

**Sentimental Structures of Feeling and ‘Queer’ Female Caretaking in  
Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)**

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After being left by her parents in the care of her unfeeling, economy-minded Aunt Fortune, Ellen Montgomery learns that Fortune has been withholding letters sent to her by her dying mother. Ellen runs, homesick and grief-stricken, to the arms of her best friend and spiritual mentor, Alice Humphreys, who later convinces Fortune to let her deliver one of the kept letters to an ailing Ellen. When she receives the letter, Ellen is overwhelmed by a fit of excessive emotion: “Her transport was almost hysterical. She had opened the letter, but threw herself upon the bed, sobbing in a mixture of joy and sorrow that seemed to take away her reason” (223). During Ellen’s hysterical outburst, Alice, earnest in her sympathy for Ellen, begins to cry too, and shares that she has also lost her mother: “There was a long silence, during which they remained locked in each other’s arms. ‘Ellen dear,’ said Alice at length, ‘we are both motherless, for the present at least, --both of us almost alone; I think God has brought us to be a comfort to each other. We will be sisters while he permits us to be so...and my home shall be your home as well” (224). The two women, having both lost their mothers “for the present at least,” adopt each other as sisters, their affection embodied in a silent embrace that frequently reoccurs over the course of the novel as a gesture of emotional and physical caretaking. To be sisters “for the present at least” indicates both their Protestant religious belief that they will reunited with their mothers in heaven, but also that they may, in the future, find other people to adopt and be adopted by, pointing to both the multiplication of possibilities and vulnerabilities inherent in “choosing” one’s own family.

I want to use this “adoptive” moment between Alice and Ellen, not only to give a sense of the melodramatic aesthetic that frames the sentimental scenes of ‘sisterly’ caretaking in *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), but to also to demonstrate how the melodramatic mode structures the reader’s affective encounter with the text. Peter Brooks defines “the melodramatic mode” as both a genre and a pervasive aesthetic quality that tends toward excessive representations of emotional life, the presence of a decidable moral lesson, and the use of gesture as a metaphor “whose tenor suggests another kind of reality” (9). However, I argue that the “decidable moral lesson” of the sentimental novel is destabilized by the presence of melodramatic gesture. On the one hand, mid-nineteenth-century Protestantism provides the moral framework for *The Wide, Wide World*, the characters surrounding Ellen, often insisting on religious piety, work-ethic, and emotional restraint as strategies to help her manage her grief. On the other hand, Ellen’s tendency toward the sorts of emotional outbursts we witnessed above results in scenes of caretaking that allow Alice and Ellen to be read—as various critics have read them—as friends, sisters, mother and daughter, teacher and student, lovers, or perhaps all of these at once.

In her recent work on queer belonging, Elizabeth Freeman addresses the centrality of corporeal dependency to the formation of queer kinship networks, noting that while social policies have traditionally only addressed some forms of lived relationality, focusing primarily on the support of heterosexual couples and the parent-child unit through the extension of financial benefits, kinship can also be defined “more loosely as a set of possibilities for social relations in any given culture whether they are addressed by state policy or not” (295). Where kinship is marked by a sense of corporeal dependency, caretaking constitutes an intimate social practice that “has not been socialized as services for purchase or as state entitlements —or, more accurately, the kinds of nurture to which, despite their having been socialized so that they are

available outside the household, people have unequal access” (298). For me, the opportunity to imagine queer kinship as a possibility resides in the silences, the melodramatic gestures that suggest, but never fully articulate another kind of reality, where queerness functions as a possibility that haunts the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality.

My decision to begin my larger project with the sentimental novel is connected to both its historical position in relationship to the emergence of capitalism and the changing shape of family life in the late-nineteenth century. The popularity of the sentimental novel was simultaneous with then emergence industrialization, a historical moment in which labor began to move from the home to the factory, and the primary function of the family transitioned from the production of goods to the affective labor of physical and emotional caretaking (D’Emilio). However, the racialized and gendered divisions of labor that also emerged as a consequence of wage-labor, slavery, and the employment of low-wage immigrant labor meant that the goods and services needed to supplement the work of caretaking were distributed in an increasingly uneven way, making it necessary, as Balibar and Wallerstein have pointed out, for poor and working-class families to form broader, non-biological caretaking networks in order to pool resources.

*The Wide, Wide World* is one sense, the bildungsroman tale of Ellen Montgomery’s development from the daughter of a working-class Scottish mother to a fully assimilated, properly gendered bourgeois citizen-subject and the community that supports that development. In a moment of rapid national expansion and global imperialism, Ellen’s progress toward becoming a middle-class sentimental heroine is dependent on her ability to internalize and reproduce the values of nineteenth-century sentimental culture, which included piety, obedience, self-sacrifice, and emotional discipline. As Ellen makes the journey from her childhood home to the rural homestead of her Aunt Fortune, from the home she shares with Alice Humphreys to the

home of her Scottish maternal relatives, she is instructed in the values of sentimental true womanhood by the various mentors she meets along the way. Meanwhile, her successful performance of white, middle class femininity is rewarded with an ever-widening sphere of influence, from a new pony for countryside expeditions with Alice and her brother, John, to a trip to Scotland, where she debates with her uncle the merits of American vs. Scottish manners and customs.

This widening sphere of influence allows the imagined community that coheres around her to both assimilate her into the image of a properly racialized and gendered citizen-subject, and reproduce its own values through her. As John Carlos Rowe has argued, Ellen's travels, her eagerness to pass on the lessons that have been taught to her, and her avidness for learning, allow her to be read as a figure for the reproduction of white, middle-class domestic life as a national, cultural ideal. Yes: Motherless, and emotionally alienated from her Aunt Fortune, Ellen Montgomery develops a kinship network that emerges out of the distribution and exchange of both emotional and physical caretaking labor. Ellen's adoptive relationship with Alice is given erotic significance through the novel's melodramatic emphasis on bodily gesture as both the mode in which the work of caretaking is performed and affection is articulated, allowing her to be read as a figure for a queer possibility. However, it's important to recognize the ways in which the kinship arrangement that emerges out of caretaking is in this case framed by a Protestant, sentimental moral economy that both results from and assists in the accrual of Ellen's economic and racial privilege.

Alice and Ellen's intensifying and suggestive affection for each other over the course of the novel culminate in Alice's long illness and eventual death. Ellen, having learned from Alice's devoted example, returns Alice's care and attention by earnestly tending to her sickbed. Alice

has many nurses during her illness, but all agree that Ellen is the most vigilant: “Constant and thoughtful care; the thousand tender attentions, from the roses daily gathered for her table to the chapters she read and the hymns she sung to her; the smile that often covered a pang; the pleasant words and tone that many a time came from a sinking heart; they were Alice’s daily and nightly cordial” (437). From morning to night, seemingly without rest, she sings hymns, brings flowers, and—as is appropriate for a sentimental heroine—hides her own sinking heart in order to better comfort her friend.

As Alice says goodbye to Ellen, just before her death, she tells her: “You mustn’t cry, love;--listen—this is the token He seems to bring to me,--‘I have loved thee with an everlasting love.’ I am sure of it, Ellie; I have no doubt of it; -- so don’t cry for me. You have been my dear comfort, my blessing—we shall love each other in heaven, Ellie” (438). Alice’s broken speech makes this passage rich with possibility, suggesting both God’s “everlasting love” for Alice, as well as Alice’s “everlasting love” for Ellen. The possibility that Alice’s “everlasting love” is for Ellen is reinforced, when Alice tells her: “You have been my dear comfort, my blessing—we shall love each other in heaven, Ellie.” The passage then closes with Alice kissing Ellen “earnestly several times” before Ellen becomes overwhelmed with emotion and runs out of the room (438). Ellen speaks very little in this scene. Instead, the articulation of her feelings are embodied in her dramatic exit from the sickroom.

I argue that the melodramatic gestures of Ellen’s care for Alice—the “thousand tender attentions,” the “smile that often covers a pang,” the earnest kisses, and her sudden fleeing from Alice’s sickroom—open up the possibility for “queer feeling” within this otherwise sentimental, didactic narrative, marked by Ellen’s inability to inhabit both nineteenth-century gender and

sexual norms and her erotically suggestive affection for Alice. Sarah Ahmed writes: “Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort takes us” (Ahmed 155). Queer feelings involve not only the co-existence of seemingly contradictory affective states, but also suggest that our subjective (and sexual) orientation towards narratives affects what we read into and out of them. While *being* queer and *feeling* queer may coincide, I want to be careful, however, to differentiate between a claim that Alice and Ellen are “actually” lesbians and the claim that I am making here, which is that “queerness” functions as a relational quality—between the reader and the text—from which queer feeling can emerge. Focusing on the homerotics of Alice and Ellen’s relationship is for, me, less about identifying them as lesbian, and more so about pointing out the ways in which the erotics of their friendship opens up space for the reader to enjoy, in Foucault’s words, “everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship,” and indulge in the kinship fantasies that may emerge from the small moments of care and intimacy that Alice and Ellen share (136).

However, Alice’s long illness and eventual death paves the way for Ellen’s emerging embodiment of middle-class sentimental ideals, evident in her tireless vigil at Alice’s sickbed; her increased physical, racial, and class mobility; and evolving self-control. In his book, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Disability and Queerness*, Robert McRuer argues that the increased professionalization of white, middle-class domesticity in the nineteenth century, combined with a cultural emphasis on the able-bodied industrial worker as a necessity for the reproduction of capital meant that the white-middle class home also serves as a site for the reproduction of the able-bodied subject, producing disability and illness as forms of deviance. The fact that Ellen and

Alice's erotic, sisterly relationship is consolidated in moments of death and illness performs the contradictory impulse of white domesticity to both eradicate disability, illness, and non-normative sexuality from the home, even as it performs the exalted function of caretaking.

On the one hand, the importance of caretaking narratives and the ways in which they have critiqued and imagined alternatives to domestic life is of consequence for queer readers, who have often produced non-familial structures of belonging or "chosen families" in order to acquire emotional, physical, and economic support. The sentimental novel's aesthetic emphasis on gesture, particularly the gesture of physical comfort, articulates a notion of family at odds with the nuclear family form as an ideal. However, in the context of *The Wide, Wide World*, while caretaking is repeatedly redistributed to imagine another model of communal and family life, white, middle-class privilege remains largely unthreatened. Jasbir Puar writes, "Both the consolidation and rupturing of traditional heterosexual family forms are possible, but in our present-day global economy the pre-requisite mobility is, as it was [in the early nineteenth century], constrained by race, ethnicity, gender, class and citizenship," and indeed, if we do choose to imagine Ellen's network of affinities as a model for queer kinship, it's necessary to recognize the ways in which Ellen might also function then as a figure for an emergent queer cosmopolitanism whose spatial mobility—a privilege of her race, class, and physical ability—plays a central role in her ability to form a broadly flung network of emotional and physical support.

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