by despair” (Hopkins 401). Through the couple’s desire for social work, Hopkins shows how these feelings of “sorrow and self-sacrifice” are not limited to an individual but rather collectively experienced by the African American community. Domesticity then for African Americans is not simply meant to meet individual needs but is rather directed at a higher purpose of serving the community.

While Contending Forces highlights ways in which African American women subvert the traditional idea of private space to achieve economic independence and meet communal needs, Gilman’s work calls for a reformation of the values that determine the internal workings of the traditional domestic space. Her short stories such as “Three Thanksgivings (1900),” “The Cottagette” (1910) and “Turned” (1911) focus on women at different stages of their lives who navigate the expectations associated with traditional domesticity and also tend to their personal desires. For example, “Three Thanksgivings” offers insight into the struggle of Mrs. Morrison, a widow who wrestles to remain single and live by herself in a culture that is bound on forcing her to live under patriarchal protection. “The Cottagette” highlights the plight of Malda, an unmarried woman, who struggles to give up her creative pursuits to suit the role of a traditional wife. “Turned” focuses on Mrs. Maronner, a married women who separates from her husband on discovering his affair with the house maid. The remainder of this chapter will therefore follow a
close analysis of Gilman’s short stories which further helps trace the differing challenges of black and white women at the turn of the century. Women in Hopkins’ texts combat the negative connotations associated with their racial identities whereas Gilmans’s female characters navigate the expectations associated with marriage and widowhood.

In “Three Thanksgivings” Mrs. Morrison creates a personal space by first recognizing the expectations associated with widows and then challenging them. For example, both Andrew and Jean (Mrs. Morrison’s children) pursue their mother to move in with them. The letter from Andrew reads as follows, “You belong with me…The old house will let for enough to give you a quite little income of your own, or it can be sold and I will invest the money where you’ll get a deal more out of it. It is not right that you should live alone there” (17). Jean’s letter follows a similar pattern of thought: “Joe [Jean’s husband] says he should think you ought to sell that white elephant of a place. He says he could put the money into his store and pay you good interest” (17). The letters from both children indicate some predominant underlying assumptions about widows in nineteenth-century America. Firstly, they highlight that single woman are incapable of living by themselves and that they need to “belong” with a male head. Secondly, the letters present a perspective that undermines women’s ability to take financial decisions. Writing about the outlook of widows in Early America, Vivian Bruce Congar notes that “widows had to be very careful when they stepped into the public role of head of household. Courthouses, churches, and neighborhoods, in turning the public gaze on widows, called into question their honesty, chastity and piety” (155). Although Conger is specifically talking about widowhood in eighteenth century, his assessment is useful in understanding the conservative nineteenth-century sentiments and why Andrew considers “it not right” that Mrs. Morrison live alone. Nicola Jane Philips further confirms the marginal status of widows in highlighting how widows were seen as
“poor credit risks” which “prevented them as from raising finances as men did” (11). Thus, in Andrew’s and Joe’s resolve to invest Mrs. Morrison’s money, Gilman highlights Mrs. Morrison’s struggle against a culture where men are adamant on directing women’s lives and forcing them into a cycle of dependence.

Successive episodes in the story show how single women as Mrs. Morrison face the pressure to conform to existent norms, from both within the home and outside. For example, Mr. Butts uses Mrs. Morrison’s financial need to coerce her into a relationship. Mrs. Morrison’s interaction with Mr. Butts reveals her vulnerable position as single woman struggling for self-sustenance. Knowing that Mrs. Morrison’s still owns a mortgage on her house that she intends to keep, Mr. Butts makes her a marriage proposal which she may be forced to accept. He tells her, “I’ve always wanted you—and I’ve always wanted this house, too. You won’t sell, but you’ve got mortgage. By and by you can’t pay up and I’ll get it—see? Then maybe you’ll take me—to keep the house” (18). As Mr. Butts talks about Mrs. Morrison and the house in the same breath, he almost equates both as interchangeable commodities that he must obtain. In telling Mrs. Morrison that she “can’t pay up,” Mr. Butt reminds her of her limitations as single woman who must seek protection from a masculine figure as himself. Through Mr. Butt’s character, Gilman shows how the lack of financial independence forced some women to consider remarriage for survival. Joyce W. Warren explains this financial insecurity in stating that, “usually the holder of the mortgage foreclosed soon after the death of the breadwinner because the new widow did not have money to keep up the mortgage payments” (193). Mrs. Morrison’s predicament thus resonates with the challenges American women faced. Their complete dependence on their husbands for economic security left them financially displaced as widows and vulnerable to proposals as the one Mr. Butt’s presents.
Interestingly, the pressure that Mrs. Morrison faces to give up her independent living arrangement echoes the concept of the “rest cure” which was a clinically prescribed psychological cure for women including Gilman herself. Physician Silas Weir Mitchell’s treatment involved enforcing a complete bed rest for women which meant a withdrawal from all activities involving intellectual and creative stimulation. Gilman at the time condemned the cure, seeing it as a way to thwart women’s individuality. Later scholars such as Emine Gegcil also identified the method as an “an attempt to silence women and keep them within the domestic sphere” (195). The narrative reveals that Mrs. Morrison, was earlier housing boarders in her mansion which implies her potential for successful independent living and a network of community of her own. In planning to take over Mrs. Morrison’s financial affairs and resigning her to an “old house” or a “little room,” (Gilman 17) as the letters indicate, the children almost propose a form of a “rest cure” for their mother, forcing her to abandon the stimulating environment of her very own Welcome House and confining her not so much to the domestic sphere but more to the traditional expectations associated with widowhood.

It is in the wake of these familial and social pressures that Mrs. Morrison recognizes her individual interests and the desire to not conform to a conventional way of life. She discovers the type of domestic setting she prefers and how she wants to run it. For example, during her visit to Andrew’s house, Mrs. Morrison is uneasy in the small “twelve by fifteen, and eight feet high” room, where the windows on look “pale gray clap boards” and “small, fenced yards” (20). This sense of dullness is further pronounced as she experiences the “little dining room, the little round and the little round fern-dish,” all of which are in contrast to the “broad green lawns in front, and the acre of garden” in her own house (Gilman 18). Mrs. Morrison’s stay in Andrew’s house is poignant as it makes her aware of the value and love she has for her own home. Gilman shows
how the Welcome House is more than simply a vast physical mansion; it represents Mrs. Morrison’s preferences for open spaces and the refreshing scenic views of her broad lawns. The atmosphere within the home further enlightens her on the type domestic setting she would like for herself. She finds that Annie (Andrew’s wife) has “no room for her assistance” and that overall, there was “no room in the house” (Gilman 20). Mrs. Morrison realizes that she holds a marginal status in Andrew’s house as here she can neither be useful nor relevant. Moreover, when made to sit with the “old ladies and gentlemen”, she is further reminded of her age and age-appropriate practices. As narrated, “Here nothing recalled her youth, every careful provision anticipated age” (20). Mrs. Morrison’s discomfort with being “watched over” and “waited on,” highlights the protagonist’s desire to break free from the image of an elderly and ideas of incapacitation and helplessness associated with it. In disliking her classification as an aged woman, Mrs. Morrison comes to terms with her youthful energy within and the desire to use it productively.

While with Andrew, Mrs. Morrison recognizes her desire to depart from a tiny house that confines her both physically and psychologically, in Jean’s company, she fully values her status as single woman. Jean’s house is one “full of babies” where Mrs. Morrison “sat holding the baby or trying to hold the twins” (Gilman 26). Jean’s neighborhood is also full of “overburdened mothers” (Gilman 27). Mrs. Morrison’s silent observation of the situation and her conscious withholding of her thoughts regarding these mothers implies her disconnect with motherhood and duties involving it. Her attitude reflects a preference for “voluntary motherhood”—an ideology that explained the turn of the century American women’s choice “not to marry or become mothers” (Gordon 263). Linda Gordon identifies “interest in professional work” combined with a knowledge of the “uncooperativeness of husbands” and limited “social
provision for childcare as reasons for women’s decision to remain single. Gordon’s discussion about women who never married offers insight into Mrs. Morrison’s sentiments. In happily exiting a space of babies and exhausted mothers’ conversations, Mrs. Morrison too refrains from choosing motherhood and instead re-discovers the prospects of singlehood in her middle-age years. She returns to the Welcome House and strategizes a business plan to gain financial independence.

Unwilling to give into Mr. Butt’s marriage proposal and resistant to the idea of living with her children, Mrs. Morrison carefully assesses her home the possibilities it can offer her. As narrated, “When she had her long list of assets all in order, she sat and studied it with a clear and daring mind” (22). Here, Mrs. Morrison’s “daring mind” highlights her almost defiant spirit that is determined to not succumb to the limited options that society provides for her widowed status. In her prompt listing and analyses of her assets, Gilman indicates how women’s aptitude and skills transcend their socially prescribed space of the kitchen. Writing about women’s growing involvement in the public space in nineteenth-century America, Susan Yohn notes, “Women in the US engaged the market in numerous ways in their attempts to earn livelihoods and support themselves and their families. They worked, they opened and sustained businesses, and they earned money” (88). Mrs. Morrison’s creative idea of opening her home to women’s club meetings shows how she too represents this new wave of American women who found ingenious way to “sustain a business” and by extension themselves. She repurposes her inventory of linens and tablecloths—emblems of traditional domesticity—to create a non-traditional commercial domestic space that secures her financially.

It is also worth noting how Mrs. Morrison’s business of facilitating gatherings not only stabilizes her economically but also plays a role in elevating other women. Several women
congregate, converse, and exchange ideas at Mrs. Morrison’s house, allowing themselves to bond and form a sense of home with each other. Mrs. Blake for example, “spoke to them of the work she was interested in, and how it was aided everywhere by the woman’s clubs” (Gilman 24) She further “spoke of woman’s club houses, going up in the city, where many associations meet and help one another” (Gilman 24). The Welcome House provides women as Mrs. Blake a platform to voice their interests, create awareness and lead other women. S.J Kleinberg further explains the relevance of such meetings in stating how these “indicated women’s desire for female company and a growing belief that they could and should unite to improve themselves and society” (162). Female centered clubs and associations provided safe domains for women to gain visibility, be encouraged and acquire information they needed, to achieve prominence in the public arena. Thus, in the process of repurposing her domestic space, Mrs. Morrison also creates a space of productive discourse for other women, enabling them to also reform their personal domestic settings in line with new and increasing role of women in society.

At the story’s close, Mrs. Morrison’s is depicted as a successful entrepreneur. She pays off the mortgage on her house and invites her family over for the holidays. As Mrs. Morrison’s pays for her children’s travel expenses and provide for their needs, she reclaims both her house as well as the position of a family head—a position that is typically associated with a masculine figure. In Mrs. Morrison’s ability to take care of personal needs and beyond, Gilman shows how women’s talents transcend their biologically and socially prescribed roles of mothers and wives. Through Mr. Butt’s feelings of “loathing” and the children’s’ surprise on seeing Mrs. Morrison’s success, Gilman reveals how much of women’s dependence and lack of confidence is associated with society’s underestimation of their abilities (Gilman 25). In showing her protagonist’s restocked inventory, hired help and a bank account Gilman subverts this devalued outlook of
women, emphasizing how women are capable of establishing systems that will enable them to transition from being dependents to autonomous individuals.

While Gilman’s “Three Thanksgivings” shows women’s struggles as they navigate the expectations associated with widowhood, “The Cottagette” explains the predicament of unmarried women as they wrestle with the reality of sacrificing individual desires in favor of marriage. Malda, the protagonist of the story discovers the all-consuming daily toil of kitchen work as she prepares to build a home with her love interest, Ford Matthews. Through her struggle of balancing the demands of the kitchen and pursuing her personal interests, Gilman condemns the traditional domestic design for its limiting impact and offers other possibilities of domesticity that allow greater freedom.

Gilman reveals the constraints of a traditional marital home through Malda’s conversation with her formerly married friend Lois. On learning about Malda’s interest in marriage, Lois instructs her friend to “make a home” of her current living space (Gilman 34). A young Malda justifies her present space as a home saying she “never was so happy anywhere else” (Gilman 34). Lois however, rejects Malda’s conception of a home in asserting, “Ford comes here and sits talking with us, and its quiet feminine and attractive—and then we hear that big gong at the Calceolaria, and off we go slopping through the wet woods—and the spell is broken. Now you can cook” (Gilman 34). The dialogue between the friends indicates the juxtaposition of a raw and a more informed perspective. While Malda with her limited knowledge and experience of marriage, perceives home as a space of sheer happiness, Lois considers it as a space of sacrifice. Lois views the current dynamics between Ford and Malda as rather transient, and so, broaches the subject of “cooking,” to show Malda the more real side of a marriage which involves service. Mary Kelly elaborates on the dynamics of the nineteenth-
century home in stating that “[the home] was not only rhapsodized as a peaceful, joyful retreat, but it was christened as the hallowed ground for the dissemination of a selflessness that would purify the larger society” (201). Lois’ dialogue echoes Kelly’s observation as she urges Malda to see home as beyond a space of “joyful retreat” that harbors Ford’s fleeting visits and interactions.

In drawing Malda’s attention to “domesticity” and “homemaking,” (Gilman 34) Lois prepares her to meet expectations of selflessness associated with women at the time.

Gilman delves further into the concept of women’s self-sacrifice and service in conveying its impact on women’s well-being. Taking Lois’ advice, Malda takes measures towards being a skilled homemaker and discovers “how much work there is in the littlest kitchen” (Gilman 35). As narrated, “You go in for a minute, and you see this thing and that thing and the other thing to be done, and your minute is an hour before you know it” (35). Working in the kitchen familiarizes Malda with the lack of flexibility it offers women in terms of making time for themselves. Her reflection on “this thing, that thing and the other thing” further indicates the tediousness of the work and the physical exhaustion it causes. Malda herself acknowledges, “It was a pleasure to feed Ford, but it did heat up the house and me” (35). Here, Malda and the house appear interchangeable which implies how the daily toil almost reduces her to a lifeless object. Interestingly, Gilman’s “Turned” which focuses on the dynamics between a couple and their house maid Gerta, offers a probable solution to women’s demanding work in the kitchen. In “Turned,” Gerta’s and the cook’s presence relieves Mrs. Marroner from basic domestic chores.

Considering Mrs. Marroner is portrayed as PhD graduate and college professor, it appears that having hired help in the house has enabled her to pursue her career goals. Here, it is worth mentioning that the professional success Mrs. Marroner enjoys aligns with Gilman’s own idea of a home. In her seminal non-fiction narrative, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, Gilman
proposes an architectural design that does not include the kitchen in the main floor plan of the house. She writes, “All that part of our houses which is devoted to these industries, kitchen, pantry, laundry, servants’ rooms, etc., could be eliminated from the expense account by the transference of the labour involved to a suitable workshop.” Gilman advocates for a lifestyle where individuals outsource housekeeping work to paid enterprises, allowing women the freedom to succeed in the public space. Gilman’s idea of a kitchen-less house is a metaphor for the potential comfort women could experience if they were excused from “this thing and that thing” (Gilman 34). In “The Cottagette” Gilman elaborates on the implications of the kitchen through Malda’s stream of thought:

Before, when I woke up, there was only the clean wood smell of the house, and the blessed outdoors: now I always felt the call to the kitchen as soon as I woke. An oil stove will smell a little, either in or out of the house; and soap, and—well you know if you cook in a bedroom how it makes the room feel differently. Our house had been only bedroom and a parlor before. (35)

Malda fondly remembers the time when in the absence of the kitchen, she breathed clean air in the house and was at liberty to experience the “blessed outdoors.” However, now, with the addition of the kitchen, the lingering smells of oil and soap consumes the freshness in Malda’s home. These scents appear as constant reminders of her domestic obligations. Unlike Mrs. Marroner who relieved from kitchen work, freely pursues a career and “her many interests,” Malda caught in domestic toil is almost isolated from the outside world (Gilman 40). In presenting these diverse characters in their varying circumstances, the stories push for a domestic design that accounts for women’s personal space, the absence of which Gilman shows will disrupt women’s sense of self and consequently their relationships.
Through Lois’ situation, Gilman highlights the consequences of a marital home that fails to accommodate women’s needs. Lois is presented as being “unhappily married in her youth” and now has her “maiden name again—and freedom” (34). Gilman discloses the cause of this “unhappiness” as Lois’ knowledge of marriage emanates from personal experience. She tells Malda, “What they care for most of all is domesticity. Of course they’ll fall in love with anything; but what they want to marry is a homemaker” (34). Lois’ views provide insight into how as a married woman, she was only seen as a homemaker and was expected to be dexterous in domestic skills. Her experience aligns with Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation about married women’s predicament as he explains how “in [nineteenth-century] America the independence of a woman is irrevocably lost in the bonds of matrimony; if an unmarried woman is less constrained there than elsewhere, a wife is subjected to stricter obligations” (73). Tocqueville’s statement explains Lois’ unhappiness in a social construct that reduces her identity to a caregiver in a system of domestic obligations. While some women as Lois reclaim their freedom after divorce, others like Mrs. Fowler (Lois’ mother) almost lose themselves to the system. Mrs. Fowler’s “unnecessary” incessant sweeping and dusting in even clean places implies how years of submission to domestic obligations makes women nearly mechanical as they permanently internalize the role of a homemaker. (Gilman 37). In highlighting the contrast between Lois who regains her happiness following a divorce, and Mrs. Fowler who seems to have lost her sense of self in marriage, Gilman shows the failure of a domestic model that neglects women’s desires.

Notably, Gilman probes deep into the traditional domestic model, identifying key aspects that lead to women’s thwarted aspirations. In “Turned” for example, Mrs. Marroner considers her maid’s submissiveness a problem. She thinks to herself, “I never saw anyone so docile. It is a perfection in a servant, but almost a defect in character. She is so helpless and confiding” (40).
Mrs. Marroner’s perception of docility as a defect is better explained in “The Cottagette” when Malda in an effort to “please” Ford and “get used” to the role of a wife continues with cooking despite her discontentment (16). Gilman shows how the need to satisfy others underpins women’s complaint behavior. This docility is a “defect” because women as Malda and Gerta disengage with their own desires to conform to existing patterns of deference. What further contributes to this social defect Gilman shows, is men’s distance from tasks that are solely perceived as women’s. As narrated, “Ford never seemed to wipe dishes; though [Malda] often wished he would” (36). Here, Malda’s wish indicates how the divide of the public private sphere has also led to the division of labor within these spaces. Ford “never” wipes dishes because the kitchen is not his space and tending to dishes is not his role. Gilman further calls out the problem of this divided labor in her 1900 Non-Fiction work, *Women And Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*,

Economic progress, however, is almost exclusively masculine. Such economic processes as women have been allowed to exercise are of the earliest and most primitive kind. Were men to perform no economic services save such as are still performed by women, our racial status in economics would be reduced to most painful limitations. To take from any community its male workers would paralyze it economically to a far greater degree than to remove its female workers… Men can cook, clean, and sew as well as women; but the making and managing of the great engines of modern industry, the threading of earth and sea in our vast systems of transportation, the handling of our elaborate machinery of trade, commerce, government,—these things could not be done so well by women in their present degree of economic development. (8)
Gilman critiques the existing social structure of gendered spheres and the isolated labor performed in these spaces. Since the public space is considered the men’s realm, women are mostly alienated from it thereby creating a dependence on men to solve matters of their assigned public space. Gilman considers this dependency a problem as a shortage of male workers can lead to an economic paralysis since women are seen as less capable and subsequently not trained to cope with economic crisis. In “The Cottagette,” Gilman explores how this division of spaces and labor translates in a family setting. Malda’s inability to seek Ford’s help is reinforced in a system that insulates men from women’s work. Ford’s apparent indifference to her labor and Malda’s consequent disappointment can be seen as a form of paralysis that can occur in relationships because of rigid gendered boundaries. Thus, through Malda’s desire for Ford’s help, Gilman advocates for free movement and shared knowledge across the public and private divide for more uniformity in relationships and society at large.

Investigating further into the implication of gendered spaces, Gilman traces women’s docility to their social conditioning. For example, eighteen-year-old Gerta’s deference offers insight into an older Malda’s compliant behavior. Gerta is introduced as a “meek young goddess” who is “full of good will and eager obedience, but [is] ignorant and childish” (Gilman 40). Gerta’s obedience and ignorance resonates with the upbringing of women at the time. Nancy Theriot writes, “Female advisors reiterated the theme of sexual polarity, and recommended to young woman that they practice submission, emotional availability and selfless devotion in relation to others” (68). She further explains that “young women were urged to tame their spirits in relation to men by cultivating docility with their brothers.” Theriot’s discussion about women’s conditioning in nineteenth-century America explains Gerta’s meekness as a teenage girl and how this translates into “selfless devotion to others” in later years as seen in Malda’s
behavior. Gilman highlights the drawbacks of such complete submission in presenting Gerta as pregnant with her employer’s (Mr. Marroner) child. Gerta’s situation reveals ways in which young women’s ignorance and training to “cultivate docility” makes them susceptible to unwanted advances of men. Gilman not only conveys women’s warped notions of compliance in relation to men, but through Gerta’s pregnancy indicates the ugly consequences of women’s unawareness about their own bodies. Carl N. Degler notes American women were “inhibited [women] from acknowledging their sexual feelings” (1469). Since from a young age, women like Gerta are denied knowledge of, and more importantly control over their own bodies, they are vulnerable to men as Mr. Marroner who “know” and “understand” better (Gilman 44).

In contrast, Mrs. Marroner’s professional education and experience equips her with the confidence and knowledge needed to tackle unforeseen circumstances. She mourns her husband’s infidelity yet maintains her sense of self. As narrated, “the training of the twenty-eight years which had elapsed before her marriage; the life at college, both as a student and teacher; the independent growth which she had made, formed a very different background for grief from that in Gerta’s mind” (43). Mrs. Marroner’s professional career enables her to have an identity beyond her role as a wife. While Gerta lies “helpless” and “defenseless,” Mrs. Marroner regains her composure and logically processes Mr. Marroner’s unfaithfulness (Gilman 44). She recognizes that her husband “knew better” and wrongly “took advantage” of Gerta’s “ignorance and habitual docility” (Gilman 44). In showing the contrast between how Gerta and Mrs. Marroner deal with loss and uncertainty, Gilman highlights the larger difference between a woman that is governed by traditional norms and one that transcends them. Unlike Gerta who appears powerless and destitute, Mrs. Marroner as a trained educator retains her clarity of thought, is self-reliant and capable of planning her future.
By the story’s close, Mrs. Marroner now referred as Marion leaves her husband and moves in with Gerta into a house where she “keeps boarders” and “resumes teaching under one of her old professors” (Gilman 46). When Mr. Marroner comes to the house looking for his wife, an “impersonal” Marion with Gerta in the background, responds, “What have you to say to us?” (47). In Marion’s use of the word “us,” Gilman highlights the force women can yield through shared understanding and how this newfound strength can enable them to create liberating spaces. Together Gerta and Marion run a house that “stands in its own lawn, with trees and flowers” (47) Here, the private lawn symbolizes the women’s sense of autonomy as they stand on “their own” and support each other morally. On recognizing Mr. Marroner’s sexual exploitation of Gerta, Marion considers Mr. Marroner’s action as “an offence against womanhood” (Gilman 45). From seeing her husband’s infidelity as personal damage, Marion arrives at the larger understanding of how women have been exploited throughout history. It is this understanding of women’s plight that unites Marion with the young Gerta. Carol Lasser elaborates on the impact of women’s solidarity in stating that “sharing a vision and looking to each other for support in their often unpopular positions, activist women found kin terms particularly apt, translating the features of familial sisterhood into a fictive kinship that could sustain them in the public domain” (165). Lasser’s discussion about the unison between female activists, offers insight into the dynamics of Marion and Gerta’s friendship. United by the shared experience of manipulation and exploitation, Gilman shows how both women embody a “familial sisterhood,” and create a domestic setting that is physically and emotionally empowering. Marion is “steady” and Gerta “with a new intelligence” holds the “child as bulk walk” (47). Notably, the same child that incited connotations of shame for Gerta as an unwed
pregnant mother, now inspires fresh confidence, enabling her to proudly accept and assert motherhood.

While Marion and Gerta’s new living arrangement shows one alternative to the traditional domestic design, the conversation that follows between Malda and Ford in “The Cottagette” indicates other possibilities of what domesticity could imply. On seeing Malda’s exhaustion in the kitchen, Ford dissuades her from cooking saying, “I love you because you are rational and highminded and capable of friendship—and in spite of your cooking!” (Gilman 38). Moreover, when Malda probes at Ford’s unconventional thinking, he asserts, “It is not true, always, my dear, that the way to a man’s heart is through the stomach; at least it’s not the only way” (Gilman 38). Ford’s comment hints at the new possibilities associated with domesticity and that sacrificing an artistic hobby is not the “only way” to successful homemaking. He encourages Malda’s artistic interests and appreciates her rational thinking, making a larger point about how a woman’s worth is not defined by her expertise in housekeeping. In depicting Malda as pleasantly surprised at Ford’s support for her creative pursuits, Gilman highlights the value of a domestic space that is built on mutual partnership and nurtures women’s potential and desires.

Hopkins’ and Gilman’s writings convey ways in which black and white women at the turn of the century were still reeling from the impact of the nineteenth-century norms that defined the domestic space. A comparative discussion of Hopkins’ and Gilman’s texts highlights the differing ways in which black and white women reformed the domestic space on an external and internal level to adapt to the vision and ideology of the new era. These reformed spaces enabled women to question and to some level alter the core values defining traditional domesticity. In Contending Forces Ma Smith realigns the architecture of her home for commercial purposes and in doing so, exercises a type of business acumen typically associated
with men. Her use of fancy table ware and plated silverware to maintain her position in the market reveals that domesticity if used tactfully can help black women reintegrate and progress in society after a history of slavery. Hopkins thus redefines domesticity from its perception as a limitation to something that bears liberating potential for the African American community. In a slightly different vein, Gilman presents domestic work as a constraint; however, her dissent is not so much with the kitchen itself but the guiding tenets that relegate women to the kitchen. In portraying women who are determined to pursue their individual interests and others that independently run their home, Gilman expands the meaning of domestic space beyond the idea of a family led by a male head and offers possibilities where women are in command of their homes and lives.
Conclusion

My discussion of the domestic realm as a protean space and domesticity as an evolving concept show how these mutable spatial boundaries between the public and private realm offer a unique insight into the nineteenth-century female experience. In my analysis of texts featuring white female protagonists, I show that white women are combatting an ideology that restricts them to housekeeping affairs and demands their sacrificial devotion to the well-being of their families. These women challenge this constraining system to reorganize and reform the domestic space in a way that allows them more freedom to meet their personal desires. Texts featuring black female protagonists reveal that, unlike white women who are striving to refine the existing domestic space, black women’s struggles involve creating a private realm from the ground up, following a history of slavery that deprived them of a stable home and family life. Despite the differing nature of black and white women’s struggles, both groups of women work towards creating and constantly improving the domestic space to suit their needs and desires.

The reshaping of these tangible domestic spaces in nineteenth-century American literature reflects the modification of the traditional ideology of true womanhood that confined women to the domestic space and its duties. In Ruth Hall, for instance Mrs. Hall considers Ruth as “not brought up properly” after the latter expresses her lack of knowledge in housekeeping (Fern 14). In her marital home, Ruth is expected to suppress her creative pursuits and use her time for domestic tasks such as making bread and cleaning. Ruth’s exit from such a domestic setting and inhabiting of one where she pursues employment highlights how this improved domestic space reflects the more evolved ideology of womanhood that enables women to succeed in areas other than conventional housekeeping. This renewed outlook conveyed the aspirations of the “new woman”, a term that author Sarah Grand conceived in 1894 to identify
educated women who actively pursued professional careers. Although the new woman was not an increasingly popular phenomenon at the time of *Ruth Hall*’s publication in 1854, through Ruth’s struggle for self-autonomy, Fern conveys women’s latent desire to disengage from a version of domesticity that confined them to homemaking duties and consequently deepened their dependence on male figures. In presenting a character like Ruth who modifies the domestic setting to her preference, Fern captures women’s nascent awareness of their potential, a trend which gained momentum in later years when the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 1870s enabled women to enter the marketplace.

In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Edna’s withdrawal from domestic affairs and a growing interest in personal hobbies similarly highlights women’s disregard for the ideal of true womanhood that forced women to stay in unsatisfactory marriages. Recognizing that she does not share Leonce’s “thought and taste,” and that there is “no trace of passion” in their marriage, Edna engages in activities that fulfill her (Chopin 63). In letting the “housekeeping go to dickens” as Leonce put it, and indulging in swimming, reading and painting, Edna experiences a sense of home with the self (Chopin 117). By departing from the Pontellier mansion and moving into a small pigeon house, Edna depicts this unison with the self, since, in the new space, she is autonomous and free from the domestic trappings that suppressed her creative pursuits. Like Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, Edna’s retreat into a personal physical space conveys her embrace of the more progressive feminine ideal that encouraged women’s individuality. Gilman’s writing further details what this new feminine ideal entails in presenting women who refrain from living as dependents and sacrificing their creative interests. In “The Three Thanksgivings”, Mrs. Morrison negates the idea of “belonging” with a male head by choosing to live independently in her own home. Malda from “The Cottagette” decides to forgo cooking rather than her hobbies after
marriage. Gerta and Mrs. Marroner from “Turned” prefer to live in sisterhood rather than with a man with whom they feel deceived. In all three stories, the configuration of new physical spaces and unconventional choices reflect women’s adherence to a more progressive idea of womanhood that offers multiple and flexible possibilities of domesticity.

Similar to how nineteenth-century white female characters modify their domestic spaces and subsequently embrace a more advanced idea of womanhood, black female characters also progress socially in choosing to reinstate their private realms after years spent in bondage. In Jacobs’ *Incidents*, the possibility of her children’s enslavement motivates Linda to strategize a route to freedom for herself and her family. By the novels’ close, Linda is free from bondage and although not “in a home of her own,” she succeeds in ensuring her children’s freedom (Jacobs 945). Post-reconstruction characters such as Iola and Ma Smith from *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* further indicate ways in black people restored and developed their private realms. Iola reunites with her immediate family, and, in marrying Dr. Latimer who shares her passion for communal work, forms a domestic space that is dedicated to progress of the African American community. Ma Smith too, operates a boarding house business from her personal home which sustains her financially while also stabilizing women like Sappho who require a space of sustenance. Black women then not only rebuild their domestic space but also but also redefine this space from a realm that meets individual needs to a collective domain that facilitates the advancement of the community at large.

Despite the overarching similarity of both and white and women transitioning towards a more progressive feminine ideal, a comparison between white and black protagonists reveals the distinct racial circumstances that frame black and white women’s struggles. Analysis of Fern’s *Ruth Hall* and Jacobs’ *Incidents* show that while Ruth is combatting an ideology of womanhood
that considers her as a subservient being, Linda as a slave woman is fighting against the
dehumanizing institution of slavery that views her as mere chattel. In her marital home, Ruth
struggles to maintain her confidence when confronted with her mother in law’s harsh comments,
whereas Linda in her master’s estate must protect her spirit and her body that is constantly prone
to physical and psychological assault. Moreover, in the small spaces that Ruth and Linda
temporary live following their exit from the marital home and the Flints’ house respectively,
both women combat distinct environments. Ruth battles financial destitution whereas Linda
endures pest infestations and the physically debilitating condition of living in a “cramped
position day after day” (Jacobs 860). Unlike Ruth who is striving for economic independence,
Linda is struggling for basic survival. The distinct nature of Ruth and Linda’s circumstances is
prominent at the texts’ close, as Ruth’s successful career enables her to single handedly support
her children and have them live with her. Linda, however, manages to ensure her family’s
freedom but “does not sit with her children” in a personal home (Jacobs 945). Collins’s view on
the impact of slavery on the African American family system offers some insight into Linda’s
situation. According to Collins, “African American men’s and women’s positions within slave
political economies made it unlikely that either patriarchal or matriarchal domination could take
root” (52). Unlike Ruth who takes on a matriarchal role with her newfound financial security
and the ability to head her new self-created domestic setting, the experience of slavery and
continued racial discrimination runs too deep for Linda to be able to do the same. Although free
from bondage, the lack of opportunities available to the black community, hinders a similar sort
of matriarchy to “take root” for Linda.

The post-emancipation experience of restoring the domestic space is further apparent in
Iola’s journey of reuniting with her family and achieving financial stability. A comparative
analysis of Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and Chopin’s *The Awakening* conveys how racial concerns impact the way black and white women mobilize themselves to create safe home spaces. In the process of reconnecting with her family, Iola learns about the social standing of African Americans, which subsequently shapes her idea of a domestic setting. Seeing the stigma attached to black people in public spaces, Iola is determined to “join the great rank of bread-winners” (Harper 160). Iola recognizes that black women’s financial independence can empower women to establish their family life as well as improve the social image of the community as a whole. As a former slave woman, Iola’s priorities are thus different from an upper-class white woman such as Edna, who is combatting gendered expectations related to white femininity. In *The Awakening*, Edna’s mobility is initially expressed on an internal level as she recognizes her distaste for the concept of a “mother-woman” (Chopin 51). She refuses to constantly supervise her children and remain engaged in housekeeping tasks. In doing so, Edna discards the conventional expectations associated with married women that tend to limit women’s identities as mothers and wives. A comparative analysis between Harper’s and Chopin’s texts, therefore, reveals how racial issues complicate black women’s struggle as these women in educating themselves, seeking employment and reconnecting with their families are not only reestablishing stable domestic spaces for themselves but are also attempting to improve the collective social standing of the black community.

Black women’s efforts in refining the overall image of the African American community are further evident in Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*. By incorporating fine silverware and tableware in their boarding house business, Ma Smith and Dora extend high quality service to their boarders, reclaiming ideas of finesse and proficiency typically associated with the white community. Analyzing Hopkins’ novel alongside Gilman’s stories thus reveals how matters of
race impact what these modified domestic spaces represent. For the Smith’s, the boarding house depicts black community’s ability to access and maintain their position in the marketplace. Moreover, with a business venture that facilitates women’s discussion, careers and subsidiary businesses, Hopkins shows how in the African American context, practicing domesticity bears the potential to help the black community reintegrate into society. In Gilman’s texts, women’s decision to live independently represent the withdrawal from an ideology of white femininity that traps them in unsatisfactory family systems. In presenting women who refuse to sacrifice their individual interests and stay in relationships where they feel devalued, Gilman expands the idea of domesticity by proposing domestic settings where women are at the forefront and lead their lives on their own terms.

A comparative study of white and black women’s reformed domestic spaces highlights their distinct position and unique challenges in nineteenth-century America. White women are contesting their marginalization in a society that suppresses their individuality and denies their desires beyond the scope of marriage and motherhood. Black women, however, as former slave women, are twice marginalized because of gender and race. Rape and threats of rape that Linda and Iola endure in slavery is violence that is motivated because of the women’s biological and racial identity. In the post-reconstruction context, Iola’s and Linda’s struggle for employment and Sappho’s experience of navigating the stigma of hypersexuality associated with black women’s bodies are other examples of ways in which matters of race complicates the black female experience. The women’s transition towards stable domestic spaces then not only provides them physical security but also helps them achieve positive social visibility. With a steady home space in the background, black women seek public roles to gradually dispose negative connotations attached to their racial identities and to gain financial stability for
themselves and their families. Needless to say, women across racial lines have sought spaces of independence and progress; this dissertation contributes to the ongoing discussion on the intersection of race and gender in American literature by showing how racial differences in particular shape the domestic space. An understanding of how racial politics impacts women’s struggle for autonomy helps readers see the nuances in reason and purpose of their reformed domestic spaces.

Analysis of these reconfigured domains reflect the position and struggle of nineteenth-century women while also providing useful lenses to study the developing implications of domesticity. Literary texts published in later years are reflective of an evolving American culture in which women seek professional careers, relationships and an overall lifestyle of their preference. These choices indicate ways in which women expand the implications of domesticity to accommodate their desires. For example, Djuna Barnes Nightwood (1936) and Jane Bowles Two Serious Ladies (1943) present female characters that challenge the heteronormative domestic design by engaging in homosexual relationships. Other texts such as Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1930) and Toni Morrison’s Jazz (1992) convey how the black community’s past trauma continues to inform their existent home spaces. In Hurston’s novel, Nanny’s experience as a former slave provokes her to take drastic decisions for her granddaughter, Janie, while in Jazz, much of Joe’s and Violet’s predicament is connected to their feelings of loss in childhood that occur as a consequence of the debilitating effect of slavery on the African American family life. Considering how events of the past continue to impact domestic spaces and relationships forming within these spaces, it is only fitting that we dig deep to understand these newer developments.
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