

“THE KEEPING QUIET IS JUST WHAT I CANNOT DO”:

WOMEN’S WORK, SPEECH, AND THE HOME

IN *THE SILENT PARTNER*, *WORK*, AND *IOLA LEROY*

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
AddRan College of Liberal Arts
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

May, 2009

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Introduction

In *The Silent Partner*, by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, first published in 1871, two main characters, Perley Kelso, an upper-class woman and mill owner, and Sip Garth, a poor mill worker, gaze into the growing dusk at a street filled with mill folk. As Perley watches the crowd, she tells Sip, “One would think . . . that they had no homes” (118). Sip responds: “They have houses.” Perley assumes that these mill workers have homes because they live in buildings; Sip, an experienced worker, reveals that the idea of a home is an unfamiliar concept to these inhabitants. Perley cannot fathom why these folk would prefer the street to their supposedly more private spaces, while Sip’s insertion that they have *houses* suggests that the streets might actually be more preferable than their living conditions. Throughout the late nineteenth century, while the authors of numerous handbooks and advice manuals propounded the significance of the home and women’s roles within it, texts such as Phelps’s demonstrate the impossibility of this home for everyone, particularly members of the working class.

These advice manuals spoke solely to the middle-class female reader, ignoring the rest of society that could not possess the ideal home. Immigrant, manual-labor, and African-American women all found themselves excluded—financially, racially, and culturally—from the roles middle-class women supposedly fulfilled and the homes they stereotypically enjoyed; by these middle-class standards, the working class of all races and African Americans in general were *homeless*. Although these manuals and handbooks ignored anyone this ideal excluded, the women authors I examine—Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in *The Silent Partner* (1871); Louisa May Alcott in *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873); and Frances E. W. Harper in *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892)—reveal these exclusions and particularly demonstrate the complications of the ideals of home and women’s place there. Like the mill workers in Phelps’s

text, all of the main female characters in these novels labor, and the spaces they inhabit relate directly to their work; in fact, in many ways, *because* they work they cannot attain the ideal middle-class home as it is prescribed. At the same time, however, these writers also reveal the home to be a powerful ideology that their characters embrace, as they long to create this space for themselves and, ultimately, to some extent are able to do so. In every case, though, these authors revise notions of the home to accommodate these working women and their broader perspectives.

While these women long to develop and attain a home for themselves, they also are continually searching for a voice, identity, and greater purpose that their living and working conditions have not provided; many of these conditions have actually *silenced* these women. Thus, they must attempt to reconcile their pursuit of a home and all it offers with this desire to gain their own voice and purpose, and they ultimately revise notions of the ideal home to attain that voice. In *Work*, Christie announces to her friend and later husband David, as she tries to determine why she cannot be the perfect, pious, silent woman that his mother embodies, “The keeping quiet is just what I cannot do” (Alcott 218). In a way, all of these female characters realize their inability to keep quiet, because there are just too many things that they need to say. They realize that their greater purpose is in speaking publicly to other women and workers, to help bring about the moral and social improvement of their peers. As Harriet Beecher Stowe would say, and as their speech demonstrates, these women are “developed into nobler forms” (Crowfield 56). This development stems, not only from their home, as Stowe suggests, but, I argue, from a combination of their labor and the (revised) home they finally establish.

Phelps, Alcott, and Harper show that the home and its ideals of behavior, education, and love are necessary for these working women, so that they should not be excluded from it. At the same

time, though, they widen the image of the home, redefining it in a way that includes and empowers working women who gain their ultimate purpose through speaking beyond its walls. My intention, then, is to analyze the spaces these characters inhabit, the work they must do to remain there, and particularly the ways they speak inside and then, finally, outside that space, all to explore the identity and power they gain from merging their labor with their “homes.”

Current Scholarship

Home

Numerous critics have discussed the home in fairly recent scholarship. In her well-known and highly influential work *Building the Dream* (1981), Gwendolyn Wright looks at various types of American housing. As she explains, although the isolated cottage represented the typical middle-class dwelling, “there have always been several kinds of specialized habitations for people who did not fit this mold” (xvi). She looks at these other structures, including slave quarters, tenements, and apartment-hotels, and the ways people lived in these alternative spaces. Clifford Edward Clark, Jr. also examines the link between the house and its residents in *The American Family Home* (1986), looking specifically at the middle-class ideal of the home from 1800 to 1960 and the ways specific house types adapted to the changing middle-class family. He compares prescriptive literature and its decisive ideals with the actual relationship between families and their houses, showing that though the actual did not correspond with the stereotype, it still did little to hinder the circulation of that ideal. Glenna Matthews looks at the home in a different way, tracing the cultural history of American domesticity in *Just a Housewife* (1987). Like Clark, she focuses on middle-class families and shows that by mid-nineteenth century, American domesticity had “turned the middle-class house into a home” (17). Matthews suggests

that domesticity's ideals elevated the woman and her domestic work and strengthened her influence and activism, both inside and outside the home during this time.

Other scholars have discussed the home more recently. Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1992) looks at how black women authors during post-Reconstruction used domestic novels as "entry points" into the intellectual and political world from which they, as black women, were otherwise excluded (5). She argues that these women idealized domesticity to represent social order and promote social advancement for African Americans as a way to improve their extremely limited conditions. In *Home* (1993), edited by Arien Mack, numerous scholars discuss the ideology of home in enlightening ways, both "its meaning as a central human idea as well as the crises engendered by its loss" through homelessness or alienation (2). In this work, Kim Hopper discusses homelessness, and the "cultural limbo" homeless people occupy, as outside society's (private) spaces. Gwendolyn Wright considers the ideal of home, as it exists both as a universal longing and a cultural norm that defines specific roles and places. Most interestingly for my study, Tamara K. Hareven looks at the home historically, both for middle-class and working-class families. She shows that for workers the home existed as a resource and a much more flexible and diverse space than for the middle class. In *Burnin' Down the House* (1995), Valerie Sweeney Prince also looks at the significance of the home and what it meant specifically for African Americans in the twentieth century. She explains that the opportunities and justice African Americans pursued throughout the twentieth century "can be described as a quest for home" (xii). Prince argues that authors articulate their characters' perpetual search for home and belonging through blues expression and the use of the city, the kitchen, and the womb to represent the differences between the houses they have and the homes they desire but can never attain.

In her recent and decidedly relevant work on urban domesticity, *At Home in the City* (2005), Betsy Klimasmith examines urban housing in both literature and American culture. She explains that urban living contrasted greatly to the stereotypical middle-class rural cottage; it became the “new anti-home,” and a place of connection and mingling (3). Klimasmith argues that urban domestic spaces—like apartments, tenements, and hotels—“disrupted and forced revisions of the notions of public and private space” that the middle-class home sought to keep separate (6).

These works have provided distinct insight into the significance of the home in different stages of American history and the relationship between that home and its inhabitants. However, much of this scholarship has focused solely on the middle class. Although some of these scholars have considered the domestic spaces of the working class, African Americans, and urbanites in general, much more remains to be said, particularly in relation to the work these inhabitants do and the living conditions of those not mentioned in these studies. Though scholars such as Wright and Klimasmith discuss the residences of the tenements and the work that occurs in them, I would like to further examine the dwellings of other workers through literature to elucidate the characters’ search for home in relation to their work. Similarly, I would like to extend Prince’s argument regarding African Americans’ constant pursuit of the ideal of the home to include the late nineteenth century. Overall, I wish to use the novels I have chosen to expand these scholars’ ideas of work, housing, and the home, examining more living conditions among diverse characters to further discuss the ramifications of the domestic ideal for those excluded from that space.

Work

Several texts especially provide a deeper understanding of women’s work in America during

the end of the nineteenth century. In their early work *America's Working Women* (1976), Rosalyn Baxandall et al. provide a unique insight into the experiences of American women laborers through primary narratives by and about them. From these documents, the authors bring together common trends, including the “continuity of traditional female occupations” and the “multiplicity of women’s work” (xxiv). Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei also focus on this multiplicity, though to a much more detailed degree. In *Race, Gender, and Work* (1991), they trace women’s working lives through American economic history, examining the unique oppressions experienced by women and men in the workplace and the ways gender, racial and ethnic, and class hierarchies affect women’s work. In this study, Amott and Matthaei combine an extremely helpful general history of women’s labor with specific chapters on different races and ethnicities of women, bringing clarity to the vast diversity of working women’s experiences.

In her work *Belabored Professions* (2005), Xiomara Santamarina particularly focuses on the experience of the working African-American woman. She presents the narratives of four African-American women workers who detail their varying work experiences, showing that all of these women felt entitled to a social and economic independence because of the work they did. She argues that they used their narratives to demonstrate the respectability of working women and the worthy contributions black women made to society.

All three of these sources discuss working women in different and quite helpful ways, bringing forward unique working experiences for numerous types of women. I aim to compare these texts to the characters’ labor in the literature I study and to use that comparison to further extend the working woman’s experience in the late nineteenth century. Also, while these scholars look solely at the work of these women, I wish to bring their homes into consideration as well, showing the relation between the two.

Speech

Because the dwelling spaces (and, therefore, labor) of the characters I discuss directly influence the speech they can or cannot express, I also wish to examine the scholarship surrounding women's speech. Numerous scholars focus on this topic in two areas. In *Listening to Silences* (1994), edited by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, and similar texts, authors respond to Tillie Olsen's *Silences* and focus on the various silences women adopt when they cannot actually speak. These critics look at silence "as presence and as absence . . . as both oppressive and empowering," as both inside the text and outside it (6). Another aspect of women's speech that scholars have recently focused on is their public speech: ways women have moved beyond the private sphere and expressed themselves publicly. In *Voices of the Nation* (1998), Caroline Field Levander examines women's public speech, including female authorship, in nineteenth-century America. She argues that the discussions surrounding the female voice play a crucial role in defining and enforcing "the social changes instituted by the emerging" middle class, particularly related to masculinity and the public sphere (4). Levander suggests that women's speech managed to undermine these social changes and that women writers used this "revisionist" speech to contribute to public discussions (142).

Although these works and the discussions surrounding them highlight particularly crucial aspects of women's speech and voice, no scholarship really focuses on another aspect of female language: the "private" speech that takes place within the home. In this study, I wish to look at the language of women within this more private domestic space, examining how they can and cannot express themselves within their habitations and the identities that develop or do not develop because of that expression. I also intend to compare that speech to the female characters'

speech that exists outside of their houses and ultimately empowers them, looking at the connections and, more importantly, the differences between them, to highlight the relationship between these characters' "homes" and their emerging identities.

Historical and Social Context

Home

The Ideal Home

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed several significant shifts in middle-class housing, based on the developing middle-class ideologies surrounding the home. From 1820 to 1860, the number of people living in cities skyrocketed 797%, particularly as the number of immigrants surged, heightening the sense of crime, poverty, violence, chaos, and "foreignness" that threatened the stability and security of the middle class (Clark 15).¹ Located in the suburbs, middle-class homes removed their inhabitants from the threat of the city's chaos and instability (Klimasmith). Because the home served as a means of escape and removal, writers emphasized a domestic architecture that elevated what the middle-class society could obtain that city-dwellers supposedly could not, architecture that created "a sense of protection and inspiration, a feeling of closeness and cooperation, and, most importantly, a greater appreciation of art and beauty" (Vaux 763). The houses that resulted from these emphases represented the American Victorian style of profuse ornamentation and exaggerated detail. Residents used their homes to reveal their artistic expression and individuality, a means of reinforcing their status (McDannell 173) and, therefore, their distance and difference from the threatening city.

From its inception, the ideal home that these writers "sentimentalize[d]" (Warner 4) served as the very "antithesis of the sprawling and chaotic city" (Clark 97). By mid-century, domestic

architects and plan-book writers were emphasizing that the middle-class home reinforced all of the attributes the city was threatening, “stressing how properly designed houses would stabilize society, attest to the moral development of the owners . . . and help improve society at large” (24-25). Because “Victorian writers emphasized that the *house itself* shaped the character of its inhabitants,” architecture and house layout were essential in stabilizing the middle-class ideals in flux (McDannell 164). For example, Gervase Wheeler writes in 1855 in *Homes of the People, in Suburb and Country*, “The great evil of the present American architecture is that it is indefinable” (6). Architects and plan-book authors emphasized the definability of boundaries for the Victorian home, elevating seclusion and separation. Designers insisted that this home be located either in the suburbs (so that men could commute to the city via newly-developing public transportation) or the country (1). In *What Women Should Know* (1873), female writer E. B. Duffey advises families, “let them by all means isolate themselves from the outside world, so that the home shall be something distinct and apart from it” (116). These plan-book and advice manual authors assume that the home exists in isolation: “[t]hose families will be found happiest who have thus secluded themselves.” For these prescriptivists, happiness, and therefore middle-class security and identity, relied on the Victorian home’s seclusion from the chaos surrounding and threatening it.

Not only were these houses meant to be entirely secluded, literally sectioned off as a boundary from the crowded city, designers also stressed the definability of each room and the separation between publicity and privacy. In her *House and Home Papers* (1865), Stowe laments that some houses have been “so rambling and haphazard in the disposal of rooms, so sunless and cheerless and wholly without snugness or privacy, as to make it seem impossible to live a joyous, generous, rational, religious family-life in them” (Crowfield 272). Privacy and separation defined

this middle-class ideal, to the point that family life relied on them. Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr. explain in *The Decoration of Houses* (1902), “Each room in a house has its individual uses,” and “whatever the uses of a room, they are seriously interfered with if it be not preserved as a small world by itself” (25). These rooms were directly tied to privacy, for certain rooms (the vestibule, hall, and specifically the parlor, in respectively diminishing levels of publicity) existed to be public, and others (the kitchen, the bedrooms, the family sitting room, and the servant areas) solely existed for the private use of the household, its help, and its intimates (Clark 32). Rooms progressively became more private from the front of the house to the back, and then from the first floor to the second, so that the sitting room was generally located at the back of the first floor and the bedrooms upstairs. For this reason, Florence Hartley in *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* (1860) advises young middle-class ladies to “never go up stairs uninvited” (85). Because middle-class Victorians required privacy and seclusion to remain defined as middle class, and particularly to serve as a direct contrast to city life which supposedly violated all means of privacy, these homes represented the separation of public and private and reinforced the ability of these middle-class residents to lead private lives.

In this defined and particularly apportioned space of the home, “every individual had a clearly defined place” as well, an ideal that, again, directly opposed the city and its typically merged spaces. The preservation of the home purportedly relied on husband and wife (and so, presumably, father and mother) fulfilling their delineated roles. As Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe explain in *The American Woman’s Home* (1869), the father “undergoes toil and self-denial to provide a home, and then the mother becomes a self-sacrificing laborer to train its inmates” (24). The wife and mother’s main positions within the home consisted as “the chief educator of our race, and the prime minister of the family state” (115). As Beecher and

Stowe's use of "chief" and "prime" suggests, the elevation of the home also raised women's roles within it, particularly as prescriptivists saw middle-class women participating in the essential role of raising future citizens through the homes they created.² However, Beecher and Stowe clearly aim to elevate the woman within this domestic sphere and not outside it, as they argue that there has been "too great a tendency of the age to make the education of woman anti-domestic" (234).³ Similarly, Stowe explains, "Homes are the work of art peculiar to the genius of woman. Man *helps* in this work, but woman leads" (77). These two authors clearly aim to bring value to woman's status within the home and her (what is often called "invisible") labor there, but not beyond its walls.⁴

By elevating the privacy and separation of this middle-class home and its boundaries, prescriptive writers could then elevate everything that the home came to stand for and uphold. Especially since Victorian writers argued that the house created or hindered the development of proper character in its inhabitants, the home came to be the tangible representation of middle-class ideals. As Hollander and others demonstrate in *Home*, no word is as loaded as *home* in all the Romance languages (38); in the Victorian era, particularly, it came to be more loaded and significant than perhaps ever before. Stowe describes *home* in this way: "The word home has in it the elements of love, rest, permanency, and liberty; but besides these it has in it the idea of an education by which all that is purest within us is developed into nobler forms, fit for a higher life" (Crowfield 56). Home for these Victorians came to represent all that the city threatened, including tangible security and permanency as well as intangible love and perfection. Crucial within the walls of this home are the ideals of education and training, as parents (and especially mothers) teach children the elevated behavior they learned in their parents' homes that then extends out into society and elevates it. Martha Louise Rayne, in *What Can a Woman Do* (1893),

further elucidates the significance of the home and the education that occurs within. She writes, “Home means so much in this nineteenth century. It means all that makes life really worth the living. It means comfort, affection, sympathy, confidence, consolation, encouragement, rest, and peace. . . . It means the solitary spot in the desert of the world where all these principles and virtues taught us in infancy preserve their truthful, queen-like date-palms” (230). In language some twenty-first century readers may find nauseating, Rayne provides a sense of the importance of this ideal; *home* makes life worthwhile, the only place in the world where inhabitants can attain these attributes and preserve life’s essential “fruits,” ethical principles and moral virtues. Clark suggests that the home served as “a symbol for ideal family relationships,” “an emblem for family cohesiveness and identity” (xv); it was a place of significance centered on the family and the moral development deemed so necessary at this time. For these prescriptivists, home was a “means of ordering their lives” (Prince 65) and asserting identity and control in a fluctuating society that rendered such assertions otherwise impossible.

By the 1890s, however, “the suburban image was entirely distinct from the city” (Halttunen 168), and a majority of reformers began to reject the highly ornamental Victorian style, emphasizing simplicity and moderation instead. Wharton and Codman explain, “Decorators know how much the simplicity and dignity of a good room are diminished by crowding it with useless trifles” (183). These ideas of the Progressive Era accentuated efficiency and minimalism in the home, for example replacing the parlor and sitting room with the single, more informal living room. Progressive reformers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued for the removal of women from the imprisoning domestic sphere and advocated full public involvement instead; some scholars have critiqued their efforts by suggesting that they eventually contributed to the trivializing of women’s roles and work within that space (Matthews 114). Still, Matthews argues,

the elevation of women's place in the middle-class home continued to circulate in advice literature and reformers' discourse into the twentieth century (111). Throughout the late nineteenth century, then, *home* continued to serve as a means of separation, status, exclusion, and a representation of longing.

Actual "Homes" or Houses

Although the ideals surrounding the home, its seclusion, and women's roles pertained strictly to the European-American middle class, women from other races and ethnicities from the lower class upheld this ideal as well. As a poor working girl explains to the *Workingman's Advocate* in 1869, "Only help us to earn a home that we can attach ourselves to, that will make us feel that we have a country" ("Working" 3). She explains that women have no homes, that they have husbands' or brothers' homes, and continues, "And to those poor working women they [*sic*] have no husband or Brother, only think what a boon a home of their own would be." This working-class woman embodies the idyllic desire for a home that the middle class has taught, for without it she feels that she lacks both identity and a place to belong. Likewise, Beecher and Stowe show that servants believed they could attain this ideal, explaining that the reason servants are hard to keep is because they are looking for their own opportunities to obtain homes for themselves. These authors write, "Families look forward to the buying of landed homesteads, and the scattered brothers and sisters work awhile in domestic service to gain the common fund for the purpose; your seamstress intends to become a dressmaker, and take in work at her own house" (238). In fact, numerous sources explain that the reason middle-class women have such problems with domestic help is because all servants have something better in mind; they believe that the American dream and the ability to have a home apply to them as well.

Other workers also upheld this ideal. For instance, the poor wife of an immigrant blacksmith laments that her husband has not been able to find skilled work. According to Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), his detailed work regarding the New York tenements, she says, “it would be nice for sure to have father work at his trade” (111). Riis paraphrases her meaning: “Then what a home she could make for them, and how happy they could be,” and he adds, “Here is an unattainable ideal, indeed, of a workman in the most prosperous city in the world!” It is so interesting that this woman feels this ideal could apply to her if her husband could work at his trade, though Riis clearly suggests that the opportunity for a home and happiness does not exist at all for these people. In *Belabored Professions*, Santamarina also explains that these white middle-class ideals did not only affect whites: “Antebellum African American newspapers amply demonstrate that the ideals of domesticity and the ‘cult of true womanhood’ prevailed in black communities” (12). Amott and Matthaei also reveal the same for wealthy Mexican and Chinese Americans (298). These sources suggest that this middle-class desire for a home was indeed pervasive in other portions of society.

However, the actual homes and houses of the non-European-American classes demonstrate that this middle-class ideal did not apply universally and that it excluded many who continued to hold those ideals for themselves. At the center of the middle-class ideals of the home and domesticity, though, was the necessity for such exclusion; plan-book writers and other prescriptivists focused specifically on space and its uses as a demarcation of class. It is quite likely that prescriptive writers advocated the separation between rooms and their purposes in suburban and country residences for the very reason that other dwellings merged those spaces. Elizabeth Collins Cromley explains in “A History of American Beds and Bedrooms,” “Working-class families shared beds and bedrooms more often than middle-class households, in part

because extra space was too costly to be within their grasp” (127). However, this lack of space did not pertain only to the working class; Betsy Klimasmith discloses that even most “middle-class urban Americans did not own their homes, but rented rooms in row houses, boarding houses, tenements, and hotels” (4). Yet, according to Wright, “any kind of shared dwelling seemed an aberration of the model home,” as it brought public and private spaces close together (*Building* 145). Because these writers felt that women needed to be tied to privacy and protected from publicity, and specifically public residences, merged space represented the dangers that could befall women who did not remain isolated. Prescriptive writers constantly sought to prove what a middle-class dwelling was and was not based on the separations that the family, and especially women, could maintain from the rest of society.

Although people lived in a number of dwellings besides the separate single-family home, those residences all shared space, and the lower the class, the more permeable and mixed that space was. For the middle and upper classes, shared housing consisted of several options. For “a very economical way of building,” Palliser & Co. (1878) suggests the duplex cottage on the edge of town, for between approximately \$1300 and \$1800 (the average woman wage-earner made about \$5 a week) (n.p.). This dwelling was the most separate of shared forms of space. Members of the middle and upper classes also inhabited the hotel (or apartment-hotel), which merged more spaces and provided “collective” services (Wright, *Building* 140). However, writers of advice manuals found hotels threatening and “more controversial” for women because of the collectivity of this space and because it served in many ways as an antithesis to the home. As Klimasmith argues, hotels “emphasize the eradication of the past from space” (142), and they also allowed “clients to buy privacy as a rule of exclusion” and comfort (Douglas 279). Not only did they erase memories and perhaps identities, they merged “home” with business and the economy of

living. Both threatened the values of the single dwelling. The middle class also lived in apartments, a less expensive form of residence because it provided collective but segmented space with its own facilities but without additional services. According to Wright, “young childless couples, bachelors and working women, widows or widowers, whose space needs were less demanding” were associated with apartments (*Building* 142). Klimasmith suggests that these dwellings provided unmarried women with a “new and liberating space” between their parents and married life, though they were still seen as threatening by many (142).

However, members of the lower working class could generally not afford to inhabit any of these spaces; they could only pay for ones that further merged public and private areas. Boarding houses were a more typical form of residence for the working class. Klimasmith suggests that the boarding house was seen as the only respectable means of housing for women in the middle of the nineteenth century because it was more private than other options (31), a suggestion that Rayne seems to advocate when she emphasizes that “[e]very room is a home,” entirely distinct and respectable on its own (275). However, prescriptive writers of the time strongly criticized even the boarding houses’ lack of privacy. Wheeler condemns the loss of “the influence of the home ties and associations” that occurs in this type of space (301). Similarly, Duffey expounds upon the dangers of the boarding house and its lack of proper domestic influences, explaining that it is “a poor substitute for the quiet and retirement of home. It is leading this life that we find idle, frivolous women” (115). She infers that the habits of these women result from the multiple public uses of the parlor, as there exists only “one common parlor for dress and show and flirtation, for gossip and mischief-making, but no chance for any of that quiet home-life” that brings out “the manly and womanly traits of the character” (116). She supposes that these latter traits can result only from the influence of the private middle-class home; the publicity of this

other social space hinders such development.

Other housing options displayed the limitations placed on the working class. In an explanation echoed by numerous women whom Helen Campbell interviewed in *Prisoners of Poverty* (1887) and *Women Wage-Earners* (1893) to determine their actual working conditions, one working girl details her living experiences as a servant. She explains, “We were poor at home, and four of us worked in the mill, but I had a little room all my own, even if it didn’t hold much. In that splendid house the servants’ room was over the kitchen,—hot and close in summer, and cold in winter, and four beds in it” (*Prisoners* 230). The fact that there is one certainly uncomfortable “servants’ room” in a “splendid house” suggests that many middle-class women did not see these girls as needing or deserving the space they had been able to obtain themselves. Numerous servant girls explain to Campbell that they never had any space of their own in domestic work.

Similarly, African Americans were limited in the dwellings they could occupy, and that space was most certainly shared. Valerie Sweeney Prince characterizes the twentieth century for African Americans as “a quest for home” (xii), for many did not find homes available to them in the nineteenth. Before the Civil War, a vast majority of Southern slave owners used their belief of the slaves’ inferiority to “justify the exceedingly poor quality of the housing built for slaves,” housing that was typically dilapidated, standardized, and too small (Wright, *Building* 43). Often eight to ten people occupied a single room. According to Wright, these slave dwellings were another way slave owners could exercise power over their slaves. After emancipation, however, ideal housing still did not really become possible for African Americans. Riis explains that the African American man in New York “naturally takes his stand among the poor, and in the homes of the poor” because, based on the menial labor he can obtain, there is really no other option for

him (115). Landlords, demarcating what Riis calls the “color line,” limited blacks to specific sections of cities and charged them higher rent. Riis laments that though the African American “is immensely the superior of the lowest of the whites,” he has always had to pay more for the “poorest and most stinted rooms” than any white inhabitants (116). Similarly, he explains, “there is not one of them all, who, if he were to sell all he was worth to-morrow, would have money enough to buy a house and lot in the country” (113). Any of these living conditions and spaces severely limited working inhabitants, African Americans most of all.

However, the worst housing options were by far the tenements, the only choice for thousands of city-dwellers.⁵ According to Riis, a tenement was usually “a brick building from four to six stories high” (17). Generally, four families occupied each floor and, as he says, “a set of rooms consists of one or two dark closets, used as bedrooms, with a living room twelve feet by ten.” Although there were 15,000 tenements in New York in 1869, a source of despair for sanitarians of the time, by 1890 there were more than 37,000 tenements that housed more than 1.2 million people (1). Riis explains that every square mile of New York contained 330,000 inhabitants (85). The tenement served as the extreme antithesis to the middle-class home and was most likely a reason that prescriptive writers spread middle-class ideology so vehemently; these dwellings certainly received the most violent denunciations from such writers. Stowe calls these buildings “inhuman,” “snares and traps for souls,” where children grow up “filthy and impure,” and “places where to form a home is impossible” (273). Because these Victorians so distinctly associated architecture with character, critics attributed “the abysmal poverty, disease, and discontent of the inner city” to these “overcrowded tenement dwellings” (Wright, *Building* 117) that were permeable (Klimasmith 36), flexible, and diverse (Hareven 258).

Probably the most threatening aspect of the tenement was that many of its inhabitants used its

space for work. Riis explains, “The bulk of the sweater’s work is done in the tenements, which the law that regulates factory labor does not reach” (98). Because the need for money trumped boundaries and space, the tenement allowed every space to have multiple purposes and, therefore, every family member, including children, to work. Tamara K. Hareven explains, “In the major cities, ‘homework’ . . . engaged all family members in the household. Under such circumstances, the space in the home was used creatively, and was arranged and rearranged to fit the various functions of the family as they came up” (250). For example, “Beds for lodgers or boarders, or for children, were opened up in the hallway or in the kitchen in the evening and were folded back again in the morning.” Numerous workers labored through dinner time and late into the night. In all areas of their lives within the home, these workers blurred or broke down the boundaries by which middle-class prescriptivists declared society was to live. For these desperate workers, the home served as a resource (Hareven 248), a means of production instead of consumption (Klimasmith 104) that required the entire household. Not only was the tenement dangerous because it supposedly stunted any possibility of improving character, breeding vice and spreading poverty instead. As Klimasmith suggests, the workers of these tenements were also producing commodities that the middle and upper classes bought and used, and that would soon enter middle-class homes, eroding the boundaries between the classes that the separate home sought to keep in place. In fact, the isolated home actually relied on the permeability of the “homes” of the lower class and the production those workers generated through their inhabited spaces. It is likely that these middle-class idealists felt threatened by the city and the working class because they sensed how unstable and insecure their distance was from such work.

For numerous members of the poorest of the working class, the street was a better option than their dwelling places. Because the tenement blended interior and exterior, the street was not so

different from the dwelling; Klimasmith explains, “as the street becomes home, home comes to resemble the street” (102). According to Riis, in warm weather, “when life indoors is well-nigh unbearable with cooking, sleeping, and working, all crowded into the small rooms together, . . . the tenement expands, reckless of all restraint” (126). He also explains that “[w]hen the sun shines the entire population seeks the street” (50); like the mill workers in the earlier example, many of the working class preferred the street to their living conditions. At a time when architects and plan-book designers were campaigning for the separation of the home from anything public, these working-class dwellings had merged so much with the street that the outside public space was preferred over inner “privacy.” Speaking of the tenement dwellers, Riis writes, “Home to them is an empty name” (140). However, for really anyone outside of the middle-class ideal—whether of a race or ethnicity besides white European American, or outside the traditional married and family state, or without a husband able to sustain the family on his income alone—any dwelling place had to lack the separations of space and seclusion that marked the ideal home. Though numerous members of society deficient in those criteria longed for a home, home to them was an empty ideal; if they called their place “home,” by the middle-class definition, according to this ideal it was a meaningless designation.

Work

The houses of those excluded from the middle-class home corresponded directly to the work of their inhabitants. Many dwellers lived in the places they did because they could afford no better, given the work they could obtain. Others lived in their dwellings because they were located in convenience to work. For still others, that work took place within their habitations entirely. Regardless, particularly for the working class, work could not be separated from home.

Klimasmith argues that the “logic of separate spheres comes to resemble an ideology constructed to separate public from private precisely at the moment in which the city’s new organization of space was bringing private and public spaces together” (7). So, while the actual dwellings of the working and even middle class often brought the privacy of the home and the publicity of work together, the middle-class home worked to separate those spaces and make that disconnection seem natural. European-American middle-class married women’s work did generally follow this ideal, as much of their work existed in their homes and pertained mostly to the home instead of the world outside it. However, this designation is certainly specific. Single women, women of color, and working-class women all merged their homes with work out of necessity, especially as they not only lived in more public “homes” but also participated in more public work.

Middle-class women’s work

Most married women did work mainly in domestic duties in the home.⁶ According to the 1890 United States Census Bureau, approximately 95% of all married women were not gainfully employed (22).⁷ This census report breaks down these numbers based on race and ethnicity, and supposedly only 2% of white married women, whether foreign or native, were gainfully employed. However, approximately 22% of “colored” or black married women worked for pay, so these numbers obviously differed significantly based on race or ethnicity.⁸

For middle-class (white) women especially, Hareven explains that society viewed work outside of the home by these women as “inappropriate” (235). Interestingly, writers described the specific roles of women’s “housework” in different ways. Frank R. and Marian Stockton explain that “[n]eatness and industry, and good wholesome cooking and economy, all belong to housekeeping,” but housekeeping is really “the art of *making a home*” (99). Rayne further

explains women's work in relation to the home: "All is bright, clear, warm, happy, and it is all woman's invisible work" (230). Women's work makes the house a happy and idyllic home. Gilman's descriptions of women's household work are not idyllic, however. She explains in *The Home* (1903), "The cooking, service, and 'cleaning up' of ordinary meals, in a farmhouse, with the contributory processes of picking, sorting, peeling, washing, etc., and the extra time given to special baking, pickling, and preserving, take fully six hours a day" (95). This work would not include the necessary weekly activities, like laundry, cleaning, and sewing. Many women were able to have servants so that, ideally, "the mistress need do but little of the work herself," though she was certainly involved (Stockton and Stockton 106). Nor is her private sphere in any way private: "The mother—poor invaded soul—finds even the bathroom door no bar to hammering little hands. From parlour to kitchen, from cellar to garret, she is at the mercy of children, servants, tradesmen, and callers" (Gilman 40). Though writers vary on their depiction of married women's work within the home, depending on whether they uphold this ideal or reject it, society clearly expected married women's duties to remain "private" and centered on domestic space.

Work for these women was particularly "feminine" and domestic. In *Never Done*, Susan Strasser describes married women's duties as reproductive, as housewives served their society "in the literal sense of conceiving, bearing, and caring for children and in the broader one of preparing workers to go to work daily" (5). These women were directly invested in the home and only indirectly invested in the public work of other family members. Advice manual authors celebrated women's attention to close details within the home, possibly because these details showed that women had chosen to spend their time on private and domestic duties. Even when women completed their other work, Hartley advised them to avoid idleness. She suggests that a woman should spend her spare time on "fancy sewing" (214) that she does as "light work" for

gifts (not income) (215). Other advice manual authors celebrated the details that women had inserted in rooms, such as “houseplants and feminine needlework,” that indicated the depth of their investment in the home. These “feminine” details, as Katherine C. Grier suggests, “were symbolic representations of work that had long been assigned to women,” reinforcing the ideal of women’s bounded attention to this space (53). However, even middle-class married women participated in other types of work. Rayne suggests that women may choose to remain single and work independently to avoid a “lame offer” of marriage, or even that married women may choose to work because they “have no taste or strength for domestic work,” making it clear that even middle-class women, though probably not typically, did operate outside the ideal of the time (14). As Campbell and others show, middle-class women often took in boarders or even worked for “pin” or extra money that perhaps gave them more independence.⁹ However, for the most part, white middle-class married women’s work occurred in the non-public reproductive and feminine duties of domestic space.

“Other” women’s work

Still, the separation of public work from the home, as the essential demarcation of middle-class female respectability, required the labor of other, lower-class women. According to Baxandall et al., “Ladies relied on maids, seamstresses, laundresses, nannies, and cooks in their domestic lives” (84), even if one or two servants performed all of these roles. Like the isolated home, middle-class domestic work depended on the fact that this ideal only pertained to the middle class; numerous working-class women, even married, labored non-reproductively (or gainfully) throughout their lives. In 1870, according to the United States Census Bureau, there were approximately 1.8 million women wage-earners, a 19% increase from 1860 (Campbell,

Women 105). According to Campbell, from 1870 to 1880 the number of women workers increased by 64% (109) to approximately 2.6 million (107) and continued to increase into the twentieth century. By 1890, that number had already increased to 3.9 million (United States 22). Of the 2.6 million women wage-earners in 1880, approximately 2% worked in trade and transportation, 22% in agriculture, 24% in manufacturing, and 51% in professional and personal (including domestic) services (Campbell, *Women* 107).¹⁰ At this time, particularly as more non-married women continued to enter the work force, wages were dropping. Campbell explains that in 1893 the yearly wage for unskilled working women in New York averaged between \$3.50 and \$4 a week (*Women* 129).¹¹ Numerous women in the late nineteenth century clearly worked, thereby operating outside of the ideal for the middle-class housewife, and many of those who did work struggled to live on wages they could obtain.

There were several reasons labor and pay for women were so limited in the latter half of the nineteenth century. More women were “thrown upon their own resources” during the Civil War, and a surplus of women entered trades for which they had no training, as numerous trades had been previously monopolized by men (Campbell, *Women* 101). This surplus and the “general financial depression” of the time “brought the wage to its lowest terms.” These trades remained “open” for women following the war, though Baxandall et al. explain that many of the jobs available to women “involved tasks that were an extension of housework” and often kept them seen and treated as “marginal workers” (xxii-iii). Pay was automatically lower for women anyway, as bosses justified lower wages for them by assuming that they were a part of the middle-class ideal, choosing to believe either that “every woman who seeks work is the appendage of some man, and therefore, partially at least, supported,” or that when each woman gained the support of a man she would stop working (Campbell, *Women* 22). In the late

nineteenth century, women's wages "averaged 50 percent of men's" (Baxandall et al. xxiii). As one manager so aptly told Campbell when she asked him why he paid his workers so little: "[w]e give as high pay as anybody, and we don't give more because for every girl here there are a dozen waiting to take her place" (*Women* 174). Unfortunately, wages gradually continued to decrease during the rest of the nineteenth century, amidst further depressions and as the "incessant tide of foreign labor" came to America in search of work as well (194). According to Campbell, for these women, "Mere existence is to a large extent all that is possible" (*Women* 22). Riis adds, "There is scarce a branch of woman's work outside of the home in which wages, long since at low-water mark, have not fallen to the point of actual starvation" (186).

For such little pay, working-class women endured increasingly and unbelievably demanding conditions. If a woman was "respectably dressed" and able to provide a reference, she could generally gain regular work in a factory or large company that usually rendered better than minimum pay (Campbell, *Prisoners* 12). However, often women needed to work because of "the death or the evil habits" of their husbands, and in these cases they could not obtain the reference necessary for a better job. These women could mainly gain sewing work from middle-men or "sweaters," who paid much lower wages to make more profit for themselves. These sweaters generally "allowed," or forced, these women to work at home (to save themselves building costs), and it is this work in the tenements that so many prescriptive writers denounced as the source of society's ruin. Because these women received so little pay, they worked as many hours as possible and even often procured the help of their children to gain more income. According to Campbell, for a large number of the women she interviewed, children from ages four to eight were "valuable assistants" (*Prisoners* 200). One woman explained, "Jinny's the smartest. She could sew on buttons when she wasn't but much over four." Another woman details her

schedule: “It is fourteen hours efery [*sic*] day—yes, many time [*sic*] sixteen—we work and work. Then we fall on bed and sleep, and when we wake again it is work always” (105). According to Baxandall et al., women in general “were restricted to the worst jobs,” with 70% as domestic servants and four-fifths of the remainder in the garment trades (84). Though unions were developing for workers, white males fought to pass legislation that “protected” women and excluded them from higher paying jobs, “confining them in lower-paying (and also hazardous) sectors such as apparel and textile manufacture” (Amott and Matthaei 26). The harshness of working conditions and limited opportunities for women who had no other option further demonstrate both the exclusion of working women from the ideal of secluded womanhood and their inability to do anything about that exclusion.

Women of color and immigrant women faced much more difficult conditions finding substantive pay than white working women born in America.¹² Interestingly, Campbell equates the treatment of immigrants to African Americans: “The mass of illiterate, unenlightened emigrants . . . have fallen into the same category as the slaves, whose possession brought infinitely more degradation to owners than to owned” (*Prisoners* 253). As anti-slavery texts showed, slavery perverted slave owners and mistresses; to correlate slaves’ treatment with the treatment of paid workers suggests not only that immigrants and slaves faced similar conditions, but also that the American economic system was as corrupt as the earlier slave institution and that it degraded American society in comparable ways. Though the total amount of women workers was a low percentage of total women, both immigrant and African-American women worked significantly more outside the home than European-American women. For example, according to Amott and Matthaei, in 1900, “61 percent of single European immigrant women over the age of 10 were gainfully employed, compared to only 22 percent of single white women

with U.S.-born parents” (104).

However, though immigrant women received similar treatment to African Americans, that treatment was certainly not equal. Santamarina explains: “Black women occupied the narrowest range of occupational opportunity (narrower even than that of immigrant women) over longer periods of their lives than did white working women” (11). Because African-American men could not attain the jobs that paid enough to support their wives and families, women of color had almost no choice to be domestics, even if they were married; they had to work, and in the most menial ways (16). Amott and Matthaehi explain that these women were most likely to participate in paid work compared to all other women; in the 1890 census, an astonishingly greater number of African-American women worked regardless of marital status than any other race and ethnicity (United States 23).¹³ These women worked mainly as manual laborers and domestic servants because white owners and bosses excluded them from nearly all other work, potentially reinforcing the stereotype of black servitude. In comparison to other workers, immigrant and particularly African-American women faced conditions that made living up to the white middle-class concepts of the home and its work entirely impossible.

Working-class women’s work in the middle-class home further elucidates the contrasts between working-class and middle-class women. From the middle-class standpoint, domestic servants were ignorant, dishonest, and in need of training by the loving, superior, and ever-helpful mistress. Rayne explains, “Untrained peasants, direct from Europe, invade our homes, spoil our dinners, destroy our delicate china and bric-a-brac, and rule us with a rod of iron” (305). To her and many others, the middle-class housewife was a victim of this threatening servant, who brought foreignness and immorality into American homes. Hartley writes to her middle-class readers, “you will gain, perhaps, one servant out of twenty who will keep gross

imposition and gross immorality at bay” (234) and argues that the real “charity” towards these servants is to keep them “steadily to their duties,” for “[t]hey are a class of persons to whom much leisure is destruction” (240). Stowe laments that many New England girls choose “the mechanical toils of the factory” over the “more healthy, more cheerful, more interesting,” and “less monotonous” toil of the middle-class home, leaving domestic service “to a foreign population” because they did not want to be inferior to white mistresses (209). These women saw their homes as a means of training for the lower class and were puzzled that single women of their own class did not prefer the “healthier” work environment they could provide.

However, other sources presented another side to housework. In an interview with Campbell, a working girl, whose eyes had been too affected by the arsenic in fur sewing to be able to work outside domestic service, explains, “I’ve been in seven places in six years. I could have stayed in every one, an’ about every one I could tell you things that made it plain enough why a self-respecting girl would rather try something else” (*Prisoners* 146). Campbell adds, “domestic service is the cover for more licentiousness than can be found in any other trade in which women are at work” (234). Similarly, other girls explained why they preferred other forms of employment. One revealed, “It’s freedom that we want when the day’s work is done” (224). She adds, “You’re never sure that your soul’s your own except when you are out of the house.” For these girls, these middle-class homes signified a bondage that never ended; to fulfill the ideals associated with the home, middle-class women required these working girls’ *souls*. In her influential text *More Work for Mother*, Ruth Schwartz Cowan articulates, “The dark satanic mills did not look nearly so dark or nearly so satanic to young women who knew what it was like to work in some of America’s dark *satanic kitchens*” (124; emphasis added). In yet another way, the home becomes unrealistic, as the site of training in pure and moral behavior. Not only does

the middle-class home undoubtedly exclude the working girl and merely operate through her toils, but it is also possible that it actually threatened the moral development of the working-class laborers who entered its space.

Helen Campbell describes the process of a middle-class woman inspecting inexpensive garments for her family, made by working-class women. She explains, “as one woman selects, well pleased, garment after garment . . . marveling a little that a few dollars can give such lavish return, there arises, from narrow attic and dark, foul basement, and crowded factory, the cry of the women whose lifeblood is on these garments” (*Prisoners* 31). These garments, or any source of working women’s labor, are the symbol of the intersection between the ideal and the actual, the point that brings these separate “homes” and classes together. Though their work represents the difference between these women—the woman who buys these garments because she can and the women who have made them because they must—it also unites them in a transaction that cannot be ignored. Again, the consumption of the middle class and its constant reliance on the work of lower-class women demonstrate the extent to which the middle-class ideal of women’s work within the home was an exclusive façade.

Speech

In this study, I argue that speech lies at the center of this tenuous relationship between work and home. Generally, speech serves as a means of expression, a way to communicate one’s thoughts to others. However, through both the home and work, women’s speech was often limited, changed, or silenced based on society’s expectations or rules. This speech, then, directly relates to the agency or identity that a woman possesses or surrenders in the spaces she inhabits and/or works. For both middle-class and working-class women, speech was directly tied to

position; to remain in their positions in society, these women had to adapt their speech to fit the expectations surrounding them.

For middle-class women, society and advice manuals allowed a certain type of speech and suppressed and condemned others. For these women, politeness came first, over any other form of thought or expression; middle-class society expected a woman to mask or silence her true feelings or desired speech behind that screen of decorum. The home served as the source of this suppressed speech, as well as the origin of proper behavior. Hartley explains that politeness should be “the rule in the homeliest duties, and then it will set easily when in public, not in a stiff manner, like a garment seldom worn” (145). This same writer had advised earlier, “Let modesty and kind feeling govern your conversation, as other rules of life” (15). She writes similarly that a woman must “*talk with propriety*” (152). Hartley suggests that the middle-class woman should alter her speech to reflect modesty and propriety. Beecher and Stowe go a little further, saying, “*Perfect silence* is a safe resort, when such control can not be attained as enables a person to speak calmly” (164). Once again, within this ideal, propriety is far more important than personal expression; it is better to be silent than unladylike.

For middle-class women at this time, then, speech was directly tied to their position as ladies; to remain “proper,” they had to alter their speech, even to the point of silencing themselves if that speech threatened their polite and submissive roles. Gilman refers to the home and its rules as “limited areas of expression,” clearly viewing expression and honest voice as more important than this silencing domestic ideal (10). Mary Douglas remarks in her article “The Idea of a Home” that the home “censors speech. It has slots for different tones of voice, conversational topics, and even language. In the name of the community, referred to as ‘we’ or ‘everyone,’ neither shouting . . . nor whispering . . . is allowed” (278). In Douglas’s argument, the home

censors the speech of the individual in light of what the community wishes to hear; any language outside of that communal standard is silenced for the sake of the family. In the late nineteenth century, the home certainly performed this censure, to the point that advice manual authors saw middle-class women as needing to silence any personal expression beneath prescribed idyllic behavior and polite speech. According to these manuals, then, speech directly permitted or forfeited the possibilities for these women to embody the Victorian lady, a station that provided no outlet for truly personal and individual expression.

Working-class women's speech decided their position in other ways. One woman explains to Campbell, "You'd better not talk too much if you want to keep your place" (38). To this woman, proper speech, which in the working-class woman's position resembles silence, maintains employment, allowing her to keep her place as a working-class woman. Many women simply could not afford to talk. In several cases, Campbell interviews women who do not have the time to speak clearly to her. She explains as she interviews a sick girl who cannot afford to pause at her work: "The words came with gasps between. It was plain that what she had to tell must find a speedy listener if it was to be heard at all, but for that day at least the story must wait" (110). This woman does not have time to tell her story; her rushed flurry of words is the only means of expression she can give with the work she has. Similarly, after Campbell speaks to another woman, "The machine whirled on as she ended, to make up the time lost in her outburst" (134). Though this woman is able to speak temporarily, her speech is again altered by her lack of time, her expression bound by the compensation the machine can give. And the case continues: "There was no time for discussion. The machines must go on . . . and, strangely enough, in this house and in others of its kind inspected one after another, much the same story was told" (136). Campbell understands the story of these working women's struggles and can retell it, but it is the

machines that tell it amidst the silence of these women, a silence that demonstrates the extent to which they are tied to and controlled by their work. In “The Great Unexamined,” Lillian S. Robinson explains that “[w]orking-class experience not only silences those who live it, but silences the culture about class itself” (289), and Campbell clearly proves that much of the story of these women and their class as a whole has been silenced by the machine and the rigorous schedule they must adhere to in order to survive. Though in some of the novels I discuss, work does give certain female characters a voice and a means of expression, for many working-class women it is clear that their work has silenced them. The absence of speech is the only way they can maintain their positions and their pay.

Though in the discussions of work and home, working-class and middle-class women undergo markedly different experiences, in the case of speech their experiences are quite similar. In both of these classes, women must come to terms with society’s expectations and conditions particularly through their speech and the ways they choose to express themselves. In the novels I discuss, these women’s speech directly relates to the identities they are seeking to attain, identities that, like their speech, must operate outside of society’s ideals to be their own.

Chapters

Before discussing my chapters, I would briefly like to note the main characters in these novels. In *The Silent Partner* and *Work*, the female characters are of European-American race and ethnicity; in *Iola Leroy* the main characters are African Americans (or white/mulatto, but identify themselves as such) and freed slaves. Perley Kelso in *The Silent Partner* exists in the middle- to upper-class section of society, while Sip Garth labors as a mill worker and has always done so. Christie Devon, from *Work*, lived in the middle class but leaves it to join the working

class and gain her independence. Iola in *Iola Leroy* performs a similar action, though she began in the affluent class, was kidnapped as a slave, later returned to a middle-class lifestyle, and then ultimately chooses to join the working class to help other freed slaves. All of the main female characters are single and isolated from their parents, and therefore in need of their own labor in some way.

In Chapter One, I look at *The Silent Partner* (published in 1871). In this novel, Sip lives independently in the dampest room of a boarding house and works long, grueling hours in the mill, struggling to support herself and care for her deaf, mute sister Catty. She meets Perley, an upper-middle-class mill owner, and both serve to influence the other. When Perley realizes from Sip the actual living and working conditions of mill workers, she gains the agency to speak for these workers and use her home to help them. Similarly, when Sip receives the influences of a middle-class culture and home, combined with an inspiration from Catty, Sip gains the desire and ability to speak to her fellow workers as a preacher. Though Sip remains in her rented room and operates as a mill worker throughout the text, in some ways she transforms that room into a home, and both that home and the experience she gains from that labor empower her to preach to her fellow workers, calling them to moral and religious change. At the same time that Phelps reveals to her audience the harshness of these mill conditions, she also demonstrates the impact of these middle-class values on the working class through the influences of the proper home.

In Chapter Two, I discuss *Work* (1873). Unlike Sip who stays in her room, Christie leaves the home of her aunt and uncle and the prospect of a small-town marriage for the promise of independence and numerous work opportunities that all eventually fail. Christie moves through various spaces throughout the text, working inside and outside of homes in roles such as governess, seamstress, or companion that do not afford her a home of her own. Although Christie

does ultimately attain a husband (who dies) and a home, Alcott revises that space to include an egalitarian family of women who provide and care for each other. Empowered by this community of women and the experience she has gained as an isolated and working woman, Christie ultimately gains a promising future through speaking for working women as a women's rights activist. Alcott demonstrates the power of (her definition of) the true home as well as the need for women to labor productively.

In Chapter Three, I examine Harper's work *Iola Leroy* (1892). In this novel, Harper looks at the issues of race, slavery, and the home and the ways these intersect, particularly through the African-American women in her text who attain homes after the Civil War. The homes that Iola Leroy, Aunt Linda, and Marie finally gain are representations of the freedom they have long deserved and earned. For them, home exemplifies the freedom to work for oneself and speak freely and openly with the autonomy that a personal space provides. However, as Iola Leroy learns when she searches for work and independent living, homes also serve as the symbol of racial and social boundaries, as black women cannot enter the neighborhoods or boarding houses in which white women reside. Iola ultimately does gain a home through embracing her black identity and a purpose through labor centered around speaking to and educating black children and mothers, what Harper calls uplifting their homes. She and other characters speak for the uplift of the race through the teaching of moral (middle-class) values and behavior, as Harper expresses the need to educate and elevate African Americans so that white American society will be more willing to accept them.

Based on the work they must do and the speech they can or cannot articulate in their domestic spaces, I aim to paint a picture of the homes, or houses, these women *can* inhabit and compare them to the ones reformers of the time say they *should*, to discuss the significance of the

revisions these female authors provide. Phelps, Alcott, and Harper use their characters' labor to modify notions of their homes because their labor empowers them to possess something beyond just that home. Ultimately, as demonstrated by the abilities these women gain to speak publicly to and for workers, these authors reveal that though the homes for these women do provide a source of identity, community, and belonging, their labor cannot be separated from that home; both their home and their work combine to develop these women into the recognition of their nobler missions.

Notes to Introduction

¹ From 1850 to 1920, 30 million immigrants inundated the United States from southern and eastern Europe alone (Amott and Matthaei 110).

² Glenna Matthews argues that the post-Revolutionary War ideology of Republican Motherhood was “[p]erhaps the most important factor in elevating the status of the home” and valuing the woman’s role within that space (6). Although I see the elevation of the home as resulting to a great extent from social threats relating to the city at this time, as both Clark and Klimasmith argue, this nationalist mindset certainly also played a significant role.

³ Numerous feminist scholars have suggested that the twentieth-century notions of public and private spheres were actually not so pronounced and decisive in the nineteenth century. In *No More Separate Spheres*, for example, Cathy Davidson argues that “a generation of women historians who felt marginalized by the neglect of women’s history used the separate spheres metaphor to write about neglected women of a previous century” (10). Although in the nineteenth century middle-class men typically worked outside the home while middle-class women who were wives and mothers supposedly worked inside it instead, Lora Romero argues that the expectations placed on domesticity actually provided “middle-class women [with] a surprising amount of mobility,” as “[w]omen could argue that they continued to embody domesticity even when they left home” (25). However, because some writers of the time, like Beecher and Stowe, specifically advocate that the wife and mother remain in the home and fulfill her duties there, I do not want to ignore the fact that this public/private sphere ideology was probably pervasive at the time, though perhaps less distinct than we may think today. Still, some nineteenth-century writers did speak against women’s seclusion. See E. B. Duffey 316-20 for her discussion on the need for a “fully-developed woman,” in response to the ideal that the woman remain solely in the home (320). Similarly, see Martha Louise Rayne’s *What Can a Woman Do* (1893) as a description of different areas of work possible for a middle-class woman; Rayne declares that a woman who remains always at home “is apt to become morbid and introspective” (482).

⁴ Because of the resulting elevation of women’s domestic roles, numerous advice manual writers advocated women’s education in household affairs so that they could authoritatively and knowledgeably oversee their (stereotypically incompetent) servants, if not do the work themselves. As Frank R. and Marian Stockton suggest of the middle-class woman in their work *The Home* (1872), “The servants are her hands, but she must think for them, and this is no light task. And then, too, there is the constant oversight of everything” (106). These writers show that the woman, as well as the man, held specific roles concerning the home, and that the woman’s roles were seen as particularly crucial to the continuation of the middle-class ideals and the flow of duties in that space.

⁵ Wheeler actually suggests that “respectable families of limited means” should establish themselves in a tenement house “suited” for them, emphasizing the “[p]erfect separation of each dwelling” and the “separate conveniences” for each family (301). However, typical tenements in no way resembled his description; the fact that the model he suggests is “suited” for respectability suggests again that it is limited to those who can afford such modifications.

⁶ For a study on housework specifically, see Ruth Schwartz Cowan’s highly influential text *More Work for Mother* as an initial source for the critical discussions that follow.

⁷ Although this number is the closest possibility to an accurate national figure, it is certainly higher than actual numbers, especially because certain types of work were not considered gainful

employment. For instance, Campbell explains that the 1870 census could not accurately consider domestic service in its figures (*Women* 104). Other forms of work not considered included taking in boarders or possibly even working for extra money, and numerous women pursued both of these avenues for additional income. For perspective, in contrast to 5% of married women (though again these numbers varied extensively based on race and ethnicity), divorced working women made up 50% of divorced women, and working single or widowed averaged about 30% of each respective total.

⁸ Persons who received the “colored” demarcation are of interesting races and ethnicities. According to this census report, the Census Bureau is considering coloreds as those “of negro descent, Chinese, Japanese, [or] civilized Indians” (United States 23).

⁹ So many middle-class women living in the country worked for pin money, in fact, that, because they would take the work at any price, they served to lower the wages for working-class women who needed that work to survive (Campbell, *Prisoners* 12).

¹⁰ These numbers are obviously general, and as Amott and Matthaei make clearly evident, these percentages differed greatly based on race and ethnicity.

¹¹ This number was extremely low for a woman to live on, though not the lowest. In the sweating-system of the sewing industry, in which women worked for middle-men called “sweaters,” wages sometimes fell between \$2.50 and \$3 a week, if not less (Campbell, *Women* 130), and shop-girls were sometimes paid \$1.50 a week (131). Factory work supposedly paid an average of \$7.50 a week (132), while moderately trained labor received between \$8 and \$12 a week in contrast (21). The total average for working women in New York was \$5.85, which was higher than both Boston (\$5.64) and Philadelphia (\$5.34) (132). In perspective, Riis explains that, particularly in the tenements, rent “was never less than one week’s wages out of four” (124). Similarly, from her interviews, Campbell shows that the average cost of food for many women workers for “baker’s bread, tea, sugar, and a little milk, and butter and a bit of meat once or twice a week,” was ninety cents per week, a price that women receiving such low wages could barely afford (122).

¹² I am mainly focusing on African-American and European-American immigrant women because they pertain most to my study. However, see Amott and Matthaei for a more in-depth discussion of the work of other races and ethnicities in America.

¹³ Of single black women, 42% were gainfully employed, compared to 58% of “colored” (including African-American, Chinese, Japanese, and Native-American) women, 31% of white women with foreign parents, and only 18% of white women with native parents. A remarkable 22% of married black women worked, while only 3% of “colored” women and white women with foreign parents, and 2% of white women with native parents, did so. Similarly, 63% of African-American widowed women were gainfully employed, compared to 21% of “colored” women, 30% of second-generation white immigrant women, and 29% of native white women. Lastly, an unbelievable 80% of divorced African-American women labored for pay, at the same time that 45% of “colored” women, 48% of white women with foreign parents, and 43% of white women with native parents did so (United States 23).

“Something Has Happened”: *The Silent Partner* and the Power of the Middle-Class Home

In *The Silent Partner*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps reveals the power of the middle-class home combined with labor for women. Both female protagonists, Sip and Perley, gain agency, as exemplified through their ability to speak publicly for social and moral reform, through the development of their homes and labor opportunities through the novel. While Perley already has an elaborate, luxurious home from the beginning, she learns from Sip how empty and purposeless her life has been without labor and begins to speak for the social reform of the workers. In contrast, Sip has always labored in the mills, but she gains her ability to speak in a new type of work through Perley's influences and middle-class culture. Though Phelps endorses the homes of these women, she also shows them to reject the typical conventions of that space as they refuse marriage prospects because they, through their labor, can function without them. Their altered homes, combined with their labor, serve to empower these women.

The Silent Partner focuses on the story of Perley Kelso, an upper-middle-class young woman who, after suffering the death of her father, finds a purpose in life by working to ameliorate the mill workers' social conditions. In this process, she breaks an engagement, refuses another proposal, and independently creates an environment that introduces the mill workers to the culture of her class. Phelps intertwines Perley's story with that of Sip Garth's, one of the mill workers. Sip cares for her deaf, dumb, mute, and eventually blind sister, who drowns, while working long and strenuous hours. Through Perley's middle-class influences, Sip comes to represent the ability of the home to transform the workers. She also refuses a marriage proposal and ultimately gains her purpose in preaching to the workers, calling them to moral reform.

The Home

In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps uses the homes of her characters first to demonstrate the limitations society places on them. According to Gwendolyn Wright, “‘Home’ is both an imposed ideal and a potent cultural, as well as individual, ideal” (*Prescribing* 219-20). For Sip, the other mill workers, and Perley, the homes available to them initially operate under this first concept, an imposition by society. The various homes of working-class characters reveal the extent to which that ideal of “home” is exclusive and utterly empty, as their homes are filled, instead of with idealized love and cleanliness, with dampness, stagnation, and smells. Sip, independently working and caring for her deaf and dumb sister Catty, throughout the text lives in “a damp house, and she rents the dampest room in it” (Phelps 79). Her room is “a tenement boasting of the width of the house, and a closet bedroom with a little cupboard window in it; a low room with cellar smells and drain smells and with unclassified smells of years settled and settling in its walls and ceiling” (79). Sip calls this room “miserable” (192), and the narrator agrees, who also calls it “forlorn,” “never . . . cheerful” (79), and even “sodden” (279). Through her focus on dampness and smell specifically, Phelps makes it clear that this room, as well as other mill workers’ residences like it, is an undesirable and unhealthy living space that encloses and limits rather than uplifts and improves.

Phelps also details the living conditions of other mill workers and shows their experiences to be no different. As Perley becomes more aware of the mill workers’ treatment, she vows to see where others live as well. She follows an 8-year-old boy, Bub Mell, who works in the mills, smokes, and chews tobacco, home to his tenement. This tenement consists of two rooms, one filled with a sick woman, the other with “six children, a cooking-stove, a bed, a table, and a man with stooped shoulders,” both rooms damp and putrid like Sip’s abode (106). Mr. Mell explains

that the smell comes from the spring floods and the lack of a drain, making his “home” “a kind of a fretful place” in which none of his children wish to remain (109). Similarly, Perley visits the company boarding house and is also horrified by the conditions she witnesses there, asking Sip (who is not surprised), “Do the girls often sleep six in a room? They had no wash-stands. I saw some basins set on trunks. . . . There wasn’t a ventilator in the house” (92). Prescriptive writers like Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe devoted chapters to the importance of ventilation and healthy air in the home; they felt that stagnant air was one of the most unhealthy conditions one could have. Not surprisingly, Perley, who has probably lived in a spotless environment all her life, cannot comprehend why these girls would remain in such unhealthy and crowded circumstances, and she certainly does not understand when Sip informs her that the girls remain because board is 25 cents cheaper there than elsewhere. In these examples of residences, Phelps demonstrates that the dampness, smells, and stagnation are signs that these living spaces are the height of uncleanness.

Comparing Phelps’s work to the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics Report on which Phelps based her conditions, William Lynn Watson explains that both texts highlight “damp interiors” and the issues of water and stagnation (18). He suggests that “[t]he particular metaphor of ‘stagnation’—with its connotations of wetness and impurity—and the fear of social eclipse it represents,” pervade both texts (9). However, Phelps also demonstrates that these horrid conditions result not from the dangers of the lower class but from the apathy of the upper class, who do not care to install drains or ventilation systems or build housing in places that do not flood. Indeed, Perley comes to realize that many of the “homes” she sees belong to her fiancé and mill owner Maverick Hayle, who entirely ignores such “impurities” because he can. Phelps is critiquing this upper-class exploitation of these workers, showing that these owners have found

another way to victimize them, through the atrocities of their “homes.”

When Perley first meets Sip on the street, she tells the worker she had better go home, and Sip laughs and explodes, “Wait till *you*’ve been working on your feet all day, and wait till *you* live where *I* live, before you know whether I had so much better go home!” (Phelps 24). For Sip and many other mill workers, their homes (or “houses,” she calls them later) represent the bondage in which they live and work, and so they would rather not “go home” after long hours in the mill. Home is not a refuge from the threats of the street; it is a reminder of their oppression. As Jacob Riis and Perley are horrified to note, for these workers living in awful conditions, the street’s openness and entertainment are far more desirable than their living spaces. Sip refers to factory folks as “[w]anderers” and adds, “We’re a restless set” (44). She explains to Perley why so many young girls are out on the streets: “You can’t keep still. You run about. You’re in and out. You’ve got so used to a noise” (117). Their labor has made these workers, whose only identity is in their wandering, restless. They cannot tolerate the confinement that their dwellings represent.

However, these homes do not only represent these workers’ bondage and labor; for working women, especially, they also promise more work. Sip’s home signifies the work she must still do in the evenings “after [she has] stood eleven hours and a half at [her] loom” (90). She explains her extra work to an incredulous Perley who ignorantly asks, “What work?” Sip replies, “Washing. Ironing. Baking. Sweeping. Dusting. Sewing. Marketing. Pumping. Scrubbing. Scouring.” For Sip, this “home” is merely a reminder of the work that she cannot avoid. And the same is true for other mill workers. When Sip tells Nynee Mell, one of Bub’s sisters, to go home because “it is better than this” (the boy she is hanging around), Nynee echoes Sip’s earlier response: “It frets me so, to go home! . . . I hate to go home” (122). In his conversation with Perley earlier, Mr. Mell explains most likely why she dreads returning home: “he kept the gell

[girl] home to look after 'em; not the first gell [Nynee]; he couldn't keep her to home at all; she made seven; he didn't know's he blamed her" (108-09). Like Sip, to Nynee home represents the work she is expected to do, having to care for six other children and probably also her sick mother. Tamara K. Hareven offers a suggestion for why so many mill workers (and particularly, in this case, women) sought the streets instead of their domestic space, explaining, "In working-class homes there was little separation between domestic life and work life. The world of work spilled over into the household" (249). For these mill workers, the home merges with the burden of work, causing even more labor for its exhausted inhabitants. The actual "homes" of these mill workers serve as the antithesis to the isolated oasis prescriptivists praised the home for being.

Though Perley's home differs extensively from the supposed homes of these workers, representing the ideal to which their dwellings are compared, Phelps shows that Perley's residence places other limitations on her. As Susan Albertine points out in "Breaking the Silent Partnership," the novel begins "with a scene of confinement—Perley sitting quietly in her father's library with her hands folded in her lap" (242). She sits peacefully and passively within her home, a clear representation or "type of her class and sex" (Lang 272). As a stereotypical upper-middle-class woman, Perley does not need to work in any way, but she also lacks personality and purpose. Her house is described as "lofty, luxurious" (Phelps 126), "grand" (239), "and superb" (236), yet all she initially does within it in a morning is "sit by the fire and order dinner" (40). When she discovers at the beginning of the novel that her father has been suddenly killed, Perley asks Maverick and his father if she can become a business partner in the mill company in place of her father, probably to have something to do. Both men laugh at her ignorance and allow her to be a "silent partner" (60). In his typical condescending manner, Maverick informs Perley, "I do not see but this would meet your fancy perfectly," "[e]specially

if you are going to marry into the firm” (60). He adds, “A woman’s influence, you know; you’ve heard of it” (61). Though her home represents a life of clean, organized, non-laboring luxury, in contrast to the mill workers’ lives, it also indicates the place society has allotted her. She cannot engage in business or more public, non-social engagements, and her only influence occurs (theoretically) through marriage. Her home signifies her place but also keeps her from really *doing* anything.

However, as Wright said earlier, the home serves not only as a social imposition but also as a “potent” cultural and individual ideal (220). Although the homes of these women certainly confine and limit their agency and autonomy, Phelps shows that they can also serve as sites of empowerment and community when used appropriately. In fact, the home comes to serve, for Sip, as the representation of the possibility for middle-class cultural elevation, and, for Perley, as the disseminator of such influence when combined with labor. Sip, particularly through Perley’s middle-class influence but also even before she meets Perley, embraces the values surrounding the home that prescriptivists show to be middle-class ideals. To her, home represents safety, moral development, and isolation. She attempts to create cleanliness and order in her home as a contrast to the dirt produced in the mills. She obsessively desires cleanliness, particularly in Perley’s presence, even though Phelps makes it entirely clear that she cannot ever actually be clean because of the griminess of her work and the dampness of her rooms. When Perley comes to visit her tenement, Sip tells her, “See how dirty I am,” though Perley dishonestly tells that she “hadn’t seen” (Phelps 80). Though Perley ignores it, Sip knows she is filthy: “There was dust about Sip, and oil about her, and a consciousness of both about her, that gave her a more miserable aspect than either” (81). Though the stereotype of the working class was that they were always dirty, living in residences filled with poverty and disease, Sip desires to be clean,

adopting a more middle-class notion. When Catty enters and sits down to eat “without washing her face,” Sip is extremely troubled, and Phelps demonstrates the difference between her and the workers who would not concern themselves with a clean appearance (89). However, ultimately, such a feat is impossible for a mill girl, as Sip tells Perley, “We can’t help it, you see . . . mill-folks can’t” (81). They will always be dirty. She says this as she resembles “a half-cleared Pompeian statue.” Regardless of her intentions and desires, Sip’s work is enough to keep her from ever actually attaining the clean standards of the middle class.

Sip also conforms to ideals of this higher class in other ways, such as order and morality. When Perley visits, Sip invites her to “tea,” which consists of her and Catty’s dinner of bread dipped in molasses (82). This meal cannot even bear the semblance of tea, but Sip extends the invitation in the attempt to imitate more middle-class behavior. Similarly, she attempts to establish order in her home through her work of washing, ironing, sewing, scrubbing, and so on, performing the “self-sacrificing [labor]” that Beecher and Stowe explicitly describe, even though her rooms never become less damp or more peaceful (24). Sip also upholds the moral values of the middle class. Interestingly, when she sends Nynee Mell home, she responds the same way Perley had responded to her when they first met. When Perley found out that Sip was headed for the theater, she told her, “It’s no place for you. . . . You had so much better go home” (Phelps 24). When Sip realizes that Nynee would be staying out late with a man who would lead her astray, she tells her, “I want you to go home, Nynee Mell” and sends her home with a friend (122). Sip tells Perley that she wants to keep Nynee from eventually “go[ing] to the devil,” clearly equating morality with sexual purity and wishing it for the other female workers. Significantly, she sees home as a refuge from sexual dangers and immoral practices. Likewise, she longs to keep Catty home because Catty runs about the streets, drinks, and sometimes

“does—worse,” using the home again as a protection from sexual and altogether wicked influences (84). She upholds a morality that numerous prescriptivists such as Hartley seem to think cannot belong to the working class and its “immoralit[ies]” (234). Indeed, Sip cries to Perley later in the novel, “But I’ve tried to be good! . . . I know I’m rough, but I’ve tried to be a good girl!” (Phelps 202). For Phelps, Sip demonstrates to readers that working-class women can internalize orderly, hygienic, and especially moral values, even if they may not be able to attain these stereotypical expectations because of their working identities and conditions.

Sip most clearly demonstrates her adoption of the middle-class belief of the power of the home through her attempts to keep Catty inside. She fears the times Catty comes home late, a sign both that Sip has not succeeded in creating a “home” for her sister but also that Catty does not care to share her values. When Perley visits Sip, Catty has not returned from work. As the affluent woman speaks, Sip hears a noise and exclaims, “Hush! . . . I thought I heard—” (82). She goes to the window and returns with a disappointed face, explaining nervously, “Catty hasn’t come in.” When Catty does arrive, Sip’s demeanor changes entirely, because it means that at least temporarily Catty will remain at home. She tells her sister, “See how pleasant it is to come home early, Catty” (87). She adds, “For love’s sake and my sake, and with the lamp and fire bright. So much better . . . Better than the dark street-corners, Catty.” Sip does everything she can to create a home for her sister, trying to produce a desirable atmosphere of community, love, and warmth that the streets and its pleasures cannot offer. She cooks and provides for her sister, trying to make her happy, and, most importantly, keep her there. When Catty ultimately becomes blind from previous work, Sip mourns, “The poor eyes that I tried to keep at home, and safe, and would have died for, if they need never, never have looked upon an evil thing!” (192). Ultimately, Catty dies in a flood, and, interestingly, Sip’s home becomes even more meaningful

because Sip now sees herself as being able to always keep and protect her sister there. Phelps explains of that first evening, when Sip's friend Dirk decides not to enter, "They did not want him—she and Catty—that night" (279). Because her home partially represented a place of safety to keep Catty from the dangers of the street, this night is meaningful because Sip has finally (figuratively) attained this space. Realistically, though, Catty dies because she refuses to stay at home when Sip tells her to do so; the attainment of Sip's ideal home does not prove possible for working-class people. Still, Phelps shows Sip to be a malleable and potentially refinable character because she subscribes to these ideals.

Because Sip already holds to these values of cleanliness, morality, and the warmth and appeal of the home, she is the perfect candidate for Perley's middle-class influence. Sip shows the ability to recognize and appreciate beauty and art, even though she has never come in contact with these concepts before. When she walks into Perley's house for the first time, she exclaims, "I never knew in all my life how grand a room could be till I come into this grand room to-night" (128). She immediately appreciates and delights in this beauty. Interestingly, when Perley asks what she would do if this room were hers, Sip desires to share it with the other mill folk. She tells Perley, "I'd bring Nynee Mell in to spend an evening!" (129). Sip automatically recognizes the power of this room to influence and transform characters, so that as soon as she perceives this refinement she wishes to spread it around her. In a way, then, this one statement encompasses all of Perley's and Sip's disseminating actions. Phelps makes it clear that Sip could become just as refined as Perley if she were educated in culture and refinement. When Sip mourns for Catty's loss of her eyes, she mourns especially that Catty could not see anything beautiful. She explains that for Catty's eyes "I would have hunted the world over, if I could, to find pretty things for, and pleasant things and good things," but, instead, she never had anything but her "miserable little

room” that Catty’s eyes got so tired of seeing (192). Phelps shows that Sip can appreciate this beauty and that she even longs for and desires to share it, though she cannot attain it on her own.

However, with Perley’s help and middle-class influence, Sip and the other mill workers, and the implication is that even their homes, can become transformed. In Perley’s home, Sip observes a picture of Beethoven and becomes transfixed. She describes the picture as “a dreaming Beethoven overwhelmed by sounds he can’t control” and instantly relates to it (Malpezzi 17). She exclaims, “That’s the way things come to me; things I could do, things I could say, things I could get rid of if I had the chance” (Phelps 130). But, of course, as a mill girl, “I never have the chance.” Because Sip is so enamored with this picture, Perley hangs it in Sip’s kitchen, and, for Sip, “what a strangeness and a forgetting it makes about the room” (151). Like Perley’s influence and the effect of her home, this picture changes these rooms for Sip, making them more resemble the home she wants to have. This is a pretty, pleasant, and good thing that she is actually able to possess. Phelps explains, “She took a world of curious comfort out of that picture” (195), even talking to it “by the hour” (194). Sip expounds upon this comfort: “Sometimes now, when Catty is so bad [blind] . . . there’s music comes out of that picture all about the room” (196). She adds, “Sometimes when the floor’s all sloppy and I have to wash up after work, I hear ’em playing over the dirt. It sounds so clean!” For Sip, this picture creates for her what she otherwise cannot have: a clean house, a home filled with music and peace, and a portion of culture that provides such a contrast to everyday work experience. Phelps shows her (middle-class) readers that an introduction to culture and beauty can alter the perspective and dwellings of these working-class women.

The only hopeful influence these mill workers receive is through Perley, who slowly learns from Sip the reality of their conditions and the need for their education and improvement. After

she visits Sip's house and sees how a mill girl actually lives, her perspective entirely changes, and she sees her home and her existence differently. When Perley leaves Sip's house, Phelps explains that "[s]he felt like a stranger setting foot in a strange land" (98). Though she possesses the affluent home, she becomes the stranger, as if her home loses its significance and she loses her belonging within it. Phelps continues, "Old, home-like boundary lines of things of which her smooth young life had rounded, wavered before her." For this young woman, home has existed as a boundary that has prohibited the knowledge of these conditions, leaving her ignorant, content, and passive. However, by glimpsing life in these other houses, Perley gains the agency to step beyond the boundary lines of her home and actually become active and influential. It is when she returns to her home that evening that she reacts so strongly in her parlor, shouting to Sip, "You do not understand . . . you people who work and suffer, how it is with us! We are born in a dream, I tell you! Look at these rooms!" (127). Perley's home represents the dream in which she has been kept to live; with this new knowledge she views her home and her life quite differently.

With the realization of the needs of the workers, Perley adapts the space of her home and uses it for different purposes that uplift them. She hosts soirees or cultural parties for the mill folk there, in which they "always manage to accomplish something" cultural, whether it be a Hugo, Burns, or Dickens reading, for example (228). Perley introduces these workers to middle-class culture through literature, music—she even plays Beethoven for them on the piano—and art, and the mill characters become transformed within this environment. Phelps tells us, "The same faces at their looms to-morrow you could not identify"; in fact, they show little difference from people "collect[ed] at a *musicale*" (226). When other middle-class women ask Perley how she brought about such change, she replies, "They have brought themselves about. All that I do is to treat

these people precisely as I treat you, Miss Van Doozle” (227). To Phelps, Perley’s acts of treating the mill folk as members of the middle class, introducing them to middle-class culture and bringing them into her upper-middle-class home, empower these workers to better themselves. By bringing these workers into Perley’s home, especially, Phelps demonstrates the Victorian notion that the “house *itself* shaped the character of its inhabitants” and brought about such alterations (McDannell 164). Put another way, Riis declares that “you cannot expect to find an inner man to appeal to in the worst tenement-house surroundings. You must first put the man where he can respect himself” (209). The workers can only change their character and behavior if first introduced to better residences and a more refining atmosphere. Wendy B. Sharer specifically connects this concept to nineteenth century theories of rhetoric that suggested that exposure to “high culture” would alleviate the “plight of the working class” (n.p.). Phelps shows that these characters transform easily, if given the opportunity, implying that her readers should take it upon themselves to provide the homes and culture necessary to allow such transformations to occur. Though Perley’s home was the means of her ignorance and containment at the beginning of the novel, it now serves as the source of her newly developing activism and agency, a way to actually make a difference in the workers’ (cultural) lives.

However, at the same time that Phelps shows the home to empower these women, she alters the typical definition of the home by allowing Sip and Perley to remain in their *own* homes through the independence of their labor. Towards the end of the novel, both women, as exceptions to the female characters around them, ultimately abandon the typical homes offered them through marriage proposals, preferring to keep their own spaces instead. When Dirk, a young mill worker whom Sip likes, proposes to her, Sip refuses, telling him, “I’ll not marry anybody. Maybe it isn’t the way a girl had ought to feel when she likes a young fellow . . . But

we don't live down here so's to make girls grow up like girls should, it seems to me" (Phelps 287). She continually says that mill workers can never get out of the cycle of factory work, and she refuses to "bring a child into the world to work in the mills." To Dirk, marriage offers a sense of relief and some happiness, as he responds, "But other folks don't take it so . . . Other folks marry, and have their homes and the comfort of 'em" (288). For Dirk, marriage, home, and children provide comfort because, as a man, they offer him the notions of ownership and possession that he lacks in his work. To Sip and other working women, however, this home and its duties promise only work, the confinement and the endless repetition of factory struggle and mistreatment. Though her rejection of this womanly role is what Amy Shrager Lang terms "unnatural," so are her living and working conditions (274); they are the cause of her decision to abandon that ideal.

Perley responds in a similar fashion. Though she rejects Maverick's hand early in the novel when she realizes she no longer loves him and gains the ability to say it, she also rejects the proposal of Stephen Garrick, a mill hand who worked his way up into a partnership position (the position she actually requested) and who also desires to help the mill workers. As Perley considers the prospect of marriage, the narrator informs us how much she has changed from the stereotypical woman of the time: "Possible wifehood was no longer an alluring dream. . . . No bounding impulse cried within her: That is happiness! There is rest!" (Phelps 261). This woman no longer desires a husband. She even tells Garrick, "I do not need you now. Women talk of loneliness. I am not lonely. They are sick and homeless. I am neither." Perley possesses her own home, and as seen through her soirees, she has altered its purpose and her roles within it. She explains later that to accept marriage would to become another silent partner, established back within the ideal roles of the home, and she is not ready to accept such confinement again. For

both Sip and Perley, these marriage offers represent the part of the home they are not willing to accept. Instead, their labor and the purpose they find there to help others “propel them out of the home and into the world” (Lang 280), at the same time that they retain the space of their own homes that empowers such a move.

Work

In *The Silent Partner*, Phelps provides detailed descriptions of the labor available to women mill workers, critiquing their present conditions and the apathy of the upper class. Though labor combined with the home ultimately provides a liberating space for Sip and Perley, in which they gain the purpose of imparting moral and cultural values to the workers, labor by itself, particularly for the working-class women, proves to be extremely binding and in fact silencing. Through Sip and other mill workers’ experiences, Phelps shows the mill workers to be cruelly and permanently altered and bound by their work. Numerous workers emit “a peculiar, dry, rasping cough,” termed the “cotton-cough” because they receive it from working in the cotton mills (Phelps 82). Cotton weavers “[look] like beautiful moving corpses,” with “bleached yellow faces” and “bright eyes” (119). Sip informs a horrified Perley, “You can tell a weaver by the skin.” Similarly, when Sip returns from her weaving each night, she complains of “a dreadful sore-throat” (81). She explains: “I have it generally. It comes from sucking filling through the shuttle. But I don’t think much of it.” In all cases, these female workers have received marked physical defects from their labor as a tangible sign of the cruelties that such employment imposes on them. As the most vivid representation of this abuse, Phelps introduces Catty, Sip’s sister, who was born deaf, “queer and dumb,” and becomes blind as well from a disease acquired by wool-picking (51). Phelps suggests that Catty is the product of her mother’s forced labor, who

was made to work fourteen hours a day directly prior to Catty's birth. Sip and Catty are orphans, as their mother was killed from similar treatment with another child and "father he died of the gearing," caught in the machinery of the mills (50). As Phelps shows, these workers are entirely changed by their cruel conditions, victims to the machinery of their labor.

Sip also makes it quite clear that the workers cannot change their state. Catty, as a "type of the world from which she sprang," ultimately drowns in a flood because she has no way of knowing how to reach safety (278). Phelps writes that Catty represents "the world of exhausted and corrupted body, of exhausted and corrupted brain, of exhausted and corrupted soul, the world of the laboring poor as man has made it." And her point is clear; without help, these workers are drowning. Perley tries to provide Sip with other employment, telling Garrick, "It is not a girl to spend life in weaving cotton" (197). However, Sip constantly repeats the idea that a worker can never escape the mills. She exclaims, "How many folks I've seen try to get out of the mills! They always came back" (147). At Perley's request, she tries other work, but quickly returns to the mills, saying, "I can weave, that's all" (199). She adds, "I'm used to the noise and the running about. I'm used to the dirt and the roughness" (199-200). Both Sip and Catty demonstrate the endless cycle by which these workers live and die, from which they cannot escape on their own because the mills have made them the way they are. However, Phelps intends for her readers to help them. In the beginning of the novel, she explains her purpose in providing these descriptions to the reader: "I believe that a wide-spread ignorance exists among us regarding the abuses of our factory system" (v). By providing these realistic details, Phelps wishes to combat that ignorance—such as Maverick's inaccurate description to Perley of the people in her mills, "a well-paid, well-cared-for, happy set of laboring people as you could ask to see" (64)—and, as Lang specifies, to prompt manufacturers "to ameliorate the lot of their

employees” (270). Though the workers cannot escape the horrific conditions of their labor and its disastrous effects on them, Phelps intends for the mill owners and producers to do something about those conditions.

In a way, she wishes for these manufacturers to take on a similar role to Perley, who as soon as she learns of the actual conditions of the mills begins working to reform them. At the same time that she gains the empowerment to alter the space of her home, Perley also gains the ability to extend beyond its space and help the workers in other ways. She “moves freely” through the streets, doing what she can for these people, though she, as a woman and silent partner, cannot actually alter their conditions (Albertine 242). She vows to set up a library, “relief societies, and half-time schools, and lectures, and reading-rooms, tenement-houses fit to be lived in, and even more” (Phelps 133), all to “enrich the dismal lives of the mill workers” (Sharer, n.p.). Perley even attends the new chapel that Garrick built with the mill girls, providing an upright example of morality for them to follow. This woman brings a “tide of respectability” to these workers, providing them with the opportunity to learn and better themselves on numerous levels (Phelps 251). When Sip enters her tenement the evening that Perley has “tea” with her, Perley has changed the “forlorn little room” into a welcoming environment (79). Phelps explains, “Something has happened to the forlorn little room to-night. . . . A fire has happened, and the kerosene lamp has happened, and drawn curtains have happened.” Perley tells Sip, “the room was dark and so I took the liberty” (80). Based on the experiences Perley gains from Sip and the other mill workers, she realizes that her purpose lies at least partially outside of her home, in transforming and lightening the workers’ dark and forlorn lives. Phelps is demonstrating that Perley’s investment in these workers, and her readers’ as well, can vastly alter their conditions.

However, numerous scholars point out that Perley’s labor is neither beneficial nor actually

non-domestic, as she tries to fit the workers to middle-class standards and silences their actual needs, furthering the purposes of the upper-class, mill-owning men. According to Watson, Perley performs the actions of a “true woman,” “influenc[ing] public affairs through the example of morality and goodness she set[s]” (21-22n5). She enacts what Albertine calls “social housekeeping” (244), edifying, nursing, converting (Lang 281), and attempting to alleviate the plight of the workers by exposing them to art and beauty (Sharer, n.p.). Although Perley participates in “earnest work, work misunderstood, neglected, discouraging, hopeless, thankless,” she does not do anything to actually improve the conditions of the mills (Phelps 256); she focuses on more domestic, “womanly” issues instead. Though operating and laboring in public, Perley still embodies and teaches “some of the traditional domestic virtues” (Ward 214). Sip, likewise, does not alter conditions for the mill workers either. Gaining inspiration from Perley she offers workers a “poor folks’ religion” to reform their souls rather than their work environments (Phelps 296). Though at the end of the text these women as individuals are speaking powerfully for reform, it is a domestic reform that Phelps feels they have the authority to instigate. The workers are basically just as bound, limited, and essentially silenced as at the beginning, and readers are left to hope idealistically that the manufacturers to whom Phelps is writing will be able to provide more practical change.

Though neither Sip nor Perley’s ultimate means of labor actually “allow[s] for critical material change,” possibly due to Phelps’s own upper-class leanings and background, Phelps is clear on the fact that certain labor can provide a means of purpose and empowerment for these individual women (Sharer, n.p.). When Sip first rejects Dirk’s offer of marriage and home, she mourns privately, “I don’t see why I couldn’t have had *that*, leastways” (Phelps 290). However, at the beginning of the next chapter, Phelps informs readers, “She saw clearly enough in time to

be a very happy woman” (291). Though she rejected a home and marriage, Sip gains a greater sense of purpose and independence than they could offer. Her labor as a mill girl allows her to maintain her own home and speak authoritatively and independently through her preaching. This new purpose, to instill in these workers the moral values Perley has essentially taught her, develops partly from her experience as a poor, working mill girl; the only way she gains a powerful voice is through understanding the experiences and conditions of the workers around her and like her. Though she will presumably continue to work and face the same extremely difficult factory conditions, Sip’s labor has provided her with a means to remain independent, possess a home that she controls, and exhibit her own agency through speaking for the morality of her fellow workers. She gains a purpose and voice through her labor, as it allows her to avoid marriage and preach instead, but she does so with the influence of Perley’s home as well.

Similarly, Perley’s labor also allows her to refuse marriage because she does not need it, providing her with an identity based on her own independence. When she refuses Garrick’s proposal, she tells him, “I have no time to think of love and marriage . . . I have too much else to do” (260). Like Sip, Perley no longer finds her identity in marriage; instead, she gains the empowerment from her labor to stand alone, make her own decisions, and gain a voice as a working upper-middle-class woman. Albertine explains that Perley “acts in her own interests as a businesswoman,” which, considering her passivity and silence at the beginning of the novel, is a momentous shift (244). Albertine concludes that Phelps “affirms,” through Perley, “the woman’s desire or choice to work” (241). However, Phelps demonstrates again that Perley cannot fully operate outside the home, even in her labor, because her domesticity is what empowers her to move beyond her walls and inculcate the workers with her culture and refinement. Phelps uses her novel to argue the legitimacy of women’s labor, but to also demonstrate that such labor

requires a domestic side.

Speech

Though initially silenced, both Sip and Perley gain the ability to speak powerfully and authoritatively in the text through their labor. However, significantly, they first gain this ability by altering their speech within their home space. According to Judith Fetterley, “speech is a function of power,” and, for these women, Phelps makes it clear that they at first have no power because they have no way to talk (18). Levander explains that Phelps “describes the relationship between industry and laborers as a contentious fight for voice” (107). Though Sip seems always able to say what she means, providing Perley with “honest” words that reveal the mill workers’ actual conditions and motivate Perley to begin her reform work, Phelps shows plainly that the mill and its conditions silence the mill workers (Phelps 30). To ward off the monotony of the tedious factory conditions, for example, female weavers attempt to sing while they work. However, the machines’ engines “g[e]t hold of the song, and crunch it well” (212). When the engines defeat their song, “the melody of the voices” vanishes with it, and their voices instead become “hoarse and rough” (77). Some weavers can only speak in whispers because of their work; Sip explains that they “lost their voices some time ago” (81). Phelps demonstrates clearly that these workers have no ability to speak for themselves; they have lost that ability through their working conditions. Similarly, as Levander notes, Catty is a “silent partner” in the text (100). Though she speaks to Sip, “talk[ing] on her fingers” (Phelps 52) and becoming eloquent in her death by “pass[ing] into the great world of signs” (280), she never gains an audible voice for herself in the text because of her and her mother’s treatment in the mills. Phelps explains, “Even in her dreams she listened for what she never heard, and spoke that which no man understood”

(96). In *Violence, Silence, and Anger*, Deirdre Lashgari clarifies the relationship here between Catty and those not understanding her. She writes that the voices of working-class people and people of color have not merely been stifled; “they also have been unheard and rendered unhearable, aurally erased” (4). Like Catty’s speech, the agency and identity of these workers have been entirely erased from this text and mill-owning society. Through Catty’s lack of audible speech, Phelps demonstrates the state of these workers as she sees it in their present silent conditions: ignorant, isolated, and entirely powerless.

Before Perley comes in contact with the mill workers and their conditions, she too is silent. The novel begins with her musing silently and passively in the library, doing nothing but trying (again, passively) to decide if she should attend the scheduled opera for the evening. However, she cannot make that decision and soon finds herself taken by Maverick and her friend Fly. In this early section, Perley does not seem to be able to think or speak autonomously at all. When she first speaks to Sip, Sip offends her, leaving Perley to say simply, “She was coarse and she hurt me” (Phelps 31). Perley then fills her thoughts with Maverick’s words: “As Maverick said, the lower classes could not bear any unusual attention from their betters, without injury. Maverick in his business connection had occasion to know. He must be right” (31). Perley substitutes her language for his, trusting him to provide her with the words to think and speak. Likewise, when she converses with Maverick, he takes on a tone of condescension and she finds herself unable to reply. When she offers the suggestion of partnering with Maverick and his father after her father’s death, for instance, they laugh and patronize her attempts, allotting her the designation of silent partner or, as Maverick says, “[a]n ordinary, unprivileged dummy” (60-61). She finds herself unable to use her speech to “command the respect” and agreement of these men (59). As an upper-middle-class woman fulfilling the proper passive role her society expects,

Perley's speech possesses no persuasion or power.

However, as Perley begins to develop a relationship with Sip and see the mill workers' living conditions for herself, she finds a purpose, and through that purpose, her voice. Returning home with Sip after visiting Sip's and Bub's "homes," she enters her parlor and sits silently, "trembl[ing] violently" (127). Suddenly, she moves into action, rising, striking the chess table in front of her, and speaking powerfully, "You do not understand . . . We are born in a dream, I tell you!" Levander explains, "her subsequent speech is transformed by her realization. Speech becomes her work" (112-13). While silent before, Perley's tirade in the parlor, resulting from her realization of the workers' actual conditions, demonstrates her transition into autonomy, individuality, and power. Importantly, this reaction begins in her home, even her parlor, as her dwelling but especially this room represents the feminine, passively social role she is expected to take on. Her alternative actions within this space represent her rejection of the conventional role she has previously played and her adoption of a much more active purpose of reform.

As represented in this scene, Perley gains the power to "articulate her own position," and she uses her voice to describe the horrid mill conditions and speak for herself (Albertine 243). Her reform work "enables" her to attain a voice of power, one that even silences or out-speaks the upper-class men who initially suppressed her (Levander 113). In a chapter titled "Checkmate!" she cancels her engagement with Maverick, finally gaining the power to "assert her feelings concisely" and giving him a verbal thrust that even he "could not lightly parry" (Phelps 160). Similarly, when the mill owners find themselves speechless or powerless, they come to Perley and she speaks in their place. When Bub Mell dies by becoming entangled in the mill machinery, for example, the male mill owners suddenly become unable to voice this tragedy to his parents. Instead, Maverick suggests that they "[a]sk *her*" to speak for them (217). Perley informs Mr.

Mell of Bub's death "in a gentle, awful voice," able to do what these men could not (218).

Later in the novel, when the mill company faces the possibility of collapse and the owners must cut the mill workers' wages, the workers threaten to strike, and once again the male leaders find themselves powerless and unable to say anything effective. As the crowd gets louder and more violent, Perley cries, "I wish, Mr. Garrick, that you had never shut me out of this firm. I belonged here! You do not one of you know now what it is for your own interest to do!" (246). Though the men initially refuse to listen to her and even scoff at her ideas, they finally become nervous enough to let her speak to the workers. Sip recalls later, "she talk[ed] to us about the trouble that the Company was in, and a foolishness cre[pt] round amongst us, as if we wished we were at home" (252). Perley told them that she could not afford to pay them, and, as Sip says, "they believed *that*." In the most problematic part of the text for current scholars, the workers accept their pay cut, and Perley succeeds in quelling this strike and making her voice heard. Through this act of speech, Albertine suggests that Perley "begins to articulate her own position" (243). Phelps demonstrates that her speech is legitimate and powerful as she gains the authority to speak (if only temporarily) over these men. At the same time, Perley also reinforces her position as a member of the upper-middle class and separate from the workers. Phelps clearly seeks to legitimize women's labor and speech, and to alert readers of the horrific conditions of the mills, but she "[does] not question the social and economic structures" of her time or desire for them to change (Kessler 51). Given Perley's realized power in speech, then, it becomes clear why she refuses Garrick's proposal. Her labor (though still domestic—the workers listen to her because of her respectability and virtue) provides her with a powerful voice that a wifely role would only re-stifle.

Similarly, though not initially silenced herself, Sip gains a voice and purpose for the mill

workers that empowers both her and (hopefully) them. She acquires this ability to speak, in many ways, through Perley's influence. According to Levander, Sip "must learn from an affluent woman mill owner how to reshape both the sound and substance of her language" (107). She first demonstrates the ability to speak differently in her communication with the picture of Beethoven that Perley hangs in her kitchen. She "talk[s] to it by the hour," and the implication is that she gains more power to speak through the opportunities and culture Perley provides than she would otherwise (Phelps 194). Like Levander suggests, Sip not only acquires the ability to speak from Perley, she also learns from her *how* to speak, embodying the culture of the middle class through her words. At Perley's soirees, Sip performs most of the readings and recitations for the other mill workers, to the point that the events mostly revolve around her. Perley describes Sip's influence: "We have nothing so popular . . . as that girl's readings and recitations. They ring well" (233). The workers enjoy these readings, particularly because Sip, as one of their own, leads them. Sip connects to them but also, by internalizing Perley's culture, connects to the middle class and provides the opportunity for these workers to also experience that culture. Her speech represents the extent to which she has adopted Perley's values and beliefs and is spreading them to her own class. In both of these cases, through the picture and the soiree, Sip gains the ability to speak through the culture Perley provides, and she does so within the space of the home, whether her kitchen or Perley's parlor. Phelps again shows the home to be a space that empowers women and gives them the potential to speak, if combined with the associations of work and the cultural values of the middle class.

Sip's ultimate purpose lies in preaching to the workers about the gospel of Christ, an ability she gains through the moral example and speaking traits she learns from Perley and also from the experience she gains through her labor. Catty's death, as a representation of the plight of these

workers, ultimately empowers Sip to speak for reform. Though Catty does not speak audibly in the text, in her death she “grew grandly eloquent,” as nature “gave her speech forever” (280). In this new means of communication, Catty talks to Sip and leads her into this new profession (though she certainly continues to work in the mills). Sip explains, “There’s things she’d have me say. That was how I first went to the meetings” (291). While Sip is at the mission listening to a sermon, “Catty had such things to say,” and then, suddenly, “God had things to say” too, and, “I stood right up and said them” (292). Through Sip’s speech, then, Catty becomes eloquent “to a larger public” (Levander 114), and Sip gains a larger purpose through preaching to her fellow workers. Interestingly, Sip establishes her first religious meetings in her “home,” on the other side of her boarding house in an Irish woman’s kitchen. These meetings grow, soon becoming “too many for tenement accommodations,” and Sip and her listeners move outside to continue them (Phelps 292). However, they do begin in the stone house in which Sip has lived, in the kitchen of all places, as a demonstration of the alternate and variant role Sip has taken on and the way she has altered the purposes of that space. Instead of cooking or cleaning in the kitchen after a day of work, she is speaking, empowering men and women mill workers to alter their characters even if they cannot alter their conditions or their kitchens.

Though Sip’s home provides the space for her preaching, representing that its alternative uses can be empowering for women, her labor experiences enable Perley’s morality to reach the workers. She relates to them because she has experienced their struggles as a working mill woman. In “her factory-girls’ language” (Levander 107), she offers them the type of religion she knows they need: “We’re poor folks, and we want a poor folks’ religion” (Phelps 296). This religion centers around Jesus, because, as she shows, He experienced conditions similar to theirs. Sip explains, “This is what he says, ‘I was up, and down, and drove, and slaved, and hurried

myself . . . and *I* was poor like you” (297-98). Like Sip, these workers become empowered through their labor because it allows them to relate to Jesus’ experiences and “listen to him” (298). At the same time, Sip’s preaching allows her to provide, in a sense, a voice for the mill workers through speaking publicly about their working conditions (Levander 99). She creates the possibility for an alternate and collective identity for the workers that, instead of silence, gives them powerful and emphatic speech. However, through this speech Sip also disseminates the desires of the middle class. Her denouncement of the workers’ immorality mirrors the concerns of that class: “You go on your wicked ways, and you drink, and fight, and swear, and you live in sinful shames” (Phelps 296-97). Though she publicizes the conditions of the workers, instead of calling them to “fight” to change their treatment in the mills, she calls them to adapt their behavior to the character of Christ, who will “unsnarl us all,” ignoring “the rich folks’ ways” (299). Her speech essentially calls the workers to accept and remain where they are. As Frances M. Malpezzi declares, Sip, “in essence, becomes like Perley” (108). She becomes a tool Phelps uses to endorse the standards of the middle class.

Still, Phelps shows that Sip and Perley gain autonomy and purpose by stepping beyond the typical cycles of the home in wifedom and motherhood. Outside of those roles, though, and in conjunction with public labor, Phelps demonstrates that the middle-class home does empower these women; it does serve as a space that allows them to begin to speak openly and powerfully. Ultimately, through this novel Phelps shows the possibilities for ameliorating the mill workers’ conditions through the introduction of middle-class culture and values. She shows the need for and results of middle-class influences of the home but also the need for these women to gain a greater purpose in helping others. These women cannot be complete without either.

“A Nobler Part on a Wider Stage”: *Work* and the Communal Home

In *Work: A Story of Experience*, Louisa May Alcott's Christie also rejects the typical female roles within the home, choosing at the beginning of the novel to establish independence and autonomy by leaving her aunt and uncle's house and laboring for herself. However, while she does gain self-sufficiency through her numerous jobs, she first gains a homelessness and an anonymity that almost kill her. Throughout the text, Christie longs for a home and its ideals of acceptance, friendship, love, and belonging. At the same time, though, she desires independence, and she almost commits suicide because she cannot attain such a space. Though Christie does ultimately acquire the home that she desires, like Phelps, Alcott revises that home, showing it to only be truly empowering when formed by a community of women that moves in and out of its space. Christie embraces a new relationship between home and work at the end of the novel, gaining the ability to speak for and to other working women through her labor experiences and this community that works and establishes a home together.

Work begins with Christie's declaration to her aunt and uncle that she wants to experience the world and the fruits of her own labor. She leaves their small town and its limited opportunities and heads to the city to gain autonomy and community through her work. She performs many of the jobs that Alcott herself tried, working as a domestic servant, actress, governess, companion, and seamstress before ultimately having no way to subsist and nearly committing suicide. Her friend Rachel, a "fallen" woman whom Christie had helped, rescues Christie and places her in loving homes that restore her strength and provide her with healthier labor opportunities. Though Christie refuses several marriage proposals, she accepts one that provides her with a greater degree of independence and belonging. During the Civil War her husband David fights while she works as a nurse, and he ultimately dies, while she continues to labor independently and provide

for herself and others. At the end of the novel, she establishes a home with a community of women who share and help each other, and she gains a greater purpose in speaking as a mediator between upper- and working-class women, for women's rights.

The Home

Though Sip and Perley remain in the same dwellings throughout the novel and gain their ultimate purpose and autonomy through speaking for social and moral reform for the mill workers around them, Alcott demonstrates the necessity of Christie's departure from the home she has known to gain the autonomy she needs. An orphan, Christie has been living with her aunt and uncle, and the novel begins with her "Declaration of Independence," as she announces her intention to leave their dwelling (Alcott 5). Christie explains several reasons for her departure, all centered around the desire for independent opportunities that lie elsewhere. She longs to be independent, as she tells Aunt Betsey, "I hate to be dependent . . . I can't bear it any longer" (5). She specifies later, "I hate dependence where there isn't any love to make it bearable" (11). To Christie, love and community are crucial to her home, and she can find no love from Uncle Enos, as she complains, "Uncle doesn't love or understand me," or from anyone else in the small town in which they live (6). She also longs to "break loose from this narrow life" (13) and find more uplifting labor that allows her light to "[shine] out into the dark" and touch others (9). However, Alcott clearly demonstrates that at the heart of Christie's desire to leave lies her need to attain autonomy through her own work and apart from the influence and authority of men. She tells Aunt Betsey, "I'm not going to sit and wait for any man to give me independence, if I can earn it for myself" (9). Though Christie suggests that a man could give her independence if she waited long enough, her glances at Aunt Betsey in light of the selfishness of Uncle Enos imply that

some men, at least, take away that independence instead. Glenn Handler explains that Christie wishes for an “autonomy not available in her home”; she has to leave because Uncle Enos allows her no such privilege (687). When Christie speaks to her uncle, she calls him “sir,” a demonstration that their relationship is hierarchical and requires her submission to him (Alcott 7). As I will detail later, this relationship silences Christie and takes away her autonomy. Even in leaving she must first ask permission of her uncle to do so, and she voices her desire to go only with the promise that “I’ll never speak of it again” (10). With his permission and the resulting opportunity to become free of male authority, even with Enos’s announcement that “you need breakin’ in, my girl” ringing in her ears, Christie resolves to gain the liberty she lacks, and Alcott makes it clear from the outset that women need to establish autonomy for themselves (11).

Throughout her journey, Christie rejects several offers of marriage that would reinstate the male authority she tries so desperately to leave behind. At the house of her Aunt Betsy and Uncle Enos, she received a marriage offer from a wealthy neighbor, Joe Butterfield. However, when he “laid his acres at her feet, she found it impossible to accept for her life’s companion a man whose soul was wrapped up in prize cattle and big turnips” (12). His soul possesses no room for her; there would be no “love to make it bearable” (11). Christie recognizes that if she married Joe, she would become his “household drudge” and cannot bear to accept the “home” he offers, because it would not be a home (12). She also refuses two proposals by Mr. Fletcher, the wealthy brother of the woman for whom she works as a governess. When he proposes, he tells her, “I want you very much” (67). He also explains as she hesitates, “I’ve had my own way all my life, and I mean to have it now.” He desires Christie as a possession rather than for love, or, as she declares, so that “I can amuse and serve you” (70). A marriage to this man would not justify Christie’s surrender of her independence and autonomy any more than with Joe. She asks him,

“What can you give me but money and position in return for the youth and freedom I should sacrifice in marrying you?” (70). Similarly, when he proposes again, Christie considers “whether she would not be selling her liberty too cheaply, if in return she got only dependence and bondage along with fortune and a home,” and she again decides to refuse (251). Christie rejects both of these men’s proposals because she values her liberty and autonomy over a loveless marriage. She associates the homes they could provide with imprisonment and confinement, preferring her own labor and the “little room” she can attain to dependence on these men (16).

Alcott also demonstrates through the lives of other women that marriage and the supposedly ideal home space confine not only Christie. Like Christie’s reference to Uncle Enos as “sir,” Alcott refers to other women’s husbands as “lord” (11, 102, 137) or “master,” suggesting again a relationship of submission and dependence on the part of these women to their men (11). In this dependent and isolated state, and in fact within any of the ideal roles of the home in which women remain secluded and serve only as overseers or socialites, Alcott shows these women to be dissatisfied and depressed. She declares that the best parlors, which serve as the height of sociability and femininity (Shamir 38), “are apt to have a depressing effect upon the spirits” (Alcott 162). Instead, however, “the mere sight of labor is exhilarating to energetic minds”; Alcott’s solution to this female ennui is labor and true community. When Christie considers leaving her aunt and uncle’s house, she contemplates her probable fates if she stayed. She decides that “[s]he would either marry Joe Butterfield in sheer desperation, . . . settle down into a sour spinster . . . or do what poor Matty Stone had done, try to crush and curb her needs and aspirations till the struggle grew too hard,” committing suicide in the town’s “quiet river” (13). Alcott’s point here is clear: all of these women have “needs and aspirations” that the available options for these women cannot satisfy. Similarly, Bella Carrol (Christie serves as companion to

her sister Helen, who ultimately commits suicide) comes to Christie because she is facing this despair. Christie responds, “There are so many fine young women longing for something to fill up the empty places that come when the first flush of youth is over,” and she challenges Bella to do something about it (339). Through the examples of these women, Alcott reveals that the ideals of the isolated home and their prescribed roles as wife, mother and housewife or socialite, cannot entirely satisfy any woman; she reveals, as Elizabeth Langland puts it, that “caring for a home and a man is not always fulfilling in and of itself” (119). It is not only Christie who finds these domestic roles confining and empty; any woman totally isolated and dependent on her husband would also. And their struggles with these desires cannot end well.

To Christie, then, independence is at first the most important aspect of the space she can attain through her labor. Throughout the first half of the novel, between employments that require her to live where she works, Christie’s “home” remains “[a] little room far up” (Alcott 16) in a “second-class boarding-house” (153). This room initially represents the freedom and autonomy that she could not attain in the house of her uncle or loveless marriages with Joe Butterfield or Mr. Fletcher. Rejecting those spaces, Christie heads to the city to work solely for herself, and she moves into this room feeling “delightfully independent” and satisfied that this space is her own (16). Later in the novel, though she becomes lonely because her space provides her no opportunity for community, she still remains in this room because it offers the independence she desires. Alcott writes, “She clung to her little room, for there she could live her own life undisturbed, and preferred to stint herself in other ways rather than give up this liberty” (115). To Christie, this room represents the autonomy she has been able to attain for herself, and she resists giving up her independence for a more communal space.

However, some of her employment requires that she leave this space, at least temporarily, and

Alcott uses Christie's experiences to comment on women's need for community as well as independence. When she lives and works for pay in the dwellings of other women, whether as servant, governess, or companion, Christie does not attain a home in her living space; Alcott makes it clear that her domestic employments take away some of her independence (though she still prefers her labor to the full surrender of independence in marriage). As a demonstration of Christie's sacrifice, Alcott provides little description of the rooms in which her protagonist dwells during these sections, because her labor takes place outside of them and, thus, she has little time to spend there. As servant to the Stuarts, Christie first enjoys her place in their home because it provides "an atmosphere of ease and comfort," but she soon tires of her place and labor because there is no variance or creativity in the upper-class people's lives for whom she works and with whom she interacts (23). Though Christie must surrender a portion of her independence in serving these wealthier characters, and in having no private life of her own, she searches for a community in her labor that can turn her working space at least partially into a home. At this stage, she makes friends with the cook, an escaped slave named Hepsy, and Alcott tells us that "her happiest evenings were spent in the tidy kitchen" talking to this woman (27). Likewise, when Christie serves as a governess, "[s]he prospered in her work" by always being with the children in her care (54). Though she possesses a "corner of the luxurious apartments occupied by the family" on their extended vacation, Christie only appears in public, either with the children or taking a break from them (52). Even in this situation, Alcott describes her as making some friendships with "kind-hearted girl[s]" and "lively old maids" so that she has a form of community even in her labor (55). As companion to Helen Carrol, also, Christie devotes her "soul and body" to this young woman facing madness (92). She returns to her room only to rest for the times "she might be wanted later" (96), providing a "year of self-denying

service” until Helen commits suicide to escape her illness (98). Christie attains the loving friendship of this family who desires her to stay after Helen’s death, but, as with all these labor situations, Christie decides to move on. Alcott explains, “Christie needed rest, longed for freedom, and felt that in spite of their regard it would be very hard for her to live among them any longer” (100). Although she attains community through all of these efforts, she loses a part of her independence as well as the ability to possess a space apart from that labor, and she continues to long for a labor that provides a meaningful home and community as well as independence.

For this reason, when Helen dies Christie returns to her little room in the boarding house and embraces the privacy she finds there; it restores the independence she had partially surrendered through her previous types of work. Working as a seamstress during the day, Christie “liked to return at night to her own little home, solitary and simple as it was, and felt a great repugnance to accept any place where she would be mixed up with family affairs again” (102). This one time in the text, Alcott refers to this room as a “home,” because it offers what Christie needs: the autonomy of her own space at the end of the day. However, her dwelling actually does not possess any other traits of the Victorian home. It is a mere room in the city, and it provides no opportunity for personal display or expression, or for family or communal cohesiveness. This room is a very individualized space, and though Christie prefers her room for that reason initially, she soon longs for the attachments that she had been able to form in her other labor contexts. Though she attains a close friend named Rachel, the owners of the sewing shop where they work discover Rachel has “fallen” in the past and force her to leave. In support of her friend, Christie resigns from her position and “took home work from a larger establishment,” and her room progressively becomes lonelier and less fulfilling because it cannot provide her with

the loving bonds she needs (112). Though she has attained an independence beyond the home which the other dissatisfied women in the text need, she does so in isolation, and ultimately experiences the same depression they face.

Christie cannot attain a home in which she experiences friendship and love through her labor, and the lack of this home leads her to attempt suicide. Alcott writes that the year following Rachel's departure was "the saddest [Christie] had ever known," for "[h]er heart was empty and she could not fill it; her soul was hungry and she could not feed it; life was cold and dark and she could not warm and brighten it, for she knew not where to go" (115). Arien Mack aptly remarks that "[h]ome moves us most powerfully as absence or negation," and Christie reaches a point of desperation because she cannot possess a home that provides her with love and affection ("Exile" 59). Like Riis and Phelps feared, this room actually contributes to the failure of her moral development, as it leads her "into the bitter, brooding mood which had become habitual to her since she lived alone" (Alcott 117). Like Sip and the other mill workers, she ventures out into the "busy streets to forget the solitude she left behind her" (112), the "haunted" space that was, according to Rachel later, "the worst place [she] could be in" (127). Her room now serves as an antithesis to a home, a representation of her isolation and the cause of her sense of hopelessness, and she heads outside to avoid its bondage. In the streets, however, she catches glimpses through windows and doors of "home-love and happiness that made her heart ache for very pity of its own loneliness," and she at last loses any desire to ever return to her room (122). Alcott informs us that this "dreadful loneliness of heart, a hunger for home and friends, worse than starvation," drives numerous women, like Christie, to "desperate deaths" (118). Christie heads to the river to end her suffering, like Matty Stone in her aunt and uncle's town, "los[ing] her identity" as she peers into the water and nearly gives herself in. Without a home and place of belonging and love,

it seems Christie can have no identity or true purpose. The independence she gains from her work and little room cannot provide her with connections and bonds and the sense of belonging that a “true” home supposedly provides.

From this point in the novel, Alcott develops her own sense of the ideal home, one that combines equal labor and community. Although Janene Gabrielle Burnum Lewis and other scholars argue that Alcott problematizes the novel by showing Christie to desire both independence and a communal home, so that the two are “contradictory” goals (90), through the ideal home she creates, Alcott shows that the two need to exist together. She uses the homes in the rest of the novel to unfold her true ideal. Rachel finds Christie directly before she gives herself into the water and sends her to Mrs. Wilkins, a bustling, smiling woman whose house is full of joyous “happy faces,” “cleanliness, . . . hospitality and lots of love” (Alcott 130). Not surprisingly, Christie “[finds] herself at home at once.” In this setting, Alcott revises the Victorian ideal by centering the home on labor and hospitality rather than middle-class status. Mrs. Wilkins’s home is full of ongoing work, love, and numerous active children. Christie walks into “a small kitchen, [that] smell[s] suggestively of soap-suds and warm flat-irons,” a signal to the work occurring in its space (129). Alcott contrasts this kitchen to the wealthy houses in which Christie has worked earlier: “How pleasant it was; that plain room, with no ornaments but the happy faces, no elegance, but cleanliness, no wealth, but hospitality and lots of love” (130). Christie finds herself laughing at the children, immediately transformed by the uplifting environment of this “home,” as Alcott defines it. Every aspect of this dwelling “suggested home life,” happy, communal, and with conversations “full of domestic love and confidence” (133), all which cause Christie to “feel like a new creature” (134). Though Mrs. Wilkins possesses a relatively lazy and shifty husband, perhaps Alcott’s idea of the typical marriage relationship, the

author makes it clear that this woman is the “ruling power” and reason for the happiness of this home (286). Mrs. Wilkins explains, “I try to live up to my light, do my duty cheerful, love my neighbors, and fetch up my family in the fear of God,” and she creates a home from her attempts (152). Alcott shows that this home, centered on labor, authenticity, and kindness, can transform the character of its inhabitants and serve as the epitome of warmth and love. Restored through this space, Christie moves into another one, as Alcott continues to expand the Victorian concept of home through her protagonist’s experiences.

Mrs. Wilkins and her minister Mr. Power soon move Christie into a more permanent dwelling with the Sterlings, where she helps older Mrs. Sterling with the housework and cooking and her son David with his gardening business. Like the typical suburban cottages and country homes of the time, the Sterlings’ home resides in a rural area that represents peace, the pre-industrial past, and healing the city could not bring to Christie. Their house is “[a]n old-fashioned cottage” that stands “in the midst of a garden” (170). To Christie, “[a] quiet, friendly place it looked; for nothing marred its peace.” Like in Mrs. Wilkins’s home, Christie “felt the influences of that friendly place at once” and immediately feels at home. When Christie first meets David, whom she eventually marries, he tells her, “you must feel that this is home and we are friends” (185). From the very beginning, then, Christie’s relationship with the Sterlings, and especially David, is based on friendship and equality, as she is received as part of the family at the same time that she labors inside and outside the house (as opposed to woman’s stereotypical role only within). Christie quickly begins to call Mrs. Sterling “mother” (223), and this older woman soon notes that Christie bestows “faithful service and affectionate companionship” (199). Not surprisingly, in this liberating space, Christie fully regains her health and breaks free from her depression, gaining labor and home at once: “This was what she needed, the protection of a home,

wholesome cares and duties; and, best of all, friends to live and labor for, loving and beloved. Her whole soul was in her work now” (189). According to Joy S. Kasson, Christie “now finds that work is transformed by the spirit of the community in which it takes place” (xviii). In this home she finds the loving acceptance and community she and presumably all women need, regaining the desire to keep living and laboring and the ability to do both.

However, Christie soon realizes that she loves David, and upon this comprehension she actually temporarily elevates the conventional womanly roles within the home and loses her desire for independence and equality. Alcott explains, “now Christie’s mission seemed to be sitting in a quiet corner and making shirts” rather than working alongside David in the greenhouse or conversing with him (223). Similarly, she decides “that home was woman’s sphere after all, and the perfect roasting of beef, brewing of tea, and concocting of delectable puddings, an end worth living for if masculine commendation rewarded the labor,” for her sole purpose now rests in David and the fulfillment of his desires. However, the brief dream Christie concocts quickly “vanishe[s] like a bright bubble” (236), and she returns to her previous ambitions of love combined with independence (Maibor 121). Though Christie and David do marry, Alcott does not give readers the sentimental end they would expect as “the only possible conclusion to this passage in her life” (Wallace 268), for Christie’s marriage is not the end-all of her existence.

Christie actually hesitates to get married, with the explanation that she fears she burdens David. After the Civil War begins, David announces his desire to help the North by enlisting, and Christie declares her intention to enlist as a nurse at the same time. He asks whether he should let her “share hardship and danger with me,” and she responds, “You *will* let me do it, and in return I will marry you whenever you ask me” (Alcott 281). Christie does not actually

agree to marriage until she can maintain a level of independence and value through public work that she can share with David. Later, when David does enlist, he asks her to keep her promise, and she asks, “What promise?” (290). When she realizes the meaning of his request, Alcott explains that “[s]he did not hesitate an instant, but laid her own hand in his,” agreeing to become his wife. With Alcott’s inference that Christie has forgotten her promise and still has reason to hesitate before marriage, however, there is still the suggestion that Christie would prefer not to be married. She also insists on getting married in her hospital suit, announcing, “I will be married in my uniform as David is” (292). Rather than adopting a new identity as a bride, she insists on retaining the independent identity she has gained from her labor. In “Where the Absent Father Went,” James D. Wallace suggests that the war allows Alcott to satisfy her readers’ expectation for marriage but also her own independent “ambitions for her heroine” (268), as Christie makes it clear “that her new status as wife will not impinge upon her individuality and freedom” (Yellin 532). She accepts this marriage with David because it still offers her a means of independence that her other relationships with men have suppressed.

However, Alcott clearly could not envision a marriage that successfully provided women with lasting autonomy and independence, for she cannot allow David to live past the war. David dies in the Civil War in an attempt to save escaped slaves, and his death prevents their “happy going home together” for which Christie had temporarily dreamed (Alcott 300). Alcott refuses to complete the supposedly ideal woman’s purpose in creating an inviting home life for her husband, at the same time that she seems unable to show how a mutual marriage relationship actually plays out to her liking.¹ If David had lived, Christie would most likely have needed to surrender the autonomy she could maintain through nursing in the war. Instead, Wallace suggests, “Alcott used the happy intervention of the Civil War to remove or to curb the

dominating masculine presences that threatened to return Christie to Aunt Betsey's parenthetical condition" (268). Though it is unlikely that David's behavior towards Christie would be as suppressive as Uncle Enos's, it is still clear that Alcott sees marriage as ultimately hindering the autonomy Christie has pursued for so long. Through David's death, Alcott becomes able to show that "marriage [is] simply another stage in Christie's development," one from which she gains insight, love, and a daughter Ruth, but from which she also moves on to complete the rest of her life (Langland 113). Alcott expands the ideals surrounding the home, providing a heroine who represents the need for women to move beyond the sense of full completion in marriage and the domestic realm and to embrace the autonomy they can (hopefully) gain from that expansion.

After David's death and Ruth's birth, Alcott establishes what seems to be her actual ideal home, one in which women labor and provide for one another as a community and move in and out of its space. Unable to have a balanced and mutual home with David, Christie establishes one with the elder Mrs. Sterling, Ruth, and Rachel (who turns out to be David's estranged sister), and the other women with whom she has come in contact through her journey. In this home, then, she is "surrounded by an interracial, multi-generational, and multi-class community of women" who work together (Maibor xxiv). The home of these women is based on reciprocity, community, and togetherness; this new family image offers an alternative to "the hierarchy and repression [Alcott] associates with the conventional family" (Lewis 89). Receiving David's pension and the profits from his gardening work that she continues, Christie explains in a conversation with Uncle Enos at the end of the novel that she gives Mrs. Sterling and Rachel "two-thirds of all I make" (Alcott 325). She explains to him what their home is like: "we work for one another and share everything together." Uncle Enos grumbles his response: "So like women!" According to Langland, "Female growth, as Alcott sees it, takes place through integration rather than

separation” (127). These women integrate to create the home they need, which in isolation or by their labor alone they could not achieve. However, for Christie especially, this home exists in conjunction with her labor; not only does she help provide for these other women through her work, but she also receives the opportunity at the end of the novel to take on a new role in speaking for women’s rights. If removed from what Alcott sees as a male-dominating hierarchy that allows women only a narrow scope of domestic labor, home can provide women with love, belonging, a freeing sense of labor that uplifts all, and, as a result, empowerment to help other women.

Work

Though Christie ultimately discovers her purpose and gains her identity through labor, like Phelps, Alcott first uses Christie’s experiences to accentuate women’s working conditions at this time, for Christie nearly dies from her conditions. However, Alcott also demonstrates at the beginning of the novel that Christie had no other option; she could not have stayed at the house of her aunt and uncle. Up to this point, her experience has been “rural and domestic” (Elbert 192); even as she discusses her need for independence with Aunt Betsey, she is kneading dough in the kitchen. Christie announces her intent “to break loose from this narrow life, go out into the world and see what she could do for herself” (Alcott 13), for no longer can she “starve [her] soul for the sake of [her] body” (11). Though it ultimately proves extremely difficult and nearly impossible to survive alone through her labor, Alcott makes it clear that Christie could not have remained at “home”; she would have succumbed to the disappointment, “insanity” (Maibor 113), or “self-destruction” that other stifled female characters have experienced (Langland 115). Instead, Alcott demonstrates through Christie women’s need for a larger perspective and “access

to a wide range of employments” that provide them with their own autonomy (Maibor 126).

Alcott shows that Christie requires the wider opportunities of labor and the independence it can idealistically provide; the domestic and narrow life she would have to maintain in this town would likely kill her.

However, Christie’s representative experiences soon reveal that labor does not automatically provide freedom for women.² Alcott explains, “Christie was one of that large class of women who, moderately endowed with talents, earnest and true-hearted, are driven by necessity, temperament, or principle out into the world to find support, happiness, and homes for themselves” (12). Alcott takes Christie through numerous types of employment that many women faced, showing the difficulties they experienced and the ways work altered their bodies and minds. Though Christie’s physical features do not necessarily change with her jobs like the mill workers’ do, with every job she takes, she must sacrifice a piece of herself and her freedom. Because she possesses no specific skills for employment, at first she can only attain work as a servant. Like Alcott herself, Sarah Elbert explains, Christie begins “as the lowliest maid-of-all-work” (192), telling herself undauntedly, “I’ll begin at the beginning, and work my way up. I’ll put my pride in my pocket, and go out to service” (Alcott 17). And she does have to sacrifice her pride, as Mrs. Stuart insists on calling her Jane and on her first day Mr. Stuart expects her to do the degrading work of removing and cleaning his overshoes. This first job introduces Christie to the fact that there are limits to her independence. In her second means of employment, as actress, she also has to change her ways. When her manager first directs her with “my dear,” she is horrified; as Alcott describes it, her “sense of propriety had received its first shock” (33). Her friend Lucy, used to such practices, tells her that managers “don’t mean any thing; so be resigned,” and they sometimes even do worse. When she does gain acclaim as an actress through

her “lively fancy” and “ambitious spirit,” she changes, “growing selfish, frivolous, and vain” from the attention she receives for her efforts (41). In other domestic jobs, as governess, companion, and seamstress, Christie sacrifices other types of freedoms, subject to the impatience and indulgence of spoiled children, the emotional drain of her companion fighting madness, or the long hours spent at needlework and sewing that lead eventually to her suicide attempt.

Each job eventually phases out, and Alcott “sen[ds] her away to learn another phase of woman’s life and labor” (27). Her struggles become progressively more difficult, however, until she finds herself spending hours on needlework that her employer ultimately refuses to buy, “half-ruin[ing] [her] eyes over the fine stitching” for nothing (121). At this stage, when she can find no more work and has no one to help her, Christie considers suicide, recognizing that she has failed to gain the independence and identity for which she longed. She tells herself, “I’m growing old; my youth is nearly over, and at thirty I shall be a faded, dreary woman, like so many I see and pity” (119). Like so many other women whose stories hers represents, Christie finds herself changed and faded from the difficulties of her work. In a direct critique of women’s working conditions in the “marketplace” (Lewis 91) and its limited and limiting options for women, Alcott tells us, “There are many Christies, willing to work, yet unable to bear the contact with coarser natures which makes labor seem degrading, or to endure the hard struggle for the bare necessities of life when life has lost all that makes it beautiful” (117). These women’s work has degraded them and taken the beauty and joy out of life. As Carolyn R. Maibor puts it, “Alcott’s message, that there are many women like Christie who actively seek work but whose hopes and ambitions are quickly squelched under the degrading conditions they find, is clear” (114).³ Christie’s alteration and degradation from her experiences demonstrate the extent to which there are countless women facing the same picture of despair, most likely questioning the

necessity of their survival and the purpose of their lonely struggle like she is.

Alcott makes it clear that women facing this despair from their labor are lost without community and relationships. She explains of Christie, “Perfect rest, kind care, and genial society were the medicines she needed, but there was no one to minister to her, and she went blindly on along the road so many women tread” (117). Jean Fagan Yellin explains that Alcott shows through Christie’s situation that women workers—“exhausted, demoralized, overwhelmed—urgently need alternatives to the alienated relationships they experience” through their work (531). Christie, and presumably these other women also, can only be saved through caring relationships. When Rachel, the one friend Christie has, returns and saves her from the river and provides her with an alternative space to live and work with the Wilkins and the Sterlings, Christie progressively recovers, and is able to labor again but in a more ideal environment.

In the Sterling household, Christie’s labor is based on her relationship with David and his mother. She achieves equality and companionship through her work, especially with David. She remarks that he “is teaching me to be a gardener, so I needn’t kill myself with sewing anymore” (Alcott 194). The gardening skills he has taught her allow her to work alongside him, regain her health, and later provide for herself. Yet, a deeper implication is clear: these new skills have saved Christie from degrading labor and even death. Like the Sterlings’ home, the work here resembles the labor of a more pastoral, pre-industrial era, in which working women did not have to head to cities to kill themselves sewing. Christie exclaims, “Much of this is fine work for women, and *so* healthy”; it is not the debasing (city) work that she faced before. Interestingly, Martha Louise Rayne, in *What Can a Woman Do* (1893) agrees, arguing that gardening “would be far more desirable than constant, sedentary employment such as sewing” and suggesting that

more women adopt it as a means of employment (179). In this work, Christie also gains the ability to include her personality and emotion, so that this gardening allows her to maintain an individualism that previous jobs did not. When picking out flowers for the mother of a dead baby, for example, David asks Christie, “Will you give it a touch? women have a tender way of doing such things that we can never learn” (Alcott 182). She is able to put her feminine emotions and sympathies into this new type of work, so that her personality matters and becomes meaningful. This emotion allows for Christie’s relationship with David to develop, for this “task performed together” establishes a friendship that continues to deepen.

It is the mutuality of their friendship, through their peaceful work, that leads to their more intimate relationship and unconventional marriage. When the Civil War begins and David eventually enlists, Christie declares, “I go too,” as a nurse (282). Before they leave, even, Alcott writes that “shoulder to shoulder, as if already mustered in, these faithful comrades marched to and fro” (282). Eugenia Kaledin explains that Christie’s choice of nursing during the war “was at that time an assertion of such competence and freedom, the womanly equivalent to taking up arms” (252). Every part of the work David and Christie do together is equal. Their mutuality, in fact, serves as the model relationship Alcott imagines for men and women, showing that “if men and women work together both inside and outside the home, a social evolution will occur that will produce happier men and women” (Lewis 87). Christie recovers from her illness and desperation through the relationships and affections that develop alongside and in her “wholesome,” mutual labor (Alcott 239). She is no longer a nameless worker for whom no one cares; she has achieved a home and a reciprocal relationship that restores her desire to keep living and working.

At the end of the novel, Christie finally finds her “real place and work,” for which she has

been looking since she left Betsy and Enos's small town (48). Not surprisingly, she finds that "real place" in the home and community of the women around her, and the ultimate work and purpose she gains develop from her previous struggles and labor experiences. As David dies, he tells her to continue and take over his work, saying, "You will do my part, and do it better than I could. Don't mourn, dear heart, but work," and she listens (315). She takes "garden and greenhouse into her own hands," supporting and providing for her family with that income (323). At the same time, Christie discovers the task that perhaps "my life has been fitting me for," mediating between the upper and working classes as a speaker or "interpreter" for women's rights and "new emancipation" (334). As Wallace declares, all of her work experiences "ha[ve] been the preparation for her new role" (271). From these experiences, like Sip, she knows what it is like to be a working woman, and what working women need: "for well she knew how much they needed help, how eager they were for light, how ready to be led if someone would only show a possible way" (Alcott 331). As Maibor words it, "Only through the sum of her experiences is Christie led to her 'true calling'" (113). Christie's labor has ultimately empowered her to find a purpose helping other women through speaking for and to them. However, not surprisingly, Christie does not perform this labor alone; instead, she says, "There is so much to be done, and it is so delightful to help do it" (Alcott 343). Her community of women labors together, "a loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white, rich and poor, each ready to do her part to hasten the coming of the happy end," with even baby Ruth putting forth her fist as a "promise that the coming generation of women will not only receive but deserve their liberty" (344). All of these women aim to do their part in "sharing His great work." Elbert says of Christie, "By herself she cannot find work, happiness, or home" (196). By herself, she faced the laboring struggles of countless women and gave up. However, Alcott argues, through community

and relationships, “women will find both gainful employment and friendship” (Lewis 91). Their labor will not be in isolation or in vain.

Speech

Like Sip and Perley, Christie seems to be silenced at the beginning of *Work*, or at least surrounded by people with whom she cannot really converse. In the spaces where she works in others’ homes, she cannot engage in honest or open speech because it differs from what she should say or how she is expected to act. When the novel begins with her declaration of independence to Aunt Betsey, Christie confronts Uncle Enos with words she could not say before she intended to leave. She tells him, “I don’t suppose I can make you understand my feeling, but I’d like to try, and then I’ll never speak of it again” (Alcott 10). She then opens up those feelings, in what Alcott calls “an unusual outpouring” (11), responding to Enos’s earlier comment that she was discontented: “I am discontented, because I can’t help feeling that there is a better sort of life than this dull one” (10). She continues to detail her desire for independence and meaningful work. Even in this early scene, Christie has not been able to voice these dissatisfied thoughts previously, because she has had to conform to Uncle Enos’s expectations that she remain silent and perform domestic work. By leaving, though, she places herself outside of that home and its ideals and begins to attempt to express her original and honest feelings.

However, Christie does not really gain the ability to speak openly and honestly through the work she can attain on her own, though she can offer a critique of the speech she hears. As a domestic servant for the wealthy and egotistical Stuarts, and in her other jobs as well, Christie maintains her employment by acting and speaking as her employers tell her to do so. While working for the Stuarts, Christie tells her actual thoughts to Hepsy, demonstrating the contrast

between these two types of speech. While Christie acts as an “intelligent table-girl” to the Stuarts, saying what a servant girl should, Alcott explains that Mr. Stuart “would have become apoplectic with indignation” to know that she “often contrasted her master with his guests, and dared to think him wanting in good breeding when he boasted of his money” (24). Christie tells Hepsey that the “‘master was a fat dandy, with nothing to be vain of but his clothes,’—a sacrilegious remark which would have caused her to be summarily ejected from the house” if the Stuarts had heard it (24). Though Christie can speak honestly because she has a companion in the kitchen, she does so at the risk of losing her job, and she must keep her thoughts silent in the Stuarts’ company.

In her various work spaces, Christie also finds herself surrounded by meaningless speech, and she cannot bear to be a part of it; she silences herself rather than join such conversations. She demonstrates the type of speech she longs to partake in, in contrast to what is being said, when she complains of the Stuarts to Hepsey: “Good heavens! why don’t they do or say something new and interesting, and not keep twaddling on about art, and music, and poetry, and cosmos?” (25). Christie declares that original or interesting speech “isn’t genteel enough to be spoken of here”; Alcott seems to be critiquing the meaningless and thoughtless repetition of the standards of society’s speech. Later, as a governess, Christie finds similar speech, and when conversing with Mr. Fletcher, she demonstrates her disdain of his speech with her eyes that “grew either sad or scornful when he tried worldly gossip or bitter satire” (59). She will not speak of such topics herself, inspiring him to attempt to “talk well” to gain her approval. However, Christie’s silence is most obvious as a seamstress. In the room where numerous women talk away the monotony of their sewing, they can only discuss three topics, “[d]ress, gossip, and wages” (103). Instead of engaging in this empty speech, Christie “took refuge in her own thoughts, soon learning to enjoy

them undisturbed by the clack of many tongues about her.” However, by not sharing this speech with the other girls, Christie has no one with whom she can talk, and, especially after Rachel disappears, she becomes progressively more aware of her loneliness and desire to speak to someone. Later, when Rachel rescues her, she explains her fear and reason for near-suicide: “I do so dread to be alone” (135). Similarly, she explains to David, “I know what loneliness is, and how telling worries often cures them” (218). Through her isolated work in which no one will help her and the useless ramble around her in which she cannot voice her thoughts and troubles, Christie is entirely silenced. The disconnect that silence brings, in its lack of home or belonging, ultimately causes Christie, and, Alcott argues, numerous real women like her, to want to take her life.

However, in the environment of Alcott’s ideal home, Christie gains the speech for which she longs, equal, intelligent, and purposeful conversation. As a fellow worker with David as they labor equally, their speech takes on the qualities of true and natural friendship. They soon “chat in the friendly fashion that had naturally grown up” between them (204). This speech, however, is not the meaningless chatter that so quickly silenced Christie earlier; through their talk, especially in the evenings while Christie works, the twilight “seems to lift the curtains of that inner world where minds go exploring, hearts learn to know one another, and souls walk together in the cool of the day” (190). Their conversations are truthful, open, and authentic, and their intimate bond forms from this speech. Before, Christie was forced either to hide her true words beneath expected servant vocabulary or to remain silent altogether; now, “with David she always spoke out frankly, because she could not help it” (201). In this ideal environment of the home, Christie regains the ability to speak and to speak openly and directly. This ideal of a loving home and equal and wholesome work has given her the voice she needs.

With her newfound ability to speak in this environment, then, Christie also gains her greater purpose. Interestingly, like Sip and Catty's final and ubiquitous eloquence, she gains the seed of her purpose through David's voice. Sitting in his room after his death, stricken with grief, she hears his voice through the wind in his flute, and it provides her with the peace and strength she needs to recover. Through the ideal relationship she had with him, Christie gains the empowerment to continue and move beyond that relationship into a community of women that fully empowers her to speak. Though David helps her initially, these women provide her with exactly what she needs and left Betsey's and Enos's house to find: loving attachments and autonomy. By allowing Christie to attain these attributes, this ideal home and its female community empower her to speak through her labor for working women. This ability to speak develops quite similarly to Sip's experience. In attending a meeting of working women, in which upper-class women seek to help them without actually understanding their needs, "an uncontrollable impulse moved Christie to rise" and speak (332). Her "words came faster than she could utter them, thoughts pressed upon her," and, she recalls later, "the speech 'spoke itself, and I couldn't help it'" (342). Like Sip, her labor experiences provide the power and weight to her speech: "[s]he had known so many of the same trials, troubles, and temptations that she could speak understandingly of them" and help the plight of these workers. Wallace suggests that Christie "is the perfect mediating voice of the women's movement," and that she "'liberates' the female voice" (271). Through this new form of labor and the agency she attains through the women surrounding her, Christie gains the power to speak for working-class women, providing a voice for so many who are silenced or do not know what to say.

As she recognizes her new purpose, she also finds a way to transform the meaningless speech that she heard around her, particularly among the upper class for which she worked. Bella Carrol,

the sister of Helen who committed suicide, comes to Christie because she is experiencing the ennui of a domestic life. Christie gives her a new purpose, to transform the conversation of her society through her home. She tells Bella, “Invite all the old friends, and as many new ones as you choose; but have it understood that they are to come as intelligent men and women . . . give them conversation instead of gossip; less food for the body and more for the mind” (Alcott 338). At the beginning of the novel, Alcott explains that all of the experiences Christie has gone through have “fit her to play a nobler part on a wider stage” (37). She has gained the greater and “nobler” purpose of voicing her struggles to improve those conditions and experiences for other women. Through the ideal home and her work within and without it, Christie gains the empowerment to speak and to transform speech, providing the other despairing, depressed, and silent women around her with the ability to speak and labor for themselves. Home and labor come together to empower these women, but only when both of those entities operate inside and outside private but communal space.

Notes for Chapter 2

¹ Though David dies, some critics suggest that Alcott is not entirely giving up on men. In *Labor Pains*, Carolyn R. Maibor argues, “Alcott does not banish marriage and childbirth from her main character, but rather puts them in a more balanced place (similar to the place they occupy in the lives of men)” (124). Likewise, Janene Gabrielle Burnum Lewis notes, “It is important to remember that Alcott’s works do not demonstrate worlds in which men have no place; rather, men and women are to co-exist peacefully as partners” (87). Alcott is showing that women need to lead more balanced lives than an isolated domestic role would allow. However, the fact remains that Alcott cannot envision a marriage in which this mutuality and balance actually permanently occur.

² Scholars are quick to note that Christie’s work is not entirely representative; Alcott very notably leaves out factory work as another (respectable) option for women. The closest she gets to these conditions is in describing the sewing room in which Christie works with Rachel as a “factory-like workroom” (194). Jean Fagan Yellin suggests that Alcott “remains unprepared to acknowledge” this entire class of women (538). According to this scholar, Christie “seems unable to conceive of identifying with women engaged in the industrial production which is redefining the nature of work in America” (530). Kasson suggests another reason, that because factory work was comprised mostly of immigrant workers, Alcott wanted to preserve Christie’s “identity as poor but genteel,” just like her own (xiv). Though in some ways Christie represents all working women, she does seek to separate herself from a lower class of workers. She vows at one point, “I’ve got no rich friends to help me up, but, sooner or later, I mean to find a place among cultivated people” (Alcott 24). Similar to Phelps, then, “Alcott’s own class bias undercuts her written intention to eliminate classism” (Lewis 92).

³ Alcott continues to show the struggles of working-class women through the plights of other female characters. For example, Rachel explains her continual difficulties from her one sexual mistake: “Christie, you can never know how bitter hard it is to outlive a sin like mine, and struggle up again from such a fall. . . . No sooner do I find a safe place like this, and try to forget the past, than some one reads my secret in my face and hunts me down. It seems very cruel, very hard, yet it is my punishment, so I try to bear it, and begin again” (107-08). Christie is the only woman in the text willing to forgive and help Rachel, and it leads to her own physical salvation later. Another young girl, Kitty, who had worked for the Sterlings before Christie, experienced a different struggle. David explains, “Her father kept her in a factory, and took all her wages, barely giving her clothes and food enough to keep her alive” (183-84). Working in the mills, Kitty “at fifteen . . . was as ignorant as a child” because she had not been able to go to school (184). Though Christie does not experience every working hardship, Alcott includes other women who further demonstrate cruelties women often receive.

A “Homeless Race”: African-American Domesticity and Its Uplift in *Iola Leroy*

While Phelps and Alcott specifically move Sip, Perley, and Christie beyond the traditional ideal home, though their domestic space has arguably empowered them to do so, the main characters in African-American Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) move *into* that home and embrace many of its ideals to prove the possibilities of uplift for the African-American race. These characters gain the ability to speak openly and powerfully through the homes they gain and the communities and families they bring together in those spaces. As Harper’s “black” characters face “freedom” after the Civil War and represent the future of the race, they certainly work for pay and gain agency through that labor.¹ However, she clearly suggests that the power and voice they obtain should ultimately point back into the home, elevate many of its (white) Victorian ideals, and educate blacks to improve themselves through that space. For Harper, the home is the social instigator of change that leads blacks to adopt many dominant (white) middle-class values, and though she unquestionably modifies the roles surrounding women inside and outside of that space, she still brings her characters to embrace many of its ideals. Work and speech combine to uplift, and, ultimately, create the home that for so many years African Americans, women in particular, could not possess.

Though writing in the post-Reconstruction 1890s, Harper sets her novel in antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction times to provide, as Frances Smith Foster terms it, a “successful response” to the racial challenges of her current era (xxix).² According to Cassandra Jackson, Iola (and I would add the other characters) represents a “microcosm of the collective history of African Americans,” as she passes through all of these stages of African-American experience (565). At a time when black Americans still lived under enormously enslaving conditions of Jim Crow laws and continued national prejudice, even called the very “nadir” of their existence

(Lewis 315), Harper reverts to an earlier period and uses her characters to speak, work, and live for a more optimistic future in which white society will come to accept blacks' proved "worthiness as full U.S. citizens" (Tate 11) and provide the race with a home. She subscribes to a powerful ideology widely accepted among African Americans after emancipation, termed "uplift," in which African Americans helped each other "transcend the effects of racial exclusion" through social, moral, and political improvement (Jackson 554). According to Kevin K. Gaines in *Uplifting the Race*, subscribers to this ideology "regarded education as the key to liberation" (1) and "group advancement" (21), a notion Harper strongly emphasizes in her novel as her main characters return South to educate and improve the race there.³ However, Harper and numerous other women journalists, novelists, and reformers of the 1890s inserted their own version of uplift into their writing and speaking, "calling for women's leadership as vital to race progress" (4). Through her main female characters, for example, Harper shows the necessity of female leadership in the uplift movement, particularly as they participate in the moral and social reform of children, mothers, and the home. With her version of uplift ideology, Harper provides a response to the issues of the day, exhorting blacks, and particularly women, to work and speak to uplift that race in order to persuade whites to allow them "their rightful place in the communal home" (Ernest 502) that they are ultimately pursuing.

Iola Leroy focuses on the experiences of Iola and her family as slaves in the Civil War era of the South. Though Iola, her brother Harry, and their mother Marie are white, Marie was their father's slave, and after his death the Southern slave owners in the town manage to sell Iola and her mother as slaves and separate their family. During the war, Iola and other slaves are freed by Union soldiers and fight for the North. Afterwards, they search for their separated family members, and, because they have attained education, participate in Reconstruction educational

efforts to help elevate other former slaves. Iola temporarily desires to work for her independence in the North, but she soon finds that the blackness of her relatives hinders her ability to work and live with or near whites. She also rejects a marriage proposal with a white man that would allow her to erase her black heritage. Iola and her family ultimately return South to embrace the identity of the blacks and “uplift” the other freed slaves; she specifically seeks to educate women to create the proper home environment for their children that will make them better citizens. She finally marries a “black” man (like Iola he is biracial and could pass for white) and becomes a volunteer Sunday-school teacher.

The Home

Harper shows clearly that the slave characters in *Iola Leroy*, because of their connection to blackness, cannot possess their own homes before the Civil War but long to do so after its end. Iola, as title character and representative of the contrast between white and black experience, exhibits throughout most of the novel the isolation, longing, and separation from loved ones that slaves typically felt, embodying their loneliness and desire for change. However, early in her life Iola also embodies the ideal home experience allotted to whites, as she and her siblings grew up in the South with loving parents and slaves who cared for them, ignorant of the fact that their mother had been their father’s slave whom he educated, freed, and married. As she thinks back to those days, Iola remembers her experiences of returning home from her Northern school: she was “encircled in the warm clasp of her father’s arms, feeling her mother’s kisses lingering on her lips, and hearing the joyous greetings of the servants and Mammy Liza’s glad welcome” (Harper, *Iola* 103). Harper further demonstrates how this home resembles the prescriptive ideal: Marie, Iola’s mother, would sit “among her loved ones a happy wife and mother” (82). As it

supposedly should be, Marie's world centered on her husband who "brightened every avenue of her life" and her children who "filled her home with music, mirth, and sunshine." However, Iola awakens from this ideal when her father dies and his cousin nullifies Marie's freedom, splitting up her family and subjugating its members to slavery.

As Iola explains later, she was hurled from "a home of love and light into the dark abyss of slavery" (273), "torn from [her] mother" and her home (54). She comes to represent the "familial dislocation" of the slave experience (Young 281), and Iola finds this new experience isolating and horrifying. Slave owners sell Iola "all ober de kentry" as a young, sexual commodity, recounts a slave named Tom who knows her history, though he makes it clear that the owners can neither "lead nor dribe her" nor bring her down to their sexual level (Harper, *Iola* 38).⁴ When the Union army invades North Carolina where she and Tom reside, Tom succeeds in persuading the soldiers to free her, and through the rest of the war she works as a nurse in a Union hospital. Even in her freedom, though, Iola mourns her isolation and home of the past. When Tom, her one friend, dies, she returns to her duties "feeling the sad missing of something from her life" (54), and Dr. Gresham, a doctor working in Iola's hospital, remarks later, "there is a longing in her eyes which is never satisfied" (57). Harper seems to suggest that without a sense of belonging and a home and family, much like Alcott's Christie, Iola lacks identity and purpose and longs to have a place. Iola declares to Dr. Gresham that she has "no home but this in the South" (60). She adds, "I am homeless and alone." For Iola, this loneliness and isolation are extremely difficult because she recognizes her homelessness now in comparison to the home she used to have. In describing another work titled *Calling Home*, Lillian S. Robinson describes Iola's emotions: "The tone is one of loss and the pain of remembering what has been lost, underlying a sense of not fully belonging anywhere" (292). For Iola and these other slaves,

belonging is a crucial part of humanity denied to slaves, and even though free from slavery, Iola still cannot attain identity or fulfillment because she still possesses the pain of the memory of a home at the same time that she lacks what she remembers having.

Throughout the novel, because of her light appearance, Iola embodies the distance between white and black. She represents what blacks could have, if their skin color looked like hers, and what they actually have, when the whites around her realize she is “not white” and treat her like others they consider black. Though some scholars have critiqued Harper’s use of white characters because they represent cultural assimilation and the disappearance of black identity, other critics present meaningful arguments for why Harper (and numerous other authors of the time) chose the mulatto/a character.⁵ Iola’s light color and yet post-war decision to adopt a black identity to uplift the race certainly allow her to serve as a mediator between the two separate races, which were becoming even more distant from each other through the debilitating Jim Crow laws of Harper’s time (Carby 89-90). Through her main characters, Harper puts forth this uplift ideology as the culminating or ultimate means of attaining freedom and equality for educated black Americans to reduce that distance. Iola exemplifies this ideology through her adoption of a black identity and her decision to elevate the blacks around her. By sharing with blacks the education she received through her white skin, she and others can elevate the race so that blacks can achieve the same opportunities as whites regardless of their skin color.

At the same time, through Iola’s differing experiences based on the color society considers her to be, Vashti Lewis argues that Iola serves to “elici[t] sympathy from whites” who may more fully understand the slaves’ experience when it first more closely resembles their own, and when the character is more an “ill-fated white” than black (314). Hazel V. Carby also suggests that Harper uses Iola’s “fall” into slavery to “indicate the depths of social corruption” in this

institution, as she was socially accepted as white but just as quickly “declared nonhuman and denied all protection and nurturance” (73). Harper uses Iola’s skin color to demonstrate the absurdity of the distance between the experiences of these races and the need to elevate blacks to the level of, or even above, whites.

For other slave characters in the novel, who have always been slaves, their lack of home is most noticeable and poignant in their absence of loved ones and shared space. In her essay entitled “Enlightened Motherhood,” Harper refers to African Americans as a “homeless race” (285). As she shows in *Iola Leroy*, these slaves are homeless because they have no home entirely their own; their living spaces are often separate from loved ones as well as shared and controlled. Throughout the novel, the slaves center their lives and decisions around their family members and continually mourn their absence, as their slave owners most exhibit their power by splitting up these slaves’ families. Indeed, Wright explains that “many social ties were based on extended family or friendship bonds,” mainly because closer family ties had been cut (51). At the beginning of the novel, slaves converse secretly with each other in a meeting held in one of the slaves’, Uncle Daniel’s, cabin, deciding whether or not to desert their plantations and run to the nearby Union camp. All of the slaves base their decisions on their family members. Robert, for example, later discovered to be Iola’s uncle, announces of his mistress, even though she has consistently cared for him, “I’ll leave her. I ain’t forgot how she sold my mother from me. Many a night I have cried myself to sleep, thinking about her” (Harper, *Iola* 34). Robert chooses to run because his mistress separated him from his mother; nothing connects him to that plantation any more. However, another slave, Uncle Ben, decides to stay because his mother lives with him and would not be able to make it to the camp. He chooses her over slavery: “I don’t want to be free and leave her behind” (31).

For these slaves, the bond with their mothers is particularly strong; on numerous occasions, they describe their forced separations from those women. John Salters, the husband of Aunt Linda, an older slave, remembers, “I war sole ’way from my mammy wen I war eighteen mont’s ole, an’ I wouldn’t know her now from a bunch ob turnips” (168). Marie, Iola’s mother, remembers her separation explicitly, as Marie’s husband Eugene describes: “She had no recollection of her father, but remembered being torn from her mother while clinging to her dress. The trader who bought her mother did not wish to buy her” (69). Out of all the slaves’ horrific experiences, according to Harper the separation from family and the inability to have a connected home were the most memorable, particularly in contrast to the ideal of the time that required a specific place that united the family. According to Alexander Keyssar in *Home*, the homeless are those who “do not have ‘a place in the world’ or whose place in the world is not their own and not secure” (83). The most important aspect of the home for the slaves is the one they have the least control over, that most exhibits their homelessness, for their owners have the power to decide who lives in or near their supposed homes and who does not at all.

Although these slaves are able to hold a meeting in one of the cabins, a highly unusual occurrence given the lack of privacy typically afforded the slave, most of the time Harper shows the slaves to be outside their cabins in shared and public space. Normally, the slaves conduct their prayer and planning meetings in secret but public areas. Aunt Linda explains, “Las’ Sunday we had it in Gibson’s woods; Sunday ’fore las’, in de old cypress swamp; an nex’ Sunday we’el hab one in McCullough’s woods” (Harper, *Iola* 12). It seems that the only reason they risk holding the meeting in the cabin is because Uncle Daniel’s wife is sick and they do not want her to miss the discussion. According to Wright, meeting and holding activities outside the cabins were common practices among slaves, as the dwellings in which they lived were “not a haven for

the black family,” often because they were too small (51). The cabins were typically a single room and crowded, complex spaces in which “family living, eating, cooking, entertaining, and intimacy” took place (50). Wright explains that many activities occurred on front porches or in the “street” behind the cabins, though the clandestine meetings in the novel clearly require more secret locations. With the exception of this meeting, then, most of the slaves’ conversations and movements take place away from these cabins, and freedom certainly exists only away from that space. These cabins are clearly more binding than empowering; they are not homes. According to Keyssar, another sign of people who are homeless is that if they do have a place in the world it is “located in public rather than private space” (83). For these slaves, the “homes” they do have are located more in the public communities of other slaves than in their private, confining residences that remind them of the family they no longer have.

After the Civil War, Chaplain J. H. Fowler in *The Liberator*, in answer to the question of what the slaves will do when the war is over, declares that they will “[g]o out into the land, and make their homes there, as many are doing now” (3). Harper describes this process of the slaves pursuing and attaining homes, but it seems that their first attempt before they can create homes is to reunite their families. When Dr. Gresham (who is white) offers Iola marriage, his Northern home, and a white identity, Iola responds that she must find her mother. She explains, “were you to give me a palace-like home . . . I should miss her voice amid all other tones, her presence amid every scene” (Harper, *Iola* 118). Iola voices the cry of numerous characters: “Oh, you do not know how hungry my heart is for my mother!” Where Iola and other characters lacked purpose and identity when isolated from their families in slavery, the end of the war brings about a “familial quest for the slave community as a whole” and a new sense of purpose (Young 282). Harper explains of Robert, “To bind anew the ties which slavery had broken and gather together

the remnants of his scattered family became the earnest purpose of Robert's life" (*Iola* 148). When Robert and his mother Harriet find each other through a local church meeting designed to reunite scattered families, Harriet exclaims, "I'se got one chile, an' I means to keep on prayin' tell I fine my daughter. I'm *so* happy! I feel's like a new woman!" (183). Harriet, especially, but the other characters as well, gains identity, purpose, and newness through the restoration of her son and the consequential ability to begin to create a home. Iola also eventually finds her "real self" and means of identity through "finding and bringing together [her] legitimate family" (Carby 77). Interestingly, when Robert finds Harriet, though he had been living in a boarding-house in the North, he now begins to search for "a suitable home into which to install her"; the home cannot be complete without first reunifying the family (Harper, *Iola* 189). For these characters, freedom provides the opportunity to reunite the ties of the home that slavery severed, and particularly the tie with the mother that so often was the source of disconnect. In the reclamation of these families comes a new sort of identity for the slave, one focused on unified community and the newly emerging possibility of a personal and meaningful home.

After the Civil War, Harper shows that, as Fowler explained, the slaves have gained the right and freedom to pursue homes for themselves. Unlike Sip, Perley, and Christie, the conventional homes these slaves attain serve as places of freedom and expression. By participating in the ownership process and uplifting the ideals of these spaces, they gain a sense of societal belonging and personal identity. Harper shows a number of slaves desiring and attaining homes. Robert's mistress Mrs. Johnson explains that one of the plantations in the area had been sold to freedmen and divided. The former slaves create a "nice settlement" on the location where so many slaves had suffered cruelties, establishing it in the clearing where one of the prayer meetings had been held (152). While these hidden prayer meetings had served to covertly

empower these slaves and bring them together, these homes can literally replace those practices by providing a new avenue for more open expression. Aunt Linda and her husband John Salters demonstrate the desires of the slaves to gain this space for themselves. Salters recalls, “But somehow . . . Lindy warn’t satisfied wid rentin’, so I buyed a piece ob lan’, an’ I’s e glad now I’s e got it” (173). He further explains, “I’d ruther lib on a little piece ob lan’ ob my own dan a big piece ob somebody else’s.” Aunt Linda tells Salters’ reaction, also: “When we knowed it war our own, warn’t my ole man proud! I seed it in him, but he wouldn’t let on” (155). According to Amott and Matthaei, by the 1870s, between 4 and 8% of freed families in the South owned their own farms, with that number doubling between 1890 and 1910 (155). For both of these characters, and numerous other freed slaves, owning even a small home provides them with a sense of pride and identity that renting could not offer. Being able to own a home becomes a clear embodiment of freedom.

These freed men and women did not merely seek to own homes; they also sought to embrace and enforce domestic ideals. Fowler details some of the changes from 1863: “Then they were housed in huts and poor barracks; now each family has its own comfortable house and garden well fenced, many of which are owned by them” (3). Although Harper very clearly shows the realities behind the supposed accessibility of these homes, she also creates a picture in which the slaves adopt what Fowler describes. Uncle Daniel’s house, as Aunt Linda explains it, is “dat nice little cabin down dere wid de green shutters an’ nice little garden in front” (Harper, *Iola* 158). Aunt Linda’s little place also has a garden “filled with beautiful flowers, clambering vines, and rustic adornments” (153). Even the cottage porch of Iola’s home when she marries Dr. Latimer at the end of the novel features morning-glories, roses, and jasmine. In these expressions of freedom, there are also expectations to meet that include a specific picture of the new “free”

dwelling. Harper shows that these homes also fulfill other ideals associated with the Victorian white middle-class home. The atmosphere of these homes is “homely” (173), “bright and happy” (195), “peaceful,” and full of light. Gilman’s sarcastic description of that ideal fits well here: “everything healthy, happy, and satisfied with the whole thing” (65). Indeed, Marie, Iola, and Iola’s brother Harry sit together as a “little family” “around the supper-table for the first time for years,” and they are “very happy” (195). Harper fills these idyllic scenes with pictures of the families coming together, centered around the mother, either in the kitchen or the parlor, “living cosily together” (201).

These homes are also clean and filled with expressive feminine touches. Robert thinks about the transformations he has seen over the years, observing that the “one-roomed cabins [have] change[d] to comfortable cottages, in which cleanliness and order have supplanted the prolific causes of disease and death” (280). As mentioned with the tenement conditions of the first chapter, prescriptivists saw cleanliness as crucial to middle-class living. These homes also serve as sites of creative expression for women. Harper describes Marie’s room, for example, that Iola prepares when her mother comes to live with her, Harry, and Robert: “Her room was furnished neatly, but with those touches of beauty that womanly hands are such adepts [*sic*] in giving. A few charming pictures adorned the walls, and an easy chair stood waiting to receive the travel-worn mother” (209). According to Prince, the creative expression that Harper illustrates here was “fundamental to establishing an African American sense of home” (30), most likely because blacks did not have any way to exhibit such creativity, at least openly, in their slave cabins. By the 1890s, the ideal white home was also associated with this artistic creativity, as Clark explains that the home was expected to enhance individual expression and creative development (102). According to Linda Kerber, prescriptive literature targeted these freed slaves after the Civil War

and emphasized these ideals, “implicitly promising that adoption of the ideology would ensure elevation to the middle class” (45). Harper is suggesting the same idea here; by showing that these characters have embraced and attained the domestic ideals of family, happiness, cleanliness, and creativity, she suggests that they are worthy of elevation into the middle class and society. She also shows that by embracing these ideals, they can attain the freedom, identity, and significance they have been pursuing.

However, though these homes exemplify freedom and open expression, they also emphasize boundaries. Although these homes can provide liberating possibilities, Harper shows that due to current societal prejudice, black Americans cannot gain full access to the nation’s ideals. Harper exemplifies this contrast in Robert’s visit to his former owner, Mrs. Johnson. The author writes, “When she heard that Robert had called to see her she was going to receive him in the hall, as she would have done any of her former slaves, but her mind immediately changed when she saw him” (*Iola* 150). Though their reunion is initially awkward because Robert abandoned Mrs. Johnson for the Union army, he soon relieves their mutual embarrassment by calling her “Miss Nancy” as he had done previously. At this point, she “invite[s] him into the sitting room, and [gives] him a warm welcome” (151). However, although Mrs. Johnson welcomes him into her sitting room, a room of intimacy and reciprocal conversation, she would have left the other slaves in the hall, a place of formality, where power relations still come into play. Clark explains that in the hall “people of different social status might interact on a more formal basis” (45). Similarly, Wharton and Codman suggest that the hall serves as a “thoroughfare,” a point of access to the outside that prevents a servant or unwanted visitor from entering the rest of the house (121). Kim Hopper refers to the homeless as in “a kind of cultural limbo” (108), which is what a hall is, as a “mediating space” between the front porch and the inner, more private rooms

(Clark 45). In a way, then, Harper is showing that even though some freed slaves have attained homes for themselves, numerous whites are still only letting them remain in the hall or a liminal space of society, refusing to invite them further in as intimates or equals.

Harper provides numerous occurrences of the home as a limitation and means of exclusion for African Americans, in the North and South. Robert and Iola's family decides to move North when it is reunited, probably in the hope of better opportunities. Although the Reconstruction period brought significant improvements to blacks in the South, the post-Reconstruction period saw the assertion of national racial prejudice and the ways society wanted to exclude African Americans. In the South, for example, though some could own their own farms, the majority "were enmeshed in a cycle of failure" that reduced freed-people to servitude through sharecropping and the crop lien system (Peterson 105). However, as Robert and Iola find directly, the North in many ways is no more welcoming to black workers or residents; as Iola says, "the negro is under a social ban both North and South" (Harper, *Iola* 115). When Robert attempts to find a home for his mother, he cannot attain one in a white neighborhood when the agents see Harriet. Instead, he receives the answers "'The house is engaged,' or, 'We do not rent to colored people'" (190). Iola receives the same treatment when she attempts to work and live on her own. One matron of a respectable boarding house "grew so friendly in the interview that she put her arm around her," eagerly approving of Iola's admission, but when she realizes that Iola is "black," she "virtually shut[s] the door in her face" (209). Amott and Matthaei explain that blacks faced "violent exclusion from employment and housing" in the North as well as the South (157). Such treatment leads Iola to cry that this prejudice "environs our lives and mocks our aspirations" (Harper, *Iola* 232). Similarly, Lucille Delany, a black teacher, calls African Americans "aliens and outcasts" of society (251). At the end of the novel, all the main characters

who identify themselves as black return to the South to help uplift the race there. Their movement suggests that segregation is necessary at this point as “a matter of basic cultural survival,” says Michael Borgstrom (788). He explains that “full and equal citizenship,” gained within the intimacy of the nation’s sitting-room, “is as yet an unrealized goal.” In many ways, these African Americans have not yet attained the true homes they desire; as in other contexts, the home serves as a point of exclusion that at this point in post-Reconstruction society still keeps out members of the black race.

While Harper clearly provides a negative image of many relations between black and white, she simultaneously provides an optimistic ideal for African Americans if they embrace the black race and assist in its elevation. All of the biracial characters in the novel—essentially Iola, Harry, Robert, and a doctor by the name of Frank Latimer who eventually marries Iola—face the decision to “pass” as white or identify themselves with their families as black. All choose to embrace blackness to find and remain close to their relatives, especially their mothers, and later to uplift the race. Iola specifically faces the option of becoming the ideal middle-class white woman through the proposals of Dr. Gresham, the doctor in the hospital where Iola worked during the war. Even knowing Iola is “not white,” he sees her as his ideal wife, and she, too, sees him as “the ideal of her soul exemplified” (Harper, *Iola* 110). He offers her “love, home, happiness, and social position,” in many ways representing what readers would probably see as the ideal husband, like Christie’s wealthy Mr. Fletcher. However, Iola refuses Dr. Gresham’s proposals, feeling that if she chose whiteness she would be forsaking her mother and race and abandoning her ability to help African Americans. Ultimately, these characters, having embraced their own black identities, turn to the South and focus on educating the black Americans there and transforming their homes.

In many ways, by returning south and rejecting the option to “pass” or assimilate into white culture, Harper uses these characters to revise white ideals surrounding marriage and the home. Though Iola could have been the ideal white woman, she takes on another identity instead, choosing to work independently and, like Christie, find her purpose through that labor. She actually later calls Lucille Delany her “ideal woman,” and Harper revises that term, for Lucille, an intellectual, black, laboring, “public” teacher, starkly contrasts the submissive, quiet Victorian woman supposedly inhabiting the home (242). Harper not only revises the ideal woman here; she also modifies the ideals surrounding marriage. In her ultimate demonstration of Harper’s optimism for the future, the novel ends with two marriages, Harry to Lucille Delany and Iola to Dr. Latimer. Though Dr. Latimer’s proposal to Iola portrays the typical woman’s role in the idyllic home—“your presence would make my home one of the brightest spots on earth, and one of the fairest types of heaven”—Harper shows that neither of these relationships revolves around that stereotype (271). When Iola begins to idealize Dr. Latimer for embracing the noble purpose of uplift, emphasizing his chivalric manhood in ways typical of sentimental writers, Latimer responds by accentuating his service to and struggle for the race instead. Similarly, instead of merely “wooing her to love and happiness,” Latimer’s words call her to a “life of high and holy worth” (271). In *Discarded Legacy*, Melba Joyce Boyd acutely suggests that in “contradicting this romantic, medieval metaphor which typified Victorian imagery, Harper refutes this patriarchal notion of manhood and offers an egalitarian alternative in reconsideration of it” (195). Harper indeed emphasizes the egalitarianism of these marriages, as they “empower” these women to fulfill their individual purposes (Borgstrom 785). Both women work before marriage, gain a sense of purpose, “self-development” (Tate 6), and even “security” (Carby 80) from that labor, and, more surprisingly, continue to labor after their marriages.⁶ Both of these marriage

relationships resemble the mutuality of Christie's and David's; Iola's and Latimer's, for example, centers on their "[k]indred hopes and tastes" and their "[o]ne grand and noble purpose" to labor for the race together (Harper, *Iola* 266). According to Tate, Harper revises the patriarchal roles surrounding marriage in the form of what she calls "enlarged domesticity" (149). Harper provides a picture of a new home environment based on equality, partnership, agency for women, and a broader purpose for them than the privatized, isolated home.

Harper does seek to uplift her race through the models of these characters, and while she revises these marriages in significant ways she also enforces the standards of respectability and morality that could be considered middle-class ideals. By ending this novel with marriage, she emphasizes the respectability of these characters and the possibility for the race to uphold such standards, particularly since slaves only received the legal right to marry after the Civil War (Tate 91).⁷ In the novel, Marie (quoting Harper's "Enlightened Motherhood") declares that the race must be taught "the sacredness of the marriage relation," which she clarifies to mean "purity in women and uprightness in men" (Harper, *Iola* 254). According to Julie Cary Nerad and others, through marriage and the morality of her characters, particularly Iola Leroy, Harper dispels the circulating myth that African Americans (especially women) "lacked the capacity for moral virtue" (830). Iola, like numerous other heroines in domestic novels at the time, embodies the traits of "feminine purity, piety," and respectability that were seen as so crucial to dispelling the race's stigma of immorality (Tate 8). Gaines argues, "the home and family remained as the crucial site of race building" (12), and Harper clearly displays that perspective here. The work that Iola ultimately pursues, as a sign for the future of the race, actually involves training her students to adopt "good" respectable character as well as "lifting up the homes of the people" (Harper, *Iola* 280). Harper uses her characters to embody the domestic ideals of respectability

and propriety to affirm the race's possibilities for elevation and lead it on to achieve these ideals. Throughout the novel, then, Harper moves her characters from their slave cabins and lack of homes, through the homes they can (and cannot) attain in Reconstruction, to the charge of imparting these partially revisionist and partially traditional ideals surrounding these homes to the rest of the race. Through this new education, Harper uplifts the African-American race, points to the promise of future equality, and shows that it belongs with the rest of the nation.

Work

Throughout the novel, Harper provides various scenarios in which her characters work, ultimately showing that the most fulfilling and accessible labor comes in the education and improvement of the black race. According to Elizabeth Young, Harper provides a variety of labor efforts during the war that freed or escaped slaves realistically performed (279). The fugitive male slaves, of course, serve as soldiers for the Union army. Iola works as a nurse at the same time, gaining a sense of relief in being able to help the soldiers. Lewis explains that Iola's efforts "[pay] tribute to hundreds of black women who were actively involved at Civil War battle sites" (319). After the war, also, Aunt Linda supplies food for the soldiers, as she explains, "I made pies an' cakes, sole em to de sogers, an' jist made money han' ober fist" (Harper, *Iola* 154). When the war ends, the labor of these characters becomes more purposeful than merely supporting the troops; it becomes a way to gain a home and family and provide education to others. For instance, Aunt Linda uses her baking to save money for a house. She describes her efforts: "I kep' on a workin' an' a savin' till my ole man got back from de war wid his wages and his bounty money. I felt right set up an' mighty big wen we counted all dat money. . . . An' I sez, 'John, you take dis money an' git a nice place wid it'" (154). For this woman, labor offers her the

opportunity to gain a sense of belonging, though that work is certainly not easy; she explains that she has “been scratchin’ too hard to get a libin’” to do anything else, like learn to read (156).

When they can, the characters choose work that could lead them to their families. During the war, for example, Robert chooses to serve in the black regiment because he believes it will further his chances of finding his mother and sister. After the war, Iola, suffering emotionally and physically from the strain of nursing, chooses to teach, to “cast my lot with the freed people as a helper, teacher, and friend,” and search for her mother simultaneously (114). Iola uses what Harper describes as “her work” to support herself, go South to find her mother, and begin educating the blacks around her (146). Interestingly, Lewis shows that Iola again represents “the vital roles assumed by women of African descent in the education of black people,” working in the educational program of the Freedman’s Bureau (319). According to Borgstrom, Iola characterizes the “political possibilities” for black women following the war (782). For these freed slaves and characters identifying themselves with the black race, labor can be an empowering force that promises a home, connections to family, and the opportunities to elevate themselves and others.

Once again, however, Harper quite clearly shows that freedom has its limits, as northern and southern societies confine African Americans to specific types of work and allow them to occupy only certain positions. In the South, Harper demonstrates that conditions have deteriorated, to the point that white law holds black people to a significantly higher standard, arresting them for “taking a few chickens,” says Robert, versus the whites’ “stealing a thousand dollars” (*Iola* 170). At the same time, southern society subjugates them to the lowest forms of labor peonage. According to Amott and Matthaei, though some African Americans did own their own farms and could work for themselves, southern landowners “created a system of debt peonage that tied

most former slaves to the land” and forced them to work in slavery-like conditions for whites (109). Similarly, as Aunt Linda’s experience shows, most women had to work “side by side with men” to be able to support their family (Warner 5). Though paid labor can be empowering for freed slaves, as Harper shows, women, especially, often “occupied the narrowest range of occupational opportunity,” unable to obtain work outside of domestic service and agriculture (Santamarina 11). By 1900, say Amott and Matthaiei, 44% of black women workers were concentrated in each of these occupations (160). Work that actually offers freedom and opportunity for these freed slaves seems neither realistic nor typical.

Iola declares that prejudice “permeates society,” and Harper shows again that African Americans face this bigotry, particularly related to labor, also in the North (*Iola* 231). Iola decides to work for herself to gain independence and experience, like Christie, and Harper uses her character to represent the distance between the treatment of whites and blacks. When Iola sees an advertisement for a saleswoman, she tells Robert that she intends to apply. He quickly responds, “When he advertises for help he means white women” (205). Undeterred because the ad mentions nothing of color, Iola ignores his warning and applies anyway. She gains two positions but loses them both when her female coworkers discover that her grandmother is black; according to one, “Iola must be colored, and she should be treated accordingly” (206). After losing her second means of employment, Iola tells Robert that this prejudice “assigns us the lowest places” (207). Even in the North, Harper affirms these labor limitations for blacks and shows that white society attempts to keep them poor and disadvantaged. Iola does “at last f[i]nd a place in the great army of bread-winners” when one employer enforces racial equality among his other employees and insists on keeping her (211). This treatment is obviously rare, though. As Boyd writes, Harper is offering a “solution to this injustice” by promoting this employer’s

“integrity” (188). However, as numerous scholars have pointed out, Iola’s labor is not representative of most black women; the only reason she procures this position is through her white appearance. Instead, Harper uses this labor process to reveal the disparities based on color. As Lewis argues, Iola’s experience provides one example of this inequality, as her treatment reveals that white women would regularly have access to this work while “black women were routinely denied” (319). Because Iola does eventually attain a position (supposedly) regardless of race, however, Lewis suggests that “Iola is the vehicle for ideological platforms of black Americans at the turn of the century,” a way for Harper to show the type of treatment blacks *should* receive. Iola’s position, like the conditions in the South for these characters, is still problematic; as Harper demonstrates and argues, there is still significant room for improvement and equal treatment.

In the novel, every young or middle-aged character works, and Harper uses their labor to revise the ideals surrounding women and women’s labor. She uses Iola to elevate work for women, emphasizing their need for self-sufficiency and employable skill. Like Christie, Iola announces her decision to “join the great rank of bread-winners” (Harper, *Iola* 205). She denounces the “weakness and inefficiency of women” and declares that every woman should “know how to earn her own living” and “be prepared for any emergency” (208). Because so many black women worked out of necessity, even after marriage (a supposed 22% of black women in the 1890 census versus 2% of white women), it seems crucial for Iola to elevate and promote women’s labor to her readers (Amott and Matthaei 157). Though Iola resigns from teaching when she marries Dr. Latimer and becomes a (non-paid) Sunday-school teacher instead (thereby furthering the ideal that middle-class married women did not need to work), Lucille Delany insists on maintaining her employment after marriage, as she is “too devoted to resign”

as head of a large finishing school with Harry (Harper, *Iola* 280). It is this woman whom Iola declares to be her ideal, and Harper offers a new model for readers, one who labors and finds pride, empowerment, and self-sufficiency in her efforts. This type of woman that Harper celebrates is one who takes part in black education and “moves freely but with dignity in the public sphere” within that context (Peterson 102). With this new ideal embodied through the teaching efforts of Iola and Lucille, Harper modifies the stereotype of black women’s servility and shows their labor to be an empowering tool, as they labor *for* themselves and, if married, *with* their husbands, sharing “political activity” and purpose (Young 285).

However, this revision does not merely apply to black women, and once again Iola’s mulatto characteristics become relevant. Her call to work speaks for all types of women, black and white, even those who may not need to labor. Iola complains, “I am tired of being idle,” as if Harper is suggesting that women living solely in the home without a greater purpose, much like the initial Perley, are leading idle and purposeless lives (*Iola* 210). As a solution to her idleness, Iola decides to leave the welcome home that Robert has for her, at least temporarily. He tells her, “there is no necessity for you to go out to work” (205). Still, she responds, “I would rather earn my own living.” Carla L. Peterson explains, “Iola works to redeem her race, not by remaining by the hearth, but by mediating between private and public spheres within the black community—between home, church, and school” (102). Though Iola does return to this home when her mother comes to live with them, she does not abandon her labor efforts, and she does not limit herself only to the domestic sphere. According to Harper, work serves as a means of empowerment and self-sufficiency for any woman, that their homes should not stifle.

Harper is certainly not calling women to leave their home space, but to transform it through their labor. When Iola returns from her quest for knowledge, experience, and self-sufficiency,

she uses her efforts to educate her new students in the ideals of the home. Both she and Lucille use their labor to train children in the values of proper, moral character and women in the appropriate behavior as wives and mothers. Harper declares that through their efforts, these women (and Harry in his work with Lucille) are “lifting up the homes of the people” (*Iola* 280). She explains in *Iola*’s teaching that “[t]he school was beginning to lift up the home, for *Iola* was not satisfied to teach her children only the rudiments of knowledge. She had tried to lay the foundation of good character” (146). As I explained earlier, Stowe and others in the nineteenth century believed that the home served as the source of training in appropriate behavior, by which (mainly) mothers educated their children in morals and values, developing what is “purest within us” into “nobler forms” (Crowfield 56). By teaching these values to children and their mothers, *Iola* and Lucille elevate these homes to the point that these mothers (and children when they grow up) can adopt these values and then use their homes to provide this training for the next generation. When Lucille first decides to open her school, she does so because she recognizes that black women around her “are unfit to be mothers to their own children,” and she resolves to teach women to be future wives and mothers (Harper, *Iola* 199). In a discussion of the present conditions of the day, which Harper calls a *conversazione*, *Iola* discusses this issue in a speech called the “Education of Mothers.” Her speech sparks a discussion about the need for women to “help in the moral education of the race” (254), particularly because many leaders felt that the “lack of home training” for slaves growing up on plantations was resulting in their increased crime and violence (280). Lucille explains her idea of the role of women in this Reconstruction era, and it quite closely resembles the Victorian ideal for mothers: “There is a field of Christian endeavor which lies between the school-house and the pulpit, which needs the hand of a woman more in private than in public” (254). She specifically designates this work to women and argues

that this education should take place privately, in the home. Dr. Latimer adds that if parents (though this role was generally assigned to women) “fail to teach restraint”—what another woman explains to mean teaching “our boys to be manly and self-respecting, and our girls to be useful and self-reliant” (253), or what Iola calls making the homes “more attractive”—society will have to check these people through “chain-gangs, prisons, and the gallows” (254). Harper establishes the home as the crucial center for societal improvement and shows women’s labor to be imperative to that reform.

Harper’s vision of women’s labor, then, operates for the most part within the ideals of Victorian motherhood. Although Iola argues explicitly for women’s labor, she meets the expectation that married women resort to unpaid labor rather than paid, resigning from her teaching position when she gets married. Though Lucille still serves as Iola’s ideal woman by sharing equal duties with Harry, according to Tate and other critics, Harper seems “ambivalent” or a little uncertain about formally “asserting [Iola’s] place in the [paid] public sphere” (187). Harper explains, “she quietly took her place in the Sunday-school as a teacher, and in the church as a helper” (Harper, *Iola* 278), holding “mothers’ meetings to help these boys and girls to grow up to be good men and women” (276). As a part of her new duties, Iola provides instruction for children, guidance for young girls, and counsel for mothers, clearly continuing her role in moral education and domestic uplift ideology. Though she does work seemingly equally with the pastor in these efforts, the fact that Iola “quietly” takes this place, versus her earlier quite vocal assertions about women’s need to work, is worth noticing. Tate, specifically, argues that Iola’s new form of labor reveals she has taken on the traditional female role in her marriage with Latimer, submitting to his leadership and becoming his “helpmate” (148). Ultimately, Iola’s resignation, like these characters’ marriages, demonstrate Harper’s desire for black women to

seek to attain the middle-class ideals of respectability and nonpaid labor. Still, Iola plainly does not stop working; Harper makes it clear that these women, rather for pay or not, should be working to uplift the homes of African Americans and morally educating the race.

Speech

The speech of Harper's characters is highly relevant to the discussion of uplift and women's labor, particularly because language in the novel in many ways mirrors uplift ideology. At the beginning of the novel, the speech that we hear is coded "folk" or dialect speech of African-American slaves. Contrary to the idea that slaves were entirely silenced by their masters, unable to speak their own opinions or voice their own intellect, Harper shows that these slaves are quite vocal and in control of their language. Some of the more educated or "shrewder" slaves devise a coded language to circulate news of the Civil War (Harper, *Iola* 9). In the market, slaves greet each other asking, "[H]ow's butter dis mornin'?" (7) or "Did you see de fish in de market dis mornin'?" (8). Another slave responds that "dey war splendid, jis' as fresh, as fresh kin be" (8). The narrator explains that if slaves wanted to announce a victory for the Union army, they would declare that the eggs or fish were in good condition, or that the butter was fresh. To announce a defeat, they would say that the food items were stale instead. This speech reveals a powerful undercurrent to slaves' behavior, displaying what Boyd calls "the subversive vernacular practices of slave life" (562). These slaves are not silenced; their speech is intelligent, powerful, "polyvocal," and coded for a purpose (Lashgari 3). At the same time, though, this speech also "exemplif[ies] . . . the conditions of the slaves" (Boyd 175). If they were not in slavery, they would speak differently, for example. Similarly, their dialect demonstrates the extent to which they are not educated (Robert, as more educated, speaks less dialect), because of the barriers of

slavery.

The slaves also take part in another type of speech, in prayer meetings that also include plans for escape. In these meetings, they “mingle their prayers and tears, and lay plans” at the same time (Harper, *Iola* 13). As mentioned previously, they generally hold these meetings in the woods or swamps of one of the plantations, accessible to slaves in the surrounding areas. Robert explains the danger of these meetings: “you had better look out, and not shout too much, and pray and sing too loud, because, ’fore you know, the patrollers will be on your track and break up your meetin’ in a mighty big hurry” (13). Again, they conduct this speech without the knowledge of their masters, laying plans and holding their own religious meetings at the same time they appear to be devout and submissive. Their speech demonstrates a subversive power and shrewdness, a response to the conditions of slavery and a representation of the need to communicate and gain a collective identity through shared language. On an interesting note, both forms of these slaves’ speech occur generally in public places, the marketplace and the woods or swamps (though one meeting does take place in Uncle Daniel’s cabin). In the house of their masters, then, even that coded speech is hindered; the “home,” for these slaves, or master’s house, is clearly not a place of expression, individual voice, or unity. The freer speech the slaves do take part in must exist outside that space.

After the war, when slaves can engage in unhindered speech more openly, their homes serve as one place of expression for them, one demonstration of the freedoms they have gained. When Robert returns to the South after the war, Aunt Linda invites him into her home to “have a good talk” (157) “’bout ole times” (156). She tells him, “Couldn’t yer come an’ stop wid me, or isn’t my house sniptious ’nuff?” For her, talking is directly related to her home. While her desire to converse about slave times and the continuation of her dialect speech link her with the

antebellum era, the facts that she can do these in her newly acquired personal space, and that she wants to do them there, demonstrate the extent to which speech and the conditions surrounding it have changed for these slaves. Robert and Iola continue the slave tradition here, but in a new way: “There, in that peaceful habitation, they knelt down, and mingled their prayers together, as they had done in bygone days, when they had met by stealth in lonely swamps or silent forests” (189). For these slaves, the home has become peaceful, a place of privacy and expression. Robert and Iola’s family do the same in the home they prepared for Robert’s mother, Harriet. Like the ideal family gathered around the mother, the center of the home, “the family would gather around her, tell her the news of the day, read to her from the Bible, join with her in thanksgiving for mercies received and in prayer for protection through the night” (267). All of these activities center on language, as Harper exemplifies through speech the freedom and community these freed slaves have been able to gain through this domestic space.

Characters also speak openly in more public locations, for several unifying and uplifting purposes. After the war ends, as mentioned, the characters associated with slavery immediately begin searching for their families, specifically their mothers. They circulate news of their families through prayer meetings in the South, in which freed slaves “come to break bread with each other, relate their experiences, and tell of their hopes of heaven” (179). Those who attend are “remnants of broken families,” and they relay their experiences and memories “in the hope that they will be repeated as gossip and heard by relatives” (Berlant 563). James Christmann calls the method of speaking in these meetings “call-and-response,” in which one speaker calls and another or several from the audience respond spontaneously (6). In one of these meetings, Robert and Iola sing a hymn that their mothers had sung for them, and a mother stands up in the audience and retells the experience of being sold away from her children and sneaking back at

night to hold her son. From the memories she describes, Robert realizes that this woman is his mother Harriet, and this spontaneous and open speech “elicits the response” that unifies this family (8). These meetings also revolve around memory and the experiences during slavery, maintaining a connection to the past but also representing a unity for the future, as the dialect voices of typically less educated freed slaves merge with the uninflected and more refined voices of Robert and Iola. Both types of voices retain their distinctions and ability to speak, and in this context, suggests Christmann, Harper “offer[s] the possibility of a heteroglossic future” that provides a voice and opportunity for all different classes of blacks, from what she calls the “subalterns” to the bourgeois (8). Harper’s acknowledgement of these voices and their past suggests the prospect of creating a future that includes and unifies all types of African Americans.

However, Harper progressively silences those dialect voices and moves her characters into a future of refinement and uninflected speech. Later in the novel, the characters gather and speak at a *conversazione*, or salon, in which, as Robert declares, “the thinkers and leaders of the race . . . consult on subjects of vital interest to our welfare” (Harper, *Iola* 243). This meeting “announces the establishment of a vital African-American bourgeois intellectualism” that exemplifies and discusses racial uplift (Christmann 5). Numerous characters such as Iola, Lucille, and Dr. Latimer discuss the race’s future, promoting, for example, education for mothers, the need for temperance, and the moral progress of the race, ultimately “voic[ing] Harper’s sentiments” and her solutions for post-Reconstruction problems (Peterson 103).⁸ This meeting starkly contrasts the previous public speeches in the novel, like the prayer meetings during and after the Civil War. No “common” slaves are present at this one, and no character speaks in any dialect form. Instead of referring to the past and the conditions of slavery, this discussion looks at the future

and possibilities for black elevation. As numerous critics point out, though Robert attends the meeting and speaks at its end, he remains silent throughout the discussions, probably because of his direct connection to “slave culture” (Peterson 108) and his explicit conversations with “folk characters” (Christmann 15). This *conversazione* mirrors the “upward” movement of the plot, as other folk characters using dialect, such as Aunt Linda, disappear from the text by the end. This new type of meeting, then, facilitates “a monoglossic conception of bourgeois ascendance” (6) that allows the refined speech of leaders who are advancing the race through the teaching of “bourgeois ideals of education, deportment, and appearance” but silences anyone else (10). Borgstrom explains one of the drawbacks to racial uplift: “those who were crucial to black society prior to Emancipation may get left behind in the name of progress,” because they remind these leaders too explicitly of where the race no longer wants to be (789). Though she has certainly provided a place and voice for black characters tied to slavery, by the end of the novel Harper promotes a new type of speech that exemplifies the advancement of (part of) the race through refinement, education, and intellectualism.

Iola particularly embodies this new type of speech; in fact, she most notably gains her power and authority, as a leader of blacks, through her discourse at this *conversazione*. During the war, because of her recent experiences in slavery, Iola does not talk much; if she does, she usually speaks sadly, weakly, and sympathetically, evidencing her loneliness and grief. When Tom is dying, she sings to him in a “tremulous voice” (Harper, *Iola* 54). Even in her cheerful words, Dr. Gresham detects “an undertone of sorrow” as she remembers her experiences in slavery (59). He observes, “There was something so sad, almost despairing in her tones, in the drooping of her head, and the quivering of her lip” (60). At this stage in the novel, Iola seems helpless, weak, and dramatically feminine, so “heart-broke an’ pitiful,” as Tom says (41). Before slavery, she spoke

vibrantly and adamantly, even ironically defending slavery because it operated successfully in her household. Iola's speech, then, reflects her slave experience and the loss of her freedom and family. She loses that vibrancy and autonomy because slavery has taken away her relationships and forced her into submission, and even after she escapes, she speaks weakly and tremulously because she continues to relive the rupture of her past.

After the war, though, Iola gains further purpose and begins to speak more, and the *conversazione* represents the height of her influence as a speaker. Before this meeting, she has already used her language to speak for working women and to teach, and, like Sip and Christie, this speech serves as the culmination of her purpose as a woman and laborer. She reads a paper entitled "Education of Mothers," referencing Harper's own essay called "Enlightened Motherhood" (Boyd 191). Later in the discourse, in a discussion regarding the moral progress of the race, Iola compares the blacks' experiences of slavery to the rejections and trials of Christ, speaking jubilantly and holding her audience spellbound. Harper explains that Iola speaks with "a ring of triumph in her voice, as if she were reviewing a path she had trodden with bleeding feet, and seen it change to lines of living light" (Harper, *Iola* 257). Iola embodies the path that Harper intends for these slaves to take, in a process that mirrors the uplifting power of Jesus as He transitions from the crucifixion to the resurrection, and as she moves from her rocky path of slavery and its memories to this new light of education and equal citizenship. Iola's speech embodies this transition, as she shifts from speaking tremulously to triumphantly. One listener responds, "The tones of her voice are like benedictions of peace; her words a call to higher service and nobler life" (257). Christmann explains that the growing power of Iola's voice reflects "her natural ascension . . . from the field hospital to the . . . *conversazione*, from a world of heteroglossic black voices to a place where only uninflected speech exists" (11). Though

Iola's voice has always been educated and uninflected, her voice becomes more powerful through the text by moving beyond the limitations of slavery and its memories; her voice does what Harper sees blacks doing with moral and intellectual education. Not only does Iola's speech in this *conversazione* demonstrate that she has become a leader in this uplift movement; she embodies the process of that uplift and the power it supposedly provides.

Incidentally, though, it cannot be ignored that with marriage Iola "quietly t[akes] her place" in Sunday-school as a teacher and helper, mirroring in many ways the folk characters whom Harper has written out by the end (*Iola* 278). The freedoms surrounding domesticity and uplift for these characters impose specific ideals that produce the black citizens Harper wants to see, who will "embrace every opportunity, develop every faculty, and use every power God has given them to rise in the scale of character and condition" (282). The uplift Iola calls for inevitably leads to the silence of the parts that specifically do not fit within the ideal of the model citizen, such as dialect, folk tradition, lack of education, and even working married women. At the same time, however, Harper points to the possibilities of empowerment for women through labor, as demonstrated through Iola's speech and Lucille's autonomous work, particularly labor that educates and elevates fellow African Americans. As she demonstrates, that labor begins and ends with the home, especially for women, and provides a place where such labor supposedly promises to reap benefits. According to Harper, through the labor of these characters surrounding the home and its education, blacks gain the opportunity to become full American citizens and finally attain the national domestic space they desire.

Notes to Chapter 3

¹ These characters are often referred to as “black” because they have the biological “‘one drop’ of ‘black blood’” from their mothers’ side, though many of them, including Iola, her brother Harry, their mother Marie, and her brother Robert all have a white complexion (Nerad 814). Julie Cary Nerad argues, however, that to call these characters “black” (especially Iola, who had no knowledge of her enslaved relatives until she was taken into slavery herself) “reinscrib[es] the association between racial identity and biology” that was the argument of the time (818). Iola, Nerad says, is white because she identifies herself as white, until she turns (instead of “returns”) to identify with her black heritage. It seems that Harper intentionally mingles these complex identifications.

² Claudia Tate explains that the post-Reconstruction era begins in 1877 with the withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the Hayes Compromise that authorized the revival of Southern states’ rights (4).

³ Though meant to be democratic, uplift often served as a way to separate the educated middle class from the “undeveloped black majority” (Gaines 2). Even though Harper’s characters do seek to educate as many blacks in the South as possible, thereby seeming to accentuate an uplift ideology that includes everyone, as I discuss later, by the end of the novel she does silence the characters who are not as educated and who are more connected to slavery and the past. Many scholars argue that she associates education with moving forward to adopt middle-class values, and away from the African Americans’ history.

⁴ On an interesting note, Iola was bought to “keep house” for Tom’s master, though obviously as a pretense for the owner’s sexual intentions (38). Still, Iola’s connection to home has entirely shifted; as a slave, she now takes care of the home of someone else.

⁵ See Vashti Lewis and Claudia Tate for discussions of other authors using mulatto characters in this era.

⁶ However, only Lucille works for pay after her marriage; Iola becomes a Sunday-school teacher instead, conforming to the expectation that married women should not work for pay. I will discuss this point later.

⁷ All black people born or naturalized in the United States received citizenship in 1866, in the Fourteenth Amendment (Tate 91).

⁸ Numerous scholars have noted that their discourse even highly resembles speeches Harper had delivered between 1875 and 1891 (Peterson 103; Carby 85-88).

Conclusion

In these three novels, Phelps, Alcott, and Harper create spaces in which their heroines negotiate their desire for meaningful labor and a home that does not constrict their identities, and they gain empowerment in speaking to workers and women, through the combination of the influences of the home and the experiences they have gained from their labor. Though I have sought to show how these authors address the relationship between these necessary aspects of women's lives, particularly working women, I am well aware that I have only been able to examine a few types of female characters by authors from the Northeast United States. More scholarship certainly needs to be done that focuses on the relationship between labor and the home among other authors and texts, especially towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when society's concepts of ideal women's roles were changing so drastically.

Though the standard ideals for women, including the work they could respectably do and the homes they were meant to keep and create, generally applied to the white middle-class woman, authors reacted to these ideals by creating characters excluded from or dissatisfied with them, revising them in varying and meaningful ways. More work needs to be done to examine how these revisions played out across cultures and different types of labor. I am particularly interested in extending this project to include other types of working women such as immigrants and women of color from different portions of America as well as transnationally, particularly in comparison to the notions of work and home in other countries. I would especially like to see the types of ways different authors allow their female characters to speak in these various contexts.

This project could also be extended to include more upper-class women and their relation to this ideal home. I would like to address more extensively the fact that while Sip, Christie, and Iola, as working-class women, move into a more ideal (the authors' definition of ideal, of course)

dwelling space to gain the agency for which they search, Perley must move *out* of her home to be able to gain any sort of empowerment and purpose. Her affluent home life has constrained her to the point that her only means of freedom develops from outside of its walls; by walking the streets and working for reform she gains the agency to transform her domestic life and speak influentially. The way that the home serves as a confinement for this affluent woman, as opposed to a symbol of attainment or improvement for working-class characters, could certainly be explored further, particularly in comparison to labor. For example, the affluent home and society's expectations of women's roles within it constrict both Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*. Surrounded by these expectations, Edna feels compelled to abandon her responsibilities as a wife and mother and work for herself as a painter instead. Labor for her is a means of freedom and a symbol of self-sufficiency. For Lily, similarly, though she tries to convince herself that she longs for an affluent home and its roles, she experiences a moment of panic every time she expects or receives a marriage proposal, knowing that with secure affluence will come the confining roles society expects her to fulfill, again as wife and mother. For her, labor represents her failure to remain within the upper social class, and she finds no work that she can successfully do, though Wharton shows that she really had no other choice because of the constriction of her potential marriages. By the end of these novels, however, these women have become silenced; it would be extremely interesting to examine why these authors felt their characters had no place in society while the characters I have discussed conclude by speaking so powerfully and exuberantly. For Sip, Perley, Christie, and Iola, though, through the independence or experience they gain from their labor and the empowerment they find through their homes, the keeping silent is just what they cannot do, for they have recognized a wider purpose: to inspire and give a voice to other women and workers like them.

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ABSTRACT

“THE KEEPING QUIET IS JUST WHAT I CANNOT DO”:
WOMEN’S WORK, SPEECH, AND THE HOME
IN *THE SILENT PARTNER*, *WORK*, AND *IOLA LEROY*

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Throughout the late nineteenth century, while authors of numerous handbooks and advice manuals propounded the significance of the home and women’s roles within it, female authors such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps in *The Silent Partner*, Louisa May Alcott in *Work: A Story of Experience*, and Frances E. W. Harper in *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* demonstrate the impossibility of this home for working-class women. These writers show that the home and its ideals are necessary for these working women, so that they should not be excluded from them, but they also use their novels to revise the concept of home in a way that includes and empowers working women to gain their ultimate purpose through speaking beyond its walls. Ultimately, I argue that these women gain empowerment through their labor in association with their homes; they cannot gain agency and their own voice without being allowed to possess both.