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Nothing Extraordinary: Feminist Everyday History in Victorian Novels of the Recent Past

By

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DISSERTATION

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2024

*Nothing Extraordinary:  
Feminist Everyday History in Victorian Novels of the Recent Past*

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2024

## Abstract

“Nothing Extraordinary: Feminist Everyday History in Victorian Novels of the Recent Past” argues that Victorian novels of the recent past written by women leverage the decades-long gap between publication and plot to proffer alternative modes of practicing history that accommodate — and even prioritize — ordinary life. The nineteenth-century novels studied in this dissertation delineate the limits of traditional modes of history and historical fiction, namely that history does not typically attend to the ordinary, gendered concerns of women such as marriage, child-rearing, and homemaking. In addition to highlighting the conspicuous absence of women’s everyday lives from history, these novels also demonstrate that ordinary life is a complex, mutable assemblage of phenomena. Consequently, these Victorian novels of the recent past engage in a feminist mode of alternative retrospection that both expands what qualifies as historical to encompass the ordinary and complicates the authority of traditional historical knowledge. This dissertation includes three chapters focusing on novels of the recent past written by Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Flora Annie Steel, and George Eliot. Each chapter understands the gap between plot and publication as a different relational, gendered structure of time that emphasizes the vitality of ordinary life: the first chapter traces the significance of generational gaps between women in *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights*, the second chapter sketches how commemoration enshrines racialized gender roles in *On the Face of the Waters*, and the third chapter illustrates how women in *Middlemarch* enact symbolic homecomings making new homes through marriage. Together, these chapters conclude that these novels of the recent past are distinctly gendered forms of history that rely on ordinary, domestic life to accomplish the work traditionally reserved for public history, especially garnering nationalism and national identity.

## Acknowledgements

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter I.....	14
Chapter II.....	52
Chapter III.....	100
Coda.....	139
Works Cited.....	145



## Introduction

### Gendering History, Engendering the Ordinary

“An author ought to consider himself, not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary.” (2)

— Henry Fielding, the opening line of *The History of Tom Jones*.

Many Victorian novelists dabbled in history. Even novels that were not historical novels outright were oftentimes oriented towards the past. The narrator of *Middlemarch* (1872), for example, dubs nineteenth century readers and writers “belated historians” because they come after eighteenth century writer Henry Fielding. Fielding’s most famous work, *The History of Tom Jones* (1749) presents a comical and fictional history that offers a sweeping commentary on “human nature,” according to the narrator. Being of the previous century, Eliot’s narrator concludes that the history fashioned from older methods (like Fielding’s) that rely primarily on such a macroscopic perspective and a drive to generalize and taxonomize would now be akin to a parrot’s prattle, “as if delivered from a campstool in a parrot-house” (141). Instead, modern history as practiced by the novel’s narrator entails “unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe” (141). This aperture of historical focus is narrower: nineteenth century history as practiced in *Middlemarch* calls for a more strategic marshaling of resources and attention. It is a mode of specialized labor, narrowing in on only “certain human lots” and “this particular web” implicitly supplants sweeping histories of all humankind. This approach privileges complexity, dynamism, and specificity over a broader “range of relevancies.” It is more local, human, and intimate. This newfangled way of making history revels in the thorough studies of Dorothea Brooke and other citizens of Middlemarch that fill the bulk of Eliot’s novel. The novel

painstakingly examines individuals' motivations, contradictions, and development — and in doing so weaves a tapestry of intricate English history.

Other Victorian novels of the same genre participate in a similar mode of making history. These texts focus on phenomena that may not be overtly political, and instead take as their focus the activities of everyday lives. In turn, these novels allow for the lives of Dorothea Brooke and other Victorian women to become the stuff of history. This paradox of historical ordinariness, and — how it uniquely emerges in Victorian novels of the recent past — is the crux of this dissertation. Through studies of *Wuthering Heights*, *Shirley*, *On the Face of the Waters*, and *Middlemarch*, this project tracks how alternative practices of history and imagining the past happen in novels of the recent past, and argues that these practices are distinctly gendered, taken up to demonstrate the vitality of women's ordinary lives.

These four novels are all novels of the recent past written by women, and they subsequently proffer detailed portraits of ordinary life in nineteenth-century England. They all offer accounts of complicated families, marriages, and domestic practices, which culminate in distinct commentaries of gendered, ordinary life. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë is a case study in the acute absence of ordinariness, despite an intensely domestic setting. Consequently, the arbiter of ordinariness comes in the form of Ellen Dean, the slightly older housekeeper, who relays the inner workings of two households in crisis. *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë offers a far more triumphant account of how integral kinship between women, forged in the private sphere, is. The gap between setting and publication grafts onto generational divides, which prove to be the most vital relations in the novel. In *On the Face of the Waters*, ordinariness is critical because it begets extraordinariness, which proves a critical racializing conduit to distinguish the English from the Indian in a mutiny novel with clear political aims. Finally, *Middlemarch* presents a

realist, fictional world saturated in ordinariness, that nevertheless proves to have momentous symbolic implications for conceptualizing the history and future of Victorian England.

Crucially, all of the novels that comprise this dissertation are novels of the recent past. A term coined by Kathleen Tillotson in 1954, “novels of the recent past” take place loosely 20-30 years before their publication. Setting novels in the recent past was so prevalent in Victorian novels published between 1830 and 1880 that Richard Altick observes that this recent retrospective mode is “less incidental than almost characteristic” (131).<sup>1</sup> As a result of such ubiquity, “reviewers took its presence for granted as a perfectly acceptable and widely employed literary device, not an innovation or a matter for discussion” (131). The past in these novels, he subsequently asserts, is best understood as merely a modified present. But if novels of the recent past only serve to frame and possibly refract the present, why set these novels in the past at all? Altick reasons that the technique creates a “stereoscopic effect” that invites generative comparison: “past and present could be seen simultaneously and compared, for whatever purpose the novelist had in mind” (163). This added dimension for readerly reflection may have also been a pragmatic move that granted the author enough time for the narrative to develop, endeared older readers to the story, or allowed for plausible deniability when leveling social criticism (180). Altick also speculates that “novelists may also have felt unspoken, perhaps not even conscious, reluctance to associate themselves with the ‘realistic’ school of everyday-life representation, which some critics continued to deplore even as its popularity grew” (181). In other words, layering on retrospection to accounts of everyday life sophisticates these narratives,

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to those centrally featured in this project — *Shirley*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Middlemarch* — other prominent examples of novels of the recent past include *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Wives and Daughters*. There are arguments that imprecisely dated by firmly retrospective novels, like *Jane Eyre*, and novels with a more pronounced historical gap but intimate plot focus — such as *Vanity Fair*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *David Copperfield*, and *Sylvia's Lovers* — still qualify as novels of the recent past (Kingstone 141).

elevating them from potentially coarse to more respectable. This elevation is possible because setting everyday life activities in the past prompts a sort of memorialization that casts them as public, subject to communal memory, rather than private and idiosyncratic. Underlying Altick's supposition is the understanding that the more public and communal, the more marketable and durable the novel. In other words, novels of the recent past borrowed a formal strategy from a preeminent, popular Victorian genre: historical fiction.

Since its emergence in the early-nineteenth century, historical fiction bridged the gap between historical account and romance. Historical fiction often allegorizes or comments on the present by way of depicting sensational, political, and public events of the past. Taking up nation-shaping affairs like wars or sweeping moments of apparent political or social progress — such as the French Revolution in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* or the Italian Renaissance in Eliot's *Romola* — British historical novels throughout the nineteenth century made sense of upheaval by returning to it in fiction, thereby rendering pleasingly continuous and connected the writing present and the historical past. Georg Lukács, one of the first critics to write about historical novels as a distinct genre, credits Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels with the inception of historical fiction in the nineteenth century. Lukács argues that awareness of historical change was stimulated by the French Revolution and its aftermath, but that the new historical consciousness reflected in Scott's novels began to weaken around mid-century as the bourgeoisie became increasingly reactionary. Building on Lukács' foundational work, Avrom Fleishmann and Andrew Sanders also take Scott as the father of historical fiction but focus on his impact on specifically Victorian historical novels.<sup>2</sup> Fleishmann argues that Victorian historical

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<sup>2</sup> Other key scholarly works concerning the production of Victorian historical fiction include those by John Bowen, who charts the relationship between Victorian historical production and historical fiction and how the latter capitalized on the ambiguity produced by the former. In addition, J.W. Burrow demonstrates how political persuasion, paired with certain historical focuses (namely the Norman Conquest, the Reformation, and the Glorious

novels must be taken as sociocultural products of nationalism, industrialization, and revolution, whereas Sanders asserts that the Victorian historical novel, rather than a discrete genre unto itself, is more often a container for other genres. Its capacious generic possibilities, he argues, enable dynamic ways for Victorian writers to rethink the agency and rigidity of the past and, in line with Fleischmann, sensibly rearticulate the looming influences of the present:

To the Victorian historical novelists, the past was not frozen by eternity nor was it, unlike the scenes of Keat's *Grecian Urn*, rendered eternal, silent, and unravished by art. To Scott's successors, history was contemporary, synchronic, and enveloping; it was living and vibrating in the present, and the artist represented its reality as if it were an act of personal memory. The past reinforced rather than undermined the present. Though to many Victorians the past, like the sea lapping Tennyson's *Ithaca*, moaned with many voices, those voices seemed to call for continued advance into the future. (Sanders 31)

The Victorian historical novel captures the connections between past and present, individual and society. Rather than alloying historical events, the romance of literature buttresses the perceived truth and import of history. By capitalizing on the intimacy proffered by fiction, Victorian authors fashion a stronger emotional connection between an individual citizen and the public

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Revolution) motivated certain tracts of historical fiction. Building on Lukacs' legacy, Brian Hammett and Richard Maxwell zoom out from England and contextualize the historical novel as a European formation and underscores the limits and disjunctions of the English historical novel in folding together history and literature. For more information about the influence and reception of historical novels, see Raymond Chapman and Nicholas Dames, who focus on the affective motives and implications when authors invoke the past, especially major historical events. Ian Duncan also charts how historical fiction's infusion of romance appealed to middle-class readers, specifically, and forged a metonymic relationship between individual and national interests and heroics. Finally, there is also a massive body of scholarship dealing with the generic boundaries and blurring of historical fiction: Harold Orel provides a detailed history of the variations of the historical novel and the different authorial logistics entailed in various forms of historical fiction. Similarly, Hayden White discusses the changing and durable tropes and conventions of historical fiction, as well as why they fluctuate over the course of the nineteenth century and in different sociopolitical contexts and generic hybrids. For a comprehensive account of most sub-genres or hybrid genres of historical fiction, see Mark Phillips' *Society and sentiment: genres of historical writing in Britain, 1740-1820*. And for a striking counterclaim, Harry E. Shaw argues that historical fiction is less conscious of its historiography than most critics claim and, consequently, the historical novel is dependent on other Victorian fictional traditions and does not constitute its own distinct genre.

events of their national history. These instantiations of historical fiction take for granted the influence of large-scale historical events and seek to trace and dramatize the influence of such public, national happenings at the individual level.

Novels of the recent past are a class of historical fiction that showcase how the happenings of individuals and private life are also influential. Turning to the recent past allowed authors to sidestep current events and controversial public matters and instead delve into the activities of private life that, because of their relatively slight temporal distance (compared to historical fiction set many decades or centuries in the past), were still legible and resonant with contemporary Victorian life. Novels of the recent past borrow certain formal and ideological aspects while also diverging in key ways from the standard mode of this preeminent nineteenth century form. Namely, they perform similar operations to historical novels but leverage a unique mode of intimacy. They often relegate the political or cultural event to the background of the narrative, and while the author may glean the historical import of the events, their characters rarely grasp (or at least bother reflecting on) the fact that they are living through history. Furthermore, even though they may be preoccupied with memory, legacy, and progress, novels of the recent past parse these themes in contexts far more quotidian than on the battlefield or the middle of a revolutionary mob. These texts interrogate the past, but they do so without being obliged to memorialize or otherwise consolidate events and their underlying social formations and relationships into codified history. Instead, these novels search out and relay dispatches from the places where public history and personal memory meet, engendering a temporality that Helen Kingstone calls “living memory” since some, though not all, contemporary readers will have lived experience of the relatively recent period portrayed in the novel (9). Living memory is subject to mercurial, fragmented, and otherwise unsettled recollections of living individuals

while, at the same time, bestowing an authority reserved for experiential, lived, and embodied knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Novels of the recent past provide the ideal narrative conditions for capturing the quotidian because they are attuned to gendered, domestic, and seemingly banal phenomena; as Rita Felski notes, in modernity there is a firm correlation between the quotidian “‘feminine’ repetition” that stands in opposition to extraordinary “‘masculine’ rupture” (616). Felski explicates how this hierarchical distinction between the useful everyday and artful aesthetic structures the field of critical theory, but it also cues one into the more localized gendered paradox of the ordinary in Victorian novels of the recent past; in these texts, women’s everyday lives and work are both vital and subjugated.

This ability to write history while still accommodating the ordinary minutiae of women’s lives is incumbent upon a larger ideological shift that Foucault identifies in nineteenth-century literature’s topical focuses. He observes that literature begins to articulate an epistemological assemblage of literary realness that rivals the quality of truth posited by history in nineteenth century Europe. Literature of real life gains its purchase, he explains, by relaying fragmentary accounts of “infamous” men and women that “seek out the quotidian beneath the quotidian itself” (172-175).<sup>4</sup> This contrasts fables of centuries past that relied on the extraordinary to demarcate the ordinary. Foucault derives his definition of “quotidian” from state archives,

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<sup>3</sup> Novels of the recent past are more amenable to multiplicity and ambiguity, but they do not entirely depart from historical fiction’s tendency to create and enforce hierarchies and moralizations. As *Shirley*’s overt, self-conscious narrator tells the reader: “but though I describe imperfect characters (every character in this book will be found to be more or less imperfect, my pen refusing to draw anything in the model line), I have not undertaken to handle degraded or utterly infamous ones. Child-torturers, slave masters and drivers, I consign to the hands of jailers. The novelist may be excused from sullyng his page with the record of their deeds” (C. Brontë 60).

<sup>4</sup> Accounts of the quotidian were not ethically, affectually, or politically uniform. Because, as Foucault argues, “discourse, power, everyday life, and truth were knotted together” literary depictions of ordinary life are not simply discursive interchangeable artifacts testifying to violent encounters with a uniform state power, but mutable containers for uneven violence inflicted onto subjects depending on gender, sexuality, race, and other vectors of difference codified in the nineteenth century.

collecting fleeting encounters between individual citizens and state apparatuses, namely legal and policing structures. However, a more capacious and accurate understanding of the quotidian emerges when private happenings are considered in addition to public ones. Foucault insists that the mundane excerpts of daily life that he finds in legal records coalesce in nineteenth century Europe into an epistemological assemblage of literary realness that comes to rival history. Consequently, literature's changing relationship to history in the nineteenth-century troubles — or at least freights — the tautology that realist Victorian novels are merely ledgers of ordinary events. Rather, Foucault teaches us that realist Victorian novels accomplish influential ideological work akin to that undertaken by history. Part of the providence of Victorian realist novels, then, is to relay meaning about the present and past of the society in which they are produced because they take as their topical focus the activities of quotidian life. Certainly, the life activities that correlate “the quotidian” include a myriad of different iterations depending on geography, class, race, and other influences. However, even though they differ widely in how they present, quotidian activities share a social and political significance, temporality, and narrative function. Quotidian activities are not merely generic necessities that function like the thread of “realness” weaving the fabric of realism; the quotidian is the site at which Foucault's insight that “discourse, power, everyday life, and truth were knotted together” is most apparent (173). In this dissertation, the quotidian is where state matters manifest as private life events or identity-formation, such as when characters consider marriage, espouse nationalism, or contend with questions of inheriting wealth and property.

The phenomena of ordinary, quotidian life consequently engender the mode of history that privileges living memory because they lay the foundation of individuals' personal histories. Although he relies on twentieth-century definitions of modernity, Joe Moran's account of the



mechanisms by which quotidian, everyday events connect to history, memory, and modernity prove germane to the nineteenth century. Moran suggests that memory models a mode of history more amenable to capturing reality because it is populated by quotidian human experiences and allows for a continuity between past and present whereas hegemonic history dialectically construes everyday life as the pre-modern agar on which the modern and historical grow as distinct, if not oppositional. He concludes that the germ of conventional history — public events and macroscopic social change — is found in the everyday, in the ordinary activities of ordinary people. As a result, "the everyday is, in Susan Willis' words, 'our site of convergence with the historical': it is the point of dialogue and interaction between the local and global, the habitual and fashionable, the individual and social" (66). Everyday life — and the myriad ordinary activities that populate it — is not the base upon which history proper is built; it is the elemental stuff of history in modernity.

Despite usefully charting the overlap between ordinary life and history, Moran's study of ordinariness resembles Foucault's insofar as both accounts overlook the crucial link between private, quotidian practices and gender; they focus on the toiling of men but fail to register (or, rather, succeed in dismissing) that the quotidian, because it is so often set in the private sphere, is productively correlated with women's life activities. As Rita Felski observes in her critique of the everyday in critical theory, "metaphors of everyday time are intricately intertwined with metaphors of gender. According to [Henri] Lefebvre, women are the quintessential representatives and victims of the quotidian" (612). In part, this eclipsing masculinist model of the everyday spurs from the political utility the term garnered during the development of cultural studies. In the second half of the twentieth century, the emerging field sought a unit to encapsulate those experiencing, making, and changing culture. But, as Laurie Langbauer

critiques in her survey of twentieth-century theories of everyday life, constructing an imaginary whole from which “culture” stems relied on a problematic model that emphasized patrilineal inheritance and overwrote gender — and other sociopolitical identity — differences to conjure a masculine, virile citizenry as the bedrock of culture (18).<sup>5</sup> In response, Langbauer builds on feminist cultural studies interventions by Meaghan Morris and Gayatri Spivak to forward a more convincing model of everyday life that attends to the ongoing variances of individual experiences. She argues that, rather than demarcating a static, cohesive collective, “The everyday as a category is especially useful when attending to the differences excluded from stories of consensus” and that one should study how the everyday can highlight sociocultural contradictions — that, in fact, stymie the creation of a coherent modern citizenry that conjures the everyday as a monolith — when defined “not as lived experience, some 'real' underlying consensus, but as the ongoing deconstruction of that illusion of experience.” (Langbauer 33) The everyday, in other words, is better understood as a mutable, variable container for subjective experience in a society. It is not a promised land, nor is it a certain exile. Rather, as Felski explains, the ordinary doesn’t preclude exclusion or promote democratic inclusion: “we need to recognize the doubleness of everyday life, which enfolds two distinct constellations of issues; a mundane social world and a phenomenological relationship to that world” (607). Such a capacious model of ordinary life dovetails with Sara Ahmed’s assertion that it is a metaphysical space that is implicated in discourses of vitality and livelihood (221). However, this does not mean that the ordinary is automatically laudable or liberatory. As Felski reminds us, “for most

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to Lefebvre’s gender myopia, Langbauer also highlights “[Raymond] Williams’s allegory for ordinary culture still implies some woman (wife, mother) as a vehicle through which the generations of men must pass. By personifying high culture as a maidenly old woman (by suggesting that the tradition’s writers are themselves somehow old-maidenly), in dispelling the need for high culture, [E.P.] Thompson gets rid of the need for women too” (25).

people, most of the time, everyday life has consisted of endless hours of back-breaking and repetitive labor leavened with meager and monotonous rations” (616-617). Furthermore, in late-20th and early-21st century politics, Lauren Berlant fashions the ordinary as the epicenter of ongoing crises for marginalized subjects under neoliberalism (169). Taken together, these feminist interventions in defining the everyday, ordinary, and quotidian more convincingly sketch a blueprint of ordinary life that centers women’s material and affectual experiences and endows them with generative, formative power traditionally reserved for masculinist endeavors.

The project’s first chapter takes as its focus *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, arguing that both novels demonstrate the providence of generational gaps between women in creating an intimate, minor mode of history that is preoccupied with establishing what is — and what is not — ordinary. *Shirley* highlights the significance of generational gaps between women by telling a rousing story of restoring family bonds that begets promising futurity, whereas *Wuthering Heights* operates more like a cautionary tale, detailing the bleak consequences emerging from a vacuum of normative kinship structures, especially maternity. For better or for worse, family history is the most powerful force in shaping the lives of characters in both novels, and women’s fates and futures are most often influenced by older women who are their kin or caretakers. Women interact across generations to adjudicate what is and what is not ordinary because ordinary phenomena prove to be the stuff of which a woman’s life is made.

English women’s lives and relationships in colonial India are at the heart of the dissertation’s second chapter, which takes as its focus *On the Face of the Waters* (1897) by Flora Annie Steel. Steel’s famous “mutiny novel” channels anxiety about ordinary gender roles during a moment of national change into a detailed sketch of the recent past, set during the 1857 Indian

Rebellion or “Indian Mutiny.” The novel weaves together colonial military history and the details of domestic life in India during the Rebellion to commemorate the British soldiers and settlers in India during the time of this conflict. In doing so, Steel’s novel enshrines that extraordinary bravery and chivalry are ordinary for white British men and that selflessness and domestic mastery are ordinary for white British women. As such, ordinariness (by way of the *extraordinary*) functions as a product and tool of nationalist ideology, wielded to differentiate populations and, in conjunction with the just out-of-reach nature of the recent past, to cement racialized hierarchies of humanity as cemented as “settled” history proffered by commemorations of the 1857 conflict.

In the third chapter, female characters in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* enact symbolic returns to their own ordinary recent pasts as the plot progresses. In concert, these private homecomings model a mode of intimate history-making fortified by (rather than riddled with) feeling. The chapter traces how Mary Garth, Rosamond Vincy, and Dorothea Brooke march forward into maturity and marriage but, in their own ways and to varying degrees of success, enact paradoxical returns: Mary returns to her dearest childhood intimate, Rosamond returns to an other-worldly social stature (at least by the measures of a provincial town), and Dorothea returns to a plight of community service. Despite their different metaphysical aims, ordinariness is both the means and the ends of all these women’s’ arcs of return.

Together, these chapters show how ordinariness comes into focus most sharply in novels of the recent past because the genre permits a balance between the grand and intimate, public, and private. This trend appears time and time again in Victorian novels of the recent past — especially those written by women — because demarcating and dwelling on ordinary life proves necessary for women’s subsistence. Without it, how can women live? Not in the pages of

traditional history or traipsing around public life. They must live their everyday lives, day by day, making livelihoods connected to the labor and space of domesticity — both oppressive and liberatory — but invariably entangled with the ordinary.

## Chapter I

### **Mother Knows Best: Generative Generational Gaps in *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights***

“All those ingredients of the ordinary, the unimportant detail, obscurity, unexceptional days, community life, could and must be told — better still, written down.” (169)

— Michel Foucault, speaking of burgeoning nineteenth-century discursive production in *The Lives of Infamous Men*

In *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brontë the novels' plots are set a few decades prior to the present, and a trustworthy-enough yet decidedly outsider narrator narrates each story — diligently relaying the “ingredients of the ordinary” to which Foucault refers. In the former, an omniscient third-person narrator follows the daily life of Caroline Helstone beginning in 1811 as she befriends her neighbor, Shirley Keedlar, and, with Shirley's aid, attempts to secure herself a steady future among broader political uncertainty. In the latter, the plot begins in 1801 when a tenant arrives at the eponymous household and asks its housekeeper, Ellen Dean, to recount the circumstances of the family that owns the property. The bulk of the novel is Ellen's account of the domestic travails of Earnshaw and Linton families, who own *Wuthering Heights* and its neighboring estate, Thrushcross Grange.

The temporal divides between narrative present and publication have largely been deemed an incidental trademark of mid-nineteenth century fiction, but this chapter contends that these breaks instead intentionally structure meaning in the texts because the temporal gap between plot and publication enables comparison between the then and the now. This comparison allows the texts' authors space to delimit the boundaries of what is ordinary and what is extraordinary, and they do so via the experiences and narrative interventions of female characters in the novels and their preoccupation with family history. These female characters find themselves in the metaphysical space of the break, where recognition of liberty and

restriction becomes possible only in retrospection. Retrospection is a backward temporal orientation that has implications for the present and future. It is also a temporal orientation unique to an individual's vantage point. By comparison, a historical orientation looks backwards and draws conclusions on societal, collective scope, and whether these conclusions have bearing on the present or future is opaque.

This attention to the significance of the temporal break between publication and plot builds off the work of those who study *Shirley*, *Wuthering Heights*, and other Victorian novels of the recent past. Helen Kingstone and others affirm yet complicate the connection between the traditional historical novel and novels of the recent past. They argue that novels of the recent past capture history more intimately, via a mode that resembles memory and can be understood as gendered. I affirm that novels of the recent past proffer a distinct kind of history-making, one with decidedly different priorities, focuses, and outcomes from traditional histories or historical novels (including a proclivity to accommodate the life activities of women). However, this chapter moves beyond the foundational body of diagnostic scholarship that describes the formal qualities and historical emergence of the genre in the nineteenth century and offers an argument about the stakes of the connections between novels of the recent past and history, and what the recent past begets as a historical-yet-intimate narrative vantage point.

Specifically, this chapter contends that novels of the recent past create a mode of "minor" history that underscores the importance of family history, a force as influential as the macroscopic historical matters that dominate traditional historical novels. *Shirley* is rife with family bonds and as the narrative unfolds, family relationships are rediscovered, fortified, and forged. Too often, however, the reconciliation and proliferation of normative, nuclear family bonds in the text are merely understood as emblematic of the novel's condition-of-England

genre, in which the stabilized and sprawling private sphere reflects the fate of the public sphere and nation. I, by contrast, take these domestic matters as generative in their own right. On the flip side, in *Wuthering Heights* familial relationships are overwhelmingly the most influential matter in the novel, but they only become more tangled, complicated, and noxious as the novel progresses. Subsequently, the centrality of kinship in the novel is often considered a tragic and ominous cautionary tale because the families at the novel's center meet tragic ends. I maintain that the elaboration of this vexed family history in all its dark minutiae is not meaningful solely in its culmination, but that the ongoing process of elaborating family history affirmatively sketches a portrait of what is ordinary life and what is extraordinary.

Historical novels garner their importance because they detail events that are generally understood as significant because they are political and far-reaching, such as wars, uprisings, or governmental shifts. Novels of the recent past engage with past events, but their scope does not automatically register as significant in the same way because the events themselves are less distant, less memorialized, and subsequently enshrined in grandeur. But what if the distinct focuses of traditional historical novels and novels of the recent past were not compared to one another, but considered on their own terms? Put another way, the different focuses of traditional historical novels and novels of the recent past warrant different critical attention, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach that privileges the modes of import usually conferred by traditional historical novels. Novels of the recent past, because they are more intimate accounts of the past, accommodate different kinds of accounts and truths, smaller in scale but sometimes richer in complication. This chapter in particular focuses on the unique purview of novels of the recent past to convey the complexities of family histories. It takes *Shirley's* and *Wuthering Heights'* preoccupation with familial relationship not as a byproduct of a broader purpose, but as



a central focus onto itself. Both novels of the recent past, considered in this light, can be read as family histories, detailing the intricacies of how kin come together and fall apart.

These family histories are built from women's experiences and knowledge, and they emerge specifically where generational divides meet. The two novels focus on and leverage generational divides as influential, referential sites that adjudicate the ordinary. Older and younger women teaching and learning from each other — about the world at large, about themselves, or about others around them — actively create what is considered ordinary in these novels. Rather than observing a preexisting phenomenon, ordinary life is created by the women in these novels, serving as a mutable frame of reference that demarcates who and what is socially acceptable and sustainable because ordinary life is, above all, a metaphysical place of vitality. It is important to note that the two novels navigate generational divides differently due to the divergent family histories: *Shirley* consolidates and reconciles unsettled genealogies into neat, enduring family lines whereas *Wuthering Heights* is preoccupied with family history that is unruly and never conforms to ordinariness as ordained by its historian/bastion of the quotidian, Nellie. However, both ultimately demonstrate the providence of generational gaps between women, foregrounded in novels of the recent past, in creating an intimate, minor mode of history that is preoccupied with establishing what is — and what is not — ordinary.

### **History in the Minor Key**

Novels of the recent past create knowledge about both the historical moments of publication and of the plot. Because these moments are oftentimes accessible simultaneously to adult readers (and authors), engagement with one historical moment necessitates engagement with both. Put another way, there is no dealing with the narrative of a novel of the recent past

without considering how it is, to some extent, historical. Novels of the recent past emphasize how the present moment is not ever cleanly detached from or outside of history (at least not in nineteenth-century realist prose). But history's effects on the present are far from uniform and parsing the specific dynamics of how the past shapes and shadows the present are as multivarious and individual as characters and authors — that is, subjects — themselves. Like Foucault's proclamation about the fragmentary, banal accounts of individuals' run-ins with state power that serve as the foundation for *The Lives of Infamous Men*, neither *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë nor *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë "is a book of history" (157). Both *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights* demonstrate fascinations with the influence of history, but not necessarily history as it is traditionally construed in historical novels. Instead, they explore how the past generation or generations of a given family shape the subsequent generation. This focus is not simply a metonym to explicate national, major history, but a mode of history on a different scale and with different critical focuses.

This chapter focuses on the influence of family history as a mode of "minor" history in *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights* and avers that this mode of minor history proffers a corollary to traditional history that emphasizes the influence of the past on the present in how it structures interpersonal relationships and family structures. Foundationally, the "minor" inevitably exists in relation to major, and multiple valences of the concept underlie my analysis of family history and the recent past in this chapter: I take up what critics widely recognized as Charlotte Brontë's minor novel, in which minor characters produce history in the minor key (that, themselves, center around minors in the sense of dependent children). By definition, the minor complements and contrasts the major. Additionally, because the minor always exists in relation to the major, evaluating something as minor is always making a comment on relative scale. The marginal or

secondary nature of the minor endows minor novels, characters, and histories with both an ironic independence borne of its dependence, much as a minor child is indebted to yet compelled to supersede its parent.

The minor underwrites the plots of *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights* in their shared preoccupation with families, namely family peculiarities and histories. *Shirley* is ultimately a double marriage plot, a conclusion that comes to fruition only after extensive negotiations among and between families. Family ties are revealed, broken, fortified, and forged for numerous characters, but most importantly for the protagonist, Caroline Helstone. These interpersonal shifts and upheavals are the conduit for the novel's entire plot, even the dimensions that are explicitly political and public. Similarly, there is nothing outside of kinship and its tribulations and importance in *Wuthering Heights*. Interruptions to and continuations to lineages concern all the characters, even the central narrator, Ellen Dean, who is not a part of any of the main families by blood. The novel's primary conceit — that of gossiping about the landlord with a tenant — is, in practice, a robust and winding oral family history of the landlord's family, living and dead.

Put another way, novels of the recent past deal with history in the minor key because they capture a particularly gendered version of history, a history responsive to women and their lives. This minor mode of history and its contrary relationship to traditional history mirrors Julia Kristeva's schematic of "women's time" and how it is at odds with the time presupposed in historical production. Kristeva recalls how initial modern feminist movements "as the struggle of suffragists and of existential feminists, aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history," which is "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding; time as departure, progression, and arrival — in other words, the time of history" (17-18). This project eventually falls to the wayside, she argues, because a new generation of feminists embrace and

different sort of temporality, “the massive presence of a monumental temporality, without cleavage or escape, which has so little to do with linear time (which passes) that the very word ‘temporality’ hardly fits: all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space” (16). This divergent temporality reflects an emergent apathy or even antipathy towards female subjects as the object of history, instead prioritizing an orientation towards time that is set on female terms rather than accommodating of them. Such a value system and subsequent temporal framework is at play in the creation of minor history in the novels in this chapter. Family history, with women as its arbiters and authorities, is constitutive of the social worlds and plots of the novels.

In addition to being in a gendered, minor key, my conception of history and its function in these two novels is predicated on the understanding that history is invariably continuous with and connected to memory in how it functions in Victorian novels of the recent past, specifically. History is codified knowledge of the past, and it is predicated on both temporality and sociality. It is imbued with an authority — especially in the later nineteenth century when the discipline of History emerged in academia.<sup>6</sup> Memory is predicated on these same things, but it is considered knowledge of a different class and magnitude because memory is invariably gauged on the level of the individual (even “collective memory” is understood to be the memory engendered by a collection of individuals).<sup>7</sup> History, by contrast, is a sort of knowledge that automatically has

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<sup>6</sup>While an institutionalized mode of history gained traction and eminence as the nineteenth century went on, memory was also a fascination and held a certain mode of folk authority in the early- and mid-century. As Robert Douglas-Fairhurst explicates in “Working through Memory and Forgetting in Victorian Literature,” the cultural importance of memory to Victorians was apparent in ubiquitous media on the subject, such as the many books and pamphlets that claimed to teach various popular systems of mnemonics and dovetailed the period’s penchant for the emergent field of self-help (1-2).

<sup>7</sup>I acknowledge but sidestep direct engagement with the multidisciplinary field of “memory studies,” which emerged in the late twentieth century in response to the critical crisis in historicism that characterized the academy in the 1980s and beyond. Memory studies amasses and draws connections between the ways memory emerges and functions in various disciplines ranging from literary studies to architecture. The object of memory studies is to elucidate and complicate the concept of memory, but my aim in engaging with memory is to acknowledge overlaps between history and memory. Put simply, I leverage memory as means to other critical ends, not an end unto itself.

ramifications for and associations with broader groups of people, such as a nation. Put another way, history totalizes where memory individuates. As discussed in more depth in this project's introduction, Helen Kingstone's concept of living memory helps square the relationship between history and memory as I treat it in this chapter. Living memory is the interval "between history and the present" occupied by many readers of the novels of the recent past, who lived through the events and time in which the novel is set even though much has happened since that time (71). She asserts that the critical perspective inherent in living memory raises the questions of whether memory can be neatly assimilated into history, and what does living memory offer readers that history (in the form of the traditional historical novel, particularly) not (144-145)? These questions demonstrate how living memory enriches traditional conceptions of history, annexing a sort of history that accommodates individuals' emotional ties and responses to historical events, a history that consequently explains why nostalgia occurs for individuals and collectives. Living memory is simultaneously historic because it is a coordinate on axes of time and social life and "unhistoric" in its scale and affect.<sup>8</sup> However, even in the ways memory diverges from and eschews history, memory, it must be emphasized, engages with history, nevertheless.

This capacious, historical understanding of memory that is encapsulated by living memory is subsequently a useful way of understanding the retrospective, historical modes of both *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights*, as both texts foreground private and domestic affairs in their plots. From its very onset, Charlotte Brontë's overt narrator in *Shirley* self-consciously

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For overviews of the field of memory studies, see Roediger and Wertsch as well as Radstone. For discussions of how memory studies and literary studies robustly interact, see Erll and, for Victorian literature, see Matus.

<sup>8</sup> Kingstone relies on George Eliot's definition of "unhistoric" as presented in *Middlemarch*, and I echo it here: character and events are unhistoric when they "fall below the radar of historians and would not appear in history books, and who as fictional characters were never even alike, but who nonetheless — of even as a result — might be representative" (Kingstone 19).

draws readers' attention to how liminal, living memory structures the novel as well as the ways it is simultaneously similar to and distinct from traditional history. Although published in 1857, the plot is set a few decades earlier. The novel's protagonist, Caroline Helstone, lives with her uncle, Reverend Helstone, in the Yorkshire countryside during the economic depression caused by the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812 and witnesses the subsequent Luddite uprisings that occur on her cousin's, Robert Moore's, nearby mill. The narrator, however, is writing from a time closer to the publication's present, making clear, "But not of late years we are about to speak; we are going back to the beginning of this century; late years — present years are dusty, sun-burnt, hot, arid; we will evade the noon, forget it in siesta, pass the mid-day slumber, and dream of dawn" (C. Brontë 5). The present, according to the narrator, is fruitless and illuminated by a glaring so intense that the present's details and richness are obscured beyond recognition. Turning attention to the past begets reprieve from this inhospitable present by ushering the reader into a dreamy, liminal space that is both after noon and loops back to before noon.

Metaphorically reframing the nineteenth century as a single day that stretches on underscores the seamless connection between the past and present while also insisting on atmospheric differences that render the present inferior to the past. However, the narrator anticipates associations between this temporal turn and prelapsarian nostalgia and subsequently dashes the assumption that this temporal transition beckons to an Edenic yesteryear, announcing: "If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken [...] Something real, cool, and solid lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning, when all who have work wake with the consciousness that they must rise and betake themselves thereto" (5). The narrator's hyperbolic assurance reflects an emphatic desire to convey what the tale is *not* but, when attempting to affirmatively describe the

proceeding plot, the narrator relies on the capacious and ambiguous placeholder “something,” as well as metaphoric materialism that rebuffs romance’s emphasis on sentiment. The narrator’s posturing resembles that of traditional history, which claims to capture factual occurrences without subjective warping. Yet, this “real” narrative object “lies before you,” with a proximity and intimacy atypical of history. Additionally, it is curious how, in contrast to the amorphous material and affective descriptions of the narrative, the narrator specifies that the metaphorical day in which previous decades correspond to the morning is a Monday — a day where the bulk of one’s work lies in front of them. Any liberatory possibilities of seizing a new day are overwritten by the laborious reality that awakening on Monday morning means leaving rest behind and ceding oneself to labor. In other words, the proverbial site at which the grand and banal, the authoritative and intimate, meet is resoundingly anticlimactic while still being, in practice, the material of narrative.

To resist the grandeur or romance of history, the narrator goes on to relay a story focused on Caroline Helstone and her private perils and triumphs. In doing so, *Shirley* hints at a truth that extends to other novels of the recent past, including *Wuthering Heights*: these texts are gendered formations that privilege accounts of women’s work and lives that tend to be more repetitive, mundane, and private than the revolutionary travails of mainstream history and historical novels. Helen Kingstone extends Bonnie Smith’s thesis that history emerges in the nineteenth century as a gendered discipline to liken the contemporary reception of novels of the recent past to the reception of female historians during the nineteenth century undermined by this masculinist institutionalization of history.<sup>9</sup> Novels of the recent past, Kingstone goes on to argue, are feminized because they refuse the “objective” distillation that defines the nineteenth century’s

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<sup>9</sup> Beyond the nineteenth century, Diana Wallace writes about late-Victorian novels and their twentieth-century predecessors, mostly trying to argue for its enduring importance for both women writers and readers.

practice of writing history and more strictly govern historical novels set further back in time (82). Their insistence on intimacy and multiplicity insist on a mode of history antagonistic to that being codified in the masculinist academy, a mode more ambiguous and unruly but no less true.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, novels of the recent past are epistemologically primed to account for the activity of women's lives; eschewing nineteenth-century masculinist history makes narrative space for family relationships, courtship, domestic routines, caretaking and other quotidian practices that would not qualify as the stuff of academic history, but are, as female writers knew in particular, the vital material of life.<sup>11</sup>

Understanding novels of the recent past as gendered formations that uniquely accommodate plots of private life helps make sense of the ambivalence that characterizes literary criticism about both *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights*. Curiously, *Shirley* is oft-invoked in criticism but rarely centered; more often, it is considered in tandem with *Jane Eyre* or in a suite of all of Charlotte Brontë's novels. In part, this critical trend reflects the peculiarity of the genre, which eludes straightforward diagnosis due to the novel's sprawling focus and imbalanced structure. Many scholars leverage the historical events encapsulated in the narrative, namely the Luddite rebellions and the political and industrial upheavals that fomented them, to declare the novel a condition of England novel, industrial novel, or historical novel.<sup>12</sup> However, more salient to my

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<sup>10</sup> As part of her project to demonstrate the import of English-language fiction written by Indian women in the later-Victorian period, Barnita Bagchi explicates the truth in Toru Dutt's claim, made in the early 1870s to a British gentleman: "Novels are true, and histories are false" (59).

<sup>11</sup> For an example of how female writers worked through (rather than around) history as it was hegemonically construed in the nineteenth century see, Kelly Battles' argument that George Eliot's *Romola* explores the extent to which women could intervene to shape the masculinist historical narrative by way of fusing the heroine's private and public interests.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Peter Capuano refutes Catherine Gallagher's supposition that "industrial conflict in *Shirley* is little more than a historical setting and does not exert any strong pressure on the form" and instead makes the case that *Shirley* is, above all, an industrial novel that demonstrates the effects of industrialization on both public and private life (231). Casey Vansant links the novel's economic scaffolding with its domestic plots by arguing that the novel essentially scales up the *Bildungsroman*, so charting the reform of the industrialist Robert Moore metonymically details the reform of industrializing Britain as a whole. Matthew Roberts argues that many of the generic distinctions



study is the group of scholars who not only name but also describe the ideological effects or deduce the motivations behind Brontë's formal and topical decisions. Most straightforwardly, Marianne Thormählen usefully surveys potential reasons why the Brontës (like essentially all other Victorian novelists) may have written historical fiction, or fiction set back in time at least one generation. She maintains that historical fiction makes it easier for the Brontës to reflect on the past because it objectifies the past to a certain extent, while also guarding against charges of "over imagininess;" best of all, and most salient to understanding why *Shirley* is set in the recent past, historical novels invariably still have relevance to reader's own time (Thormählen 279). Additionally, Gisela Argyle maps and synthesizes how *Shirley* blends the genres of comedy of manners, historical romance, and psychological romance. She argues that this hybrid generic mode allows for the ideal blend of distance and intimacy, accomplishing the patching-together work in a mode that's palatable to the Victorian reader. This sense of hybridity harkens to the connectivity that is at the heart of novels of the recent past. John Plotz also describes, noting a phenomenon similar to living memory in mid-century provincial novels, including *Shirley*, that such texts beget a sense of "semi-detachment" between characters and the world, as well as between the reader and the characters. Patsy Stoneman helps broaden the imaginary of what constitutes "historical" in her understanding that the retrospective, reflective valences of *Shirley* can be read as elegy, given motifs of grief and redemption as well as the broader compositional context in which all three of Charlotte Brontë's siblings died during the interval she wrote the novel.

Similarly, criticism of *Wuthering Heights* struggles to reconcile patent recognition of the ways that the text that participates in some of the traditions of the historical novel with the

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made by other scholars that take politics, economics, or history as their main input should ultimately be understood as elaborately sketching a vivid portrait of emerging popular Toryism.

resounding insularity of the novel's plot and characters. Consequently, it is rightly treated as a cornerstone of Gothic literature, but far more rarely is it also studied as a historical novel proper. It is rarely recognized as historical fiction because its engagement with history is deemed less salient than other formal and thematic aspects of the text. Claire Jarvis speaks for many Victorian scholars who acknowledge the historical dimensions of the novel while stopping short of centering its historicity when she asserts: "In its use of ghostly markers, *Wuthering Heights* develops the form of the historical novel even if it is not, strictly speaking, a historical novel. While the national framework of the novel is implied, it is not central to the novel" (42). Cordoning off the historical aspects of the text, however, is predicated on a conception of what constitutes a historical novel that is mistakenly narrow, a conception that this chapter refutes and expands. In large part, the relative proximity between the novel's "past" and "present" causes the text to fly under the radar of historical recognition.<sup>13</sup> Taken instead as a novel of the recent past, the insistent connections between present and present peacefully coexists with the steering presence of retrospection imbued by the framed narration.

Indeed, *Wuthering Heights* is better understood not as a faulty or aberrant historical novel, but a novel of the recent past that relays a gendered and domestic mode of history, but with no less rigor or resonance than traditional historical modes. Ellen Dean is the housekeeper of the novel's eponymous estate, Wuthering Heights, and relays the tale of the wicked moorland estate and its neighbor, Thrushcross Grange, beginning in the 1770s to one of the household's

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<sup>13</sup> The novel is temporally in disarray: written by Emily Brontë in 1847, *Wuthering Heights* is set in 1801 but relays a plot that begins in the 1770s. This distinctive temporal setup garners a sense of distance and alienation and, when paired with the novel's framed and fragmented narration and themes of division, results in a novel equally disorienting and intriguing. Scholars have wasted no time parsing the purpose and effects of these formal, temporal elements of the text. For instance, Jeffery Williams takes up *Wuthering Heights* as a particularly pesky instance of narrative reflexivity that is characteristic of many nineteenth-century British novels whereas Catherine Delafield emphasizes the novel's use of mixed media, especially diary entries, to divest from certain models of patriarchal narratorial authority.

new tenants. Much of the novel is Nelly's retelling of the previous decades to a visiting tenant at Wuthering Heights, a man named Lockwood, who asks the housekeeper to educate and amuse him. Ellen Dean herself refers to her account to Lockwood as a "cuckoo's" history — a history defined by interlopers or, as Joseph Carroll describes it, "parasitic appropriation" (E. Brontë 28, Carroll 249). This description highlights the mediation on which this (and arguably all histories) are incumbent, while also underscoring the domestic, interpersonal stakes and structure of the tale. Although Carroll focuses on the formally disruptive logistics of a cuckoo's history rather than the historical texture of the term, he usefully notes that "Nelly is closer to the scene, sympathetic to the inhabitants, and tolerant of the manners of the place—characteristics that enable her to mediate between Lockwood and the primary actors in the story. She provides a perspective from which the local cultural peculiarities can be seen as particular manifestations of human universals" (248). Cast as a studious informant who can translate local knowledge to outsiders, Carroll describes Nelly as an adroit historian without naming her as such. This mode of studying and relaying information about subjects is crucial to understanding Nelly not just as a convenient narrator, but as an arbiter of historical knowledge in a novel enmeshed with the mechanisms of history playing out on a provincial, intimate scale.

Ellen Dean is thus the engine of historical production in the novel; yet, this realization belies the same common understandings of history that novels of the recent past do because demarcating the line between convenient narrator and artful storyteller who produces history, in part, is steered by generic expectations, and because family history does not register as a preeminent sort of history. As established earlier on, in nineteenth-century British novels, sketching history is primarily the charge of historical novels, whereas other genres are largely excused from engagement with historical context or production of historical knowledge. This

schism belies an underlying network of expectations about who can and should engage with and make history, as well as what qualifies as history. Situated in a novel of the recent past, Ellen Dean becomes a historian rather than a “gossip,” (or, perhaps, a gossip registers newly as a sort of historian) (E. Brontë 26). Nelly is privy to the private lives of the Lintons and Earnshaws and her work in the novel is not only taking care of the estates’ residents and guest but recording and relaying details of their lives. Her role as housekeeper enables her to observe and relay information about others akin to private histories that would otherwise be inscrutable — even to a monied, educated man like the gentleman tenant Lockwood. It is her gendered, classed social position that simultaneously obscures Nelly’s account as a sort of history and permits her access to the metaphysical materials of history. The type of history she relays, however, is family history. The sizable body of scholarship detailing the housekeeper’s narratorial function and import in the novel generally treats the time between the moment of Nelly’s narration and the moment during which the events she describes take place as a mere “frame” or memory.<sup>14</sup> However, Nelly’s embedded role in the households allows her direct contact with other members of the households during critical, revealing moments in their lives. Although she is initially underestimated by Lockwood in the novel and undermined by scholars who scrutinize her social role in *Wuthering Heights*,<sup>15</sup> Nelly’s access to and influence over essentially all other characters makes her not only a convenient narrator but a measured historian — much like the omniscient narrator in *Shirley*.

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<sup>14</sup> See Beth Newman’s work on gendered frame narration in the text and Nicholas Frangipane’s more recent study of the limits of fragmented narrations. Also, it’s especially interesting to note the generic and gendered valences of N.M. Jacobs’ incisive argument that Nelly’s narration is “appropriated and modified from the familiar gothic frame tale,” enables readers to “approach a horrific private reality only after passing through and then discarding the perceptual structures of a narrator-significantly, a male narrator-who represents the public world that makes possible and tacitly approves the excesses behind the closed doors of these pre-Victorian homes” (204).

<sup>15</sup> In an article surveying the relationships between masters and servants in the novel, Graeme Tytlet, for instance, insists on Nelly’s “mediocrity,” calling her “house-proud” in a way that begets “no admiration” since it renders her outspoken and seemingly inconsistent (“Masters and Servants,” 328-329).

One of the primary ways Nelly accomplishes historical production is via her management and marking of time. This claim builds on Graeme Tytler's observation that Nelly Dean is deeply associated with time and temporally, as evidenced by her "strong sense of the annual calendar, as borne out by her mentioning or alluding to every month except May, and every day of the week except Wednesday, together with her awareness of the season, the weather, the time of day, even the hour or hours when a particular episode has taken place" (15). Tytler argues that these connections between Nelly and time lend her authority in the reader's eyes because they render her narrative "for the most part historically plausible" (15). While the connection between demarcations of time and historical authority is compelling, it is far too stingy to interpret Nelly's proximity to time as solely a desperate grab for plausibility or authority. Instead, it is more apt to interpret her ability to mark time stemming from her authority as an intimate interlocutor of both households. She is the only person in the novel able to chronicle the domestic events and episodes over generations and — similarly to the way she reports on relationships to insiders as well as outsiders — she keeps time for the families she serves as well as strangers like Lockwood. Nelly transcends timekeeper and becomes a historian because she not only records events but relays them towards intentional ends. This becomes especially evident in moments when she elides large swaths of time in her narration to Lockwood, such as after her fastidious description of Catherine and Linton's courtship and union. Suddenly she zooms out: "The twelve years, continued Mrs. Dean, following that dismal period were the happiest of my life" (E. Brontë 146). Clearly wielding control of time rather than being controlled by it, Nelly arbitrates which moments of the past are important and which are not. Notably, moments of her own happiness do not warrant scrutiny from Lockwood, at least by her measure. Much like history traditionally conceived, peacetime is not worth scrutinizing, though

Nelly still relies on standard metrics of time (years) to convey this present absence, staying true to historical production.

Furthermore, Nelly also creates historical knowledge in the form of biography. She is the hub of biographical knowledge about inhabitants of the moorlands houses and sketches portraits of characters not only to Lockwood, but to other household members, even members of the same family. Such is the case when she explains Linton's anger and jealousy towards Heathcliff when he returns to Wuthering Heights. Furthermore, she couches these interpersonal explanations in broader terms of "human nature," a topic that Nelly is notably able to comment on whereas her wealthier mistress cannot (77). This reciprocal move to apply general precepts to individual circumstances while simultaneously gleaning portable knowledge from specific situations corresponds to the way historical novels (not just those of the recent past) rely on realist plots in tandem with broader sociopolitical context to generate historical and interpersonal commentary.<sup>16</sup> Mastery of private information even more directly corresponds to public authority for Nelly at the end of the novel when she relays to Lockwood that Heathcliff has died. As a result, he will have to settle his account with Nelly, not Mrs. Heathcliff, who has "not learnt to manage her affairs yet," prompting Nelly to "act for her" because "there's nobody else" (236). Her closeness here explicitly surpasses her role as housekeeper. Ironically, she is well-grounded in domestic affairs that she is the one called on to handle the public and masculine administrative duties of the estate. However, the role only becomes real in the text only once she reports her

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<sup>16</sup> This model of a "tandem" relationship is informed by Devin Griffiths' explanation of comparative historicism, which he studies with particular attention to how comparative historicism in the nineteenth century mobilizes and relies on analogy. He usefully asserts that this approach "is more fundamentally a way of writing about the past. Its central gesture is the movement between histories, drawing connections between lives, experiences, and material objects that articulate history as a tense composite rather than an organic whole [...] The historical novel provided the nineteenth century with transformative plots that weave comparisons drawn between incidents, persons, and things into larger analogies between the stories they told" (15).

master's death to Lockwood. Her reporting of this bit of Heathcliff's personal history instantiates Nelly's unlikely realization of more authority.

Both Ellen Dean's authoritative production of domestic history and *Shirley's* narrator's fixation on the importance of the quotidian emphasize the importance of private, family life in the plots — and women's key role in fomenting and relaying these vital details. The novels participate in the tradition of historical fiction that emerges in the decades preceding their publication but are oftentimes not recognized as doing so because they are novels of the recent past that depict domestic, interpersonal histories of specific families and they rely on women's perspectives and life activities to furnish these accounts.

### **Ordinary Building Blocks of Family History**

The preoccupation with family history and, ironically, its continuation in both *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights* showcases the “doubleness of everyday life,” serving simultaneously as moments of estrangement and connection between individuals, namely women (Felski 607). In the midst of kinship disarray, it is Ellen Dean who tirelessly connects the two estates, multiple generations, as well as the employees with their employers. Similarly, Caroline Helstone travels between her neighbor's and cousin's estates, interfaces repeatedly with numerous older women, and receives guests at her uncle's home. These acts of connection fashion ordinariness in both texts because they articulate a scheme of reference for women. It is in contexts of comparison where Ellen Dean and Caroline Helstone garner a sense of what is ordinary and carry out the work of assembling it for themselves in the practice and service of creating family history, including creating the conditions necessary for family history — i.e., the futurity of a given family — to endure.

Revealing and relaying family history happens in moments of domestic encounter and observation, particularly in the temporal situation of novels of the recent past. Kingstone points out that one unique appeal of the recent past for novelists is that its engagement with the past, the potentially historic, is always already rooted in the “particularized immediacy – immersion – of everyday life” (148). Novels of the recent past rely on the phenomena of ordinary life — the insistent yet banal processes that inspire the plights of mill workers, their bosses, clergy members, domestic servants, vengeful family members, and all characters in *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights* — and, because they are formally and topical integral, these ordinary, quotidian events are constitutive rather than incidental.<sup>17</sup> In *Wuthering Heights*, Ellen Dean is not only the crux of family gossip, but of banal, domestic life because she is the estate’s housekeeper and this begets her the additional authority of being arbiter of what constitutes ordinary life. Similarly, *Shirley*’s topical focus on Caroline Helstone and her domestic concerns corresponds to a thematic preoccupation with what is ordinary (and what is not) and how a woman secures a sustainable and ordinary life via navigating family relations.

The centrality of ordinariness in *Wuthering Heights* is evident in Ellen Dean’s occupation: as a housekeeper, she has no choice but to attend to quotidian domestic affairs of the household(s). She cleans up the home, literally and figuratively, caretaking and performing physical labor to maintain the living conditions of those in *Wuthering Heights* and, albeit indirectly, at Thrushcross Grange. Like an informant immersed in a given community, this labor

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<sup>17</sup> By the nineteenth century, “quotidian” became synonymous with monikers of “ordinary” and “everyday.” To understand the overlap between these terms, one can refer to Kathleen Stewart’s ethnographic definition of ordinariness that asserts: “the ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledge, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life” (1-2). Iterations of quotidian existence do not share identical, or even resemblant, material conditions. Ordinariness is as ubiquitous as it is myriad. Stewart’s model also maps the ordinary onto both public and private commitments, global and local concerns, casting quotidian life as a site of ongoing phenomenological occurrence that forges subjecthood.



equips her with the experiential knowledge to relay a private, domestic history of the extraordinary lives of the Earnshaws and Lintons. Put another way, her occupation as housekeeper situates her among the phenomena of ordinary, quotidian life, which is the same phenomena that, in concert, culminates into the assemblage that is ordinary life. She is the resident expert, consequently, of what belongs to and what threatens ordinariness.

Among a cast of characters who are aberrant, delinquent, and unsettling, Nelly emerges as the paragon as well as arbiter of ordinariness in the extraordinary novel.<sup>18</sup> When Mr. Lockwood remarks that Ellen Dean does not align with his expectations of a provincial housekeeper and reasons that her remarkable nature must be the result of her extraordinary labor Nelly admits, “I certainly esteem myself a steady, reasonable kind of body,” but she gently corrects that her keenness stems “not exactly from living among the hills and seeing one set of faces, and one series of actions, from year’s end to year’s end; but I have undergone sharp discipline, which has taught me wisdom” (E. Brontë 49). Even though she may depart from Lockwood’s specious romantic imaginary of a provincial woman, Nelly’s lived experiences both traumatic and quotidian render her “steady” and “reasonable” but not extraordinary. Indeed, as a diligent housekeeper, Nelly is firmly rooted in what is ordinary because, as Rita Felski reminds us, “for most people, most of the time, everyday life has consisted of endless hours of back-breaking and repetitive labor leavened with meager and monotonous rations” (616). Nelly is arguably the least violent and most responsible character in the novel, but it is not her virtuosity that make her ordinary. She is ordinary because of the actions she does and the relationships she maintains. Repetitive tasks and familiar relations equip Ellen Dean with a “wisdom” that is

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<sup>18</sup>*Wuthering Heights* (and its critical reception) is seemingly preoccupied with the *extraordinary* and dimensions of the unbelievable, bestial, magic, and abject. However, in arguing for the importance of ordinariness in the novel, I do not seek to overlook or overwrite these focuses, but instead understand the mode of ordinariness that the novel asserts to, paradoxically perhaps, accommodate these facets.

difficult for Lockwood to fully recognize and appreciate because it stems from her gendered ordinary life practices, which are largely indistinguishable from her class-specific duties as housekeeper.

Specifically, her work as housekeeper familiarizes her with the information necessary to furnish a family history because, rather than orbit them or exist on their margins, she is profoundly imbricated in the lives of the families in question. She grows up alongside Hindley and Catherine Earnshaw so her own biography and account of her childhood is intertwined with their upbringing. Even before she was officially employed as housekeeper, Nelly remarks that she “was almost always at Wuthering Heights; because my mother had nursed Mr. Hindley Earnshaw, that was Hareton’s father, and I got used to playing with the children: I ran errands too, and helped to make hay, and hung about the farm ready for anything that anybody would set me to” (E. Brontë 28). Simultaneous association with and service to the Earnshaws is the foundation of Ellen’s life. She and Hindley are both wards of Ellen’s mother and the two children play together, a pseudo-sibling relation. However, young Ellen also performs service for the Earnshaws and their estate that cements her in the realm of quotidian, domestic labor. When she has grown up and serves officially as housekeeper and nurse, this ambivalent upbringing continues to inform her social position in the household. When confronted with the option of leaving Thrushcross Grange and Hindley Earnshaw, Nelly reflects that she “had not the heart to leave my charge; and besides, you know, I had been his foster-sister, and excused his behaviour more readily than a stranger would” (51). Her stubborn immersion in the families themselves — not just their physical homes — extends to the generation that comes after Nelly and Hindley’s. Like her mother to Hindley, Ellen cares for Hareton and Catherine Earnshaw and once they are on the precipice of adulthood she remarks that “they both appeared in a measure my children: I

had long been proud of one; and now, I was sure, the other would be a source of equal satisfaction” (246). Her connection to the Earnshaw family is contractual but it is also emotional. She feels a degree of ownership over these children even if they are not her biological offspring. In practice, she is a member of the family as well as an employee because of these emotional attachments.<sup>19</sup> This charged manner of employment situates Ellen to observe the ordinary, interpersonal dynamics necessary to detailing a family history and explains why she bothers to do so — because she cares for these children, and they are positioned much like family to her.

In contrast to Ellen’s intimate perspective of ordinary life predicated on her class as a domestic worker that enables her to fashion a family history as part and parcel of her work, the narrator of *Shirley* observes the minutiae of Caroline Helstone’s life with a distant but equally keen attention that privileges the gendered actions and relationships of ordinary life. Caroline Helstone is the hub of ordinariness in the novel due to her social position as a young woman in pursuit of a husband, a position that arguably serves as the narrative blueprint for the novel itself as a “condition-of-England” novel. In a condition-of-England novel, the union of man and woman in marriage serves as a parable for national unity through harmonious union of seemingly diametric differences. Because gender is so critical to the ideological work of the genre, many scholars have recognized the crucial ways gender permeates and shapes the novel. Namely, a sizable cluster of *Shirley* criticism pays attention to women’s domestic spaces in the novel—especially the sick room, dressing room, and school room that all feature prominently in the

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<sup>19</sup> “Care” is a multivalent, charged term that has both emotional and economic implications, especially in the nineteenth century as the private sphere began to have unprecedented resonance with the public, economic sphere. Talia Schaeffer sketches the ambivalence of this term in robust detail as it pertains to Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette* (1853), which usefully adds dimension to Nelly’s care in her sister’s novel. Additionally, Schaeffer’s theorizing on “care communities” as they coalesced in Victorian fiction also adds depth to why Caroline Helstone, in *Shirley*, tends to Mrs. Pryor in her sickness and why this setting is prime for the emotional and political revelation of Caroline’s parentage.

novel — as well as to women as defined by their relationships to others as spinsters, mothers, sisters, and wives.<sup>20</sup> Tara Puri explicates the modes of vital female intimacy that become uniquely possible in the novel's dressing room, whereas Kate Lawson understands the sickroom as a site of productive stasis where individual, relational healing occurs, especially for Caroline. Wherever it may be located, Anna Lepine also aptly observes how the novel both celebrates female independence while resolving the plot by converting female independence into dependence wherever possible, echoing a proto-feminist ideological paradox unique to mid-nineteenth century Britain. This sense of being “both and neither” also underlies Martha Vicinus' and Sharon Marcus's descriptive categorizations of female friendship in *Shirley*. They agree that the novel is a tremendous demonstration of influential female friendship; however, they diverge in their readings of the ideological bases, underlying erotics, and logistical ends of the friendship between Caroline Helstone and her neighbor, Shirley Keeldar.<sup>21</sup> These scholarly accounts all underscore that women are fundamental to the novel and especially that relationships between female characters are manifold and influential, but the precise nature of these relationships (and influence) are opaque, unsettled, and mutable. Furthermore, these accounts of women's importance in the novel have failed to account for how women are constitutive of ordinary life.

Although I do not aim to resolve the narrative and symbolic complexities that women proffer in *Shirley*, shifting the critical focus to how female characters cultivate and then orient themselves towards ordinary life accommodates the prevalence of gender's profound influence in

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<sup>20</sup> Bridging generic and gendered considerations, Tara Moore details how the novel participates in and renovates female mythology, especially that pertaining to Eve and the Garden of Eden. Tim Dolan also connects *Shirley*'s genre with its treatment of gender, arguing that the novel responds to debates about provincialism and a women's metaphysical place, by combining the regional and industrial novel to productively complicate what constitutes a woman's narrative, as well as a woman's place.

<sup>21</sup> The blurry distinction between homosociality and homosexuality in the novel lends credence to Anne Longmuir's historical-biographical argument that Caroline Helstone's intimate friendship with her neighbor, Shirley Keeldar in the novel, was perhaps informed by Emily Brontë's real-life proximity to (in)famous lesbian Anne Lister.

the text. They do this primarily via navigating family relationships, both present and absent. Orphan Caroline Helstone's plight for marriage becomes synonymous with the plight for an ordinary life. Defining what constitutes a woman's ordinary life, however, turns out to be a complicated task because Caroline lacks, at first, traditional family ties and has an abundance of non-traditional ties of female kinship. In concert, Shirley Keedlar's bombastic gender-bending chaos, a slew of odd spinsters, and a mass of oblivious men who have no seeming interest or competency in being husbands of wives all pose a significant challenge to demarcate what exactly an "ordinary" life for a woman is, not to mention how Caroline might achieve it. The novel implicitly forwards the logic that Caroline must reconcile these relationships, namely that she must establish traditional maternity and institute appropriate distance from the likes of Shirley, to transmute her desired marriage from fanciful to possible. As the final section of this chapter discusses, reconciling ordinariness becomes a social process incumbent specifically on interactions between women, namely between women of different generations.

### **Generational Gaps Between Women**

In both *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights*, the referential framework that creates a sense of what is ordinary — and what is extraordinary — emerges specifically in moments of intergenerational connection and comparison. Generations are human bonds marked by breaks; relationships predicated on temporal separation. They can evoke a sense of history, particularly when characters on opposite sides of a generational divide are of the same family or of the same gender. In these novels of the recent past, generation divides act as referential sites of living memory that blueprint gendered ordinariness because they are loci of interpersonal relationships, especially between women.

The relationships between older women and younger characters simultaneously discipline and pass on enduring notions of ordinary life as well as revise and alter what constitutes the ordinary in the social fabric. Generational divides exist between young adult characters and women and older women in both novels. The older women serve as instructors for younger characters. They adjudicate and modulate the behavior and expectations of younger characters through sharing their experiences, performing caretaking, and steer them towards decisions they deem appropriate for women. Older women have little direct effect on the plots, but they are foundational in structuring the social worlds that the younger characters navigate and that stage the plot's action. The older women are subsequently construed as peripheral or minor characters in their respective plots because the younger characters, with their futurity figuratively tethered to the imagined future of the family and nation, tend to dominate the texts (and their critical reception). However, older female characters have lived long enough to witness, if not partake in, births, marriages, and deaths. These lived experiences beget knowledge about the families they are a part of and near to; they become implicit authorities about domestic relationships. Whether this authority exists is not a question, but whether such authority is utilized by other characters in the text is. As a result, the collaborative project of fashioning family history via the means of ordinary life culminates in vastly different results. In *Shirley*, the relationships between younger women and older women — especially between Caroline Helstone and her estranged mother, Mrs. Pryor — consolidate and smooth over rough patches of family history. In *Wuthering Heights*, attempts to codify a family history from Ellen Dean's non-biological but nevertheless influential position of generational wisdom leaves unresolved but perhaps promising the fate of the families in question.

Generational divides are crucial sites of generating family history because they are invariably ambivalent. They beget an ambivalence because they are a site of separation and connection, and Camilla Cassidy usefully names this temporal-affective ambivalence as a “twilight zone” in novels of the recent past where memory and history can overlap and interact (110). Cassidy takes up George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* as a potent example of this distinct interplay between memory and history, public and private, that is only possible in this zone. She argues this temporal device enables Eliot to evoke a unique sense of home. Nostalgia here manifests as homesickness, for a “liminal historical setting” that feels more intimate and available while still being decisively irretrievable like all of history (110). Rather than escape to a bucolic or idyllic past, Eliot uses this twilight zone of the recent past to cultivate and center the turbulence of grieving or longing for the past from the present. Such a model of memory and history’s overlap is useful for my consideration of how novels of the recent past engage with and veil with irony the dynamics of historical production. However, Cassidy is more interested in the home-space created by the recent past as a metonym that reflects the broader affective turn in the late nineteenth century and nostalgia’s curious manifestation therein.<sup>22</sup> I, by contrast, seek to explicate how this twilight zone presents in the plots themselves, rather than the affect retrospection engenders (and its potential political associations or ramifications). Specifically, I am curious to examine what happens at the liminal intersection of past and present in these Brontë novels of the recent past, which are literal generational divides. Via characters of different generations forging connections, the Brontës’ leverage the overlap of muddled history

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<sup>22</sup> Cassidy asserts that extending the providence of historical novels to include novels of the recent past with their twilight histories subsequently “engages in interesting and various ways with wider stories of cultural transformation and grapples illuminatingly with what John Stuart Mill — among many others — identified as ‘an age of transition’” (110). Generational divides, then, are convincing sites where the dynamics of this “twilight zone” play out because they are concerned with what to pass on from one generation to the next and whether this impulse towards conversion is compatible with progress.

and personal memory to consider the future. The twilight interval of the recent past, especially when it is filled and explicitly narrated by a character of an older generation, becomes an aspirational site that, while still liminal, is gesturing towards home in a more ambivalent, searching sense.

The import of generational divides is at the heart of *Shirley* because the novel's plot revolves around Caroline Helstone who, from her very first introduction, is defined in terms of her missing mother (and later, her mother restored) as well as a series of relationships between Caroline and other, older female characters in the novel. The first older woman who Caroline encounters is Hortense Gérard Moore, who is Caroline's neighbor, cousin, and Robert's sister. She serves as a tutor to Caroline, teaching her French regularly. Caroline loathes her lessons and pities Hortense because she perceives her tutor as a spinster in the making. However, she continues to learn French as an excuse to get closer to her cousin, Robert. Once the narrator reveals Caroline's unrequited romantic feelings for Robert, the narrator concludes that Caroline is at a crossroads: she can either give in to her feelings and pursue Robert (invariably repelling him in the process) or she can "be her own governor" and solemnly accept the impossibility of their union (C. Brontë 107). The narrator then grants that Caroline "had a little sense" and "betook herself to her studies under Hortense as usual" (107). Although she returns to what is ordinary — banal French lessons under the auspices of Hortense — Caroline's submission to the status quo in this instance is distinct from previous lessons. This time, Caroline intentionally chooses her usual lessons to separate herself from Robert, rather than to get closer. Performing the same act as she's performed many times now achieves, or seeks to achieve, a contradictory purpose. Indeed, this is the final lesson Caroline attends after her guardian learns of Robert's mill troubles. Put another way, Caroline's encounters with a quotidian act and relation figure both her



romance with Robert and the dissolution thereof; her French lessons with Hortense fail to impart knowledge of French but they succeed in bestowing a certainty that she will not be able to marry Robert despite her love for him. It is only through her transactional relationship with Hortense, an older woman, and ongoing participation in fruitless French lessons that Caroline can figure herself first as a potential bride and then a likely spinster.

A subsequent encounter with an older woman — a fellow parishioner, Mrs. Sykes, accompanied by her daughters — precipitates another moment of reckoning for Caroline that leaves her yearning for an opaque standard of ordinary life. Mrs. Sykes calls on Reverend Helstone and Caroline receives the woman and her adult daughters. In doing so, she confronts the standards she, as a Yorkshire woman, is supposed to meet. This confrontation yields a recognition that she is different in a way that registers as unsustainable and backwards. Caroline feels no connection or affinity with other women, and the narrator repeatedly emphasizes Caroline's negative difference or lack in comparison to her supposed peers. To begin with, she lacks the same lived experiences as them, epitomized by not having seen the sermon they are discussing. Having nothing to add to this conversation begets much broader existential despair for Caroline — she feels “incompetent,” “unpractical,” and equipped with “little fitness there was in her for ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world” (C. Brontë 111). References to the sentimental qualify this alienation from perceived ordinary life; the narrator describes that Caroline's recognition of difference stems from her “heart,” and her “dreaming,” which render her a “fool” (111). Notably, the narrator does not describe what ordinary entails, but the implication (echoing the beginning of the novel) is that whatever is ordinary must not be romantic or sentimental. The Sykes girls live in the ordinary world, ushered in by their mother, and participate in ordinary discourse, whereas Caroline “had attached herself to the white cottage

in the Hollow, how in the existence of one inmate of that cottage she had pent all her universe” (111). Sentiment is not only undesirable, but also unsustainable. The narrator refers to the realization she had while studying under Hortense, a sort of innate knowledge within Caroline that she must change, that “some day she would be forced to make an alteration” (111). As if it is glaringly obvious, there is no explanation why this change is necessary. But while the fact of this change is treated as certain to the point of natural, the nature of this inevitable change is unsettled and opaque: “It could not be said that she exactly wished to resemble the ladies before her, but she wished to become superior to her present self, so as to feel less scared by their dignity” (111). The Sykes are not simply aspirational figures for Caroline, but they incite a desire in Caroline to change. Specifically, it stirs a desire to reform her orientation to the future, which turns out to be the same as reforming what constitutes her ordinary life. The germ of this equivalence is the supposition that ordinary life is a site of vitality and futurity, where a woman like Caroline can achieve something that feels sustainable.

Caroline’s encounters with Hortense and Mrs. Sykes are preambles for the relationship she later develops with her friend and neighbor’s chaperone, a woman named Mrs. Pryor. The older woman provides both contrast and affinity with Caroline that animate and fortify Caroline’s gendered sense of self. Mrs. Pryor first establishes herself as a chaperone and friendly acquaintance of Caroline, and in doing so, enables Caroline to foster a friendship with Shirley Keedlar. Then, during the most intense period of Caroline’s mid-novel sickness, Mrs. Pryor reveals that she is, in fact, Caroline’s biological mother. Mrs. Pryor took the name of her mother’s family after running away from her abusive husband and leaving Caroline in the care of her uncle. First as a governess and chaperone, then as a caretaker and mother, Mrs. Pryor’s

gendered relationships to other women (and the relationships these bonds subsequently foment) are the most salient aspects of her character.

Mrs. Pryor is far more influential to Caroline because she is of an older generation rather than because she is her biological mother. Logistically, Mrs. Pryor enables Caroline's formative friendship with Shirley Keedlar. The older woman serves as Shirley's guardian and confidant, seemingly like a surrogate mother-figure for the headstrong woman as well as a chaperone for the two young friends. Caroline first meets Shirley and Mrs. Pryor in the company of her uncle, Reverend Helstone, when they pay a visit to introduce themselves upon moving to the neighborhood. For Caroline, this initial encounter prompts a similar gendering triangulation to that spurred by Mrs. Sykes and her daughters, but this time Mrs. Pryor's generational difference hints at Caroline's agency to fashion an ordinary life rather than underscoring her distance from such an objective. In Caroline's first encounter with Mrs. Pryor, the narrator characterizes Mrs. Pryor as the epitome of a cultural trope rather than a distinct individual: "No middle-aged matron who was not an Englishwoman could evince precisely the same manner" (C. Brontë 155). At once set apart and connected to Caroline and Shirley, Mrs. Pryor is defined in terms of generalizable identity categories. Even though she, Caroline, and Shirley are all "Englishwomen," Mrs. Pryor brings a "manner" utterly distinct due to her age — underscored by both labels of "middle-aged" and "matron." Her age difference is not only remarkable to the narrator. When Mrs. Pryor herself responds to Mr. Helstone's inquiry about Shirley's philosophy on politics and religion, she asserts: "Difference of age and difference of temperament occasion difference of sentiment [...] It can scarcely be expected that the eager and young should hold the opinions of the cool and middle-aged" (155). Mrs. Pryor refers to the "difference" between women of different ages numerous times. She aligns herself with Mr. Helstone on account of age

rather than with Shirley and Caroline on account of sex, even though sex might appear as more salient and divisive. It is also striking that both the narrator and Mrs. Pryor refer to the retired governess as “middle-aged,” which emphasizes that the woman is past her youth but not yet codified as elderly. She occupies a liminal temporal state in which her identity is different than it once was — like those of the young women around her — but it is also still mutable.

Mrs. Pryor’s eventual reconciliation with Caroline is ironically predicated on the sense of alienation structured by their generational divide. So important is the age difference between Caroline and Mrs. Pryor that the middle-aged woman explains to her daughter that she was able to return to Yorkshire because twenty years transformed her into an utterly different, unrecognizable person:

I only paid a short visit, as a bride, twenty years ago, and then I was very different to what I am now—slender, almost as slender as my daughter is at this day. My complexion, my very features are changed; my hair, my style of dress—everything is altered. You cannot fancy me a slim young person, attired in scanty drapery of white muslin, with bare arms, bracelets and necklace of beads, and hair disposed in round Grecian curls above my forehead? (287).

“Everything,” by Mrs. Pryor’s account, encompasses her physical, distinctly gendered traits such as complexion, build, and dress; it seemingly has no reference to immaterial or interior traits. Twenty years has eradicated all traces of being a “bride” so much so that Mrs. Pryor underscores the gulf between her past and present self by begging a rhetorical question that invites negation and describing her former beauty in a grandiose, fantastical register that suggests such a possibility is about as real as mythology. So distinctive is the change — from extraordinary to ordinary — that occurred over “twenty years” that it is a question whether Mrs. Pryor’s own

daughter (presumably her likeness, near the same age Mrs. Pryor was when she was a bride) can even imagine her mother in such a state. After Caroline affirms the profound change wrought on Mrs. Pryor by a generation-length interval of time, her illness begins to wane. Beholding her mother as a wholly ordinary woman rather than a heraldic imaginary serves as the foundation for Caroline to stage her recovery and, soon thereafter, on which to build her future as a wife.

Whereas *Shirley* offers an instructive tale about the utility of generational difference in reconciling a mutable, gendered ordinary, *Wuthering Heights*, by contrast, offers a cautionary tale about the absence or perversion of generational difference and the threat such an absence poses for the consolidation of ordinary life. Generational divides lend *Wuthering Heights* its structure and thwarted or contorted generational inheritance fuels much of its plot. The novel's structural, temporal gaps are oftentimes treated as merely "frames;" however, I contend they are better understood as historical intervals that chart and emphasize generational divides (and lack thereof). Premature death is ubiquitous in the novel, and the two-to-three-decade gaps between the "frames" of the novel echo and reinforce the specific, tragic lifespans of both Earnshaws and Lintons: Hindley dies at 27, Catherine at 19, Isabella at 32, Linton at 18, whereas both Edgar and Heathcliff make it to 38. By contrast, Nelly Dean, when she tells Lockwood the story, is 44 or 45 years old. Her rare staying power in the novel, therefore, stems from the fact she is the only character who lives long enough to see multiple generations. From this vantage point, she can compare one generation to another and discern the forces and conditions that inhibit or encourage survival. These observations translate to the ordinary life activities that she carries out as she tries to keep the households literally intact and symbolically viable.

The most influential instances in which Nelly leverages gendered, generational divides to attempt to modulate ordinary life present themselves in her motherly attempts to steer Catherine

Earnshaw away from Heathcliff. Ellen first serves as a corrective influence to Catherine Earnshaw. Catherine's mother dies when she is a young girl, and her father never remarries, so Catherine's most immediate and reliable female kinship comes from Nelly, who grows up alongside her and is deeply interwoven into the Earnshaw family. Even though the two women are relatively close in age and share the same gender, they are crucially distinguished by different class positions, so gendered duties like marriage and caretaking affect the two women unevenly. This class difference compensates for their proximity in age in creating a meaningful divide in perspective between the two women, a divide that stations Nelly in a subservient yet advisory position and Catherine in a place of comparative liberty but one saturated with naivety. In practice, this relationship resembles that between a mother and a daughter in some respects. For instance, when Catherine explains to Nelly that she seeks to marry Edgar Linton because the match will equip her with the means to support Heathcliff, who she loves exponentially more than Edgar, Nelly critiques the plan, telling Catherine that "it only goes to convince me that you are ignorant of the duties you undertake in marrying; or else that you are a wicked, unprincipled girl. But trouble me with no more secrets: I'll not promise to keep them" (E. Brontë 65). At this moment, Nelly shifts her relationship with Catherine from one of confidante — a role more appropriate for a peer, especially of the same sex — to that of an advisor, specifically an advisor who consults Catherine about the duties and decorum appropriate for women of her station. In this pivot, Nelly operates more like a mother sternly teaching her daughter the harsh realities of gendered life. This warped maternal relation between the two women also appears in the numerous instances when Nelly, in her narration of the family history to Lockwood, describes the adult Catherine as a child, noting that in her distress over Heathcliff's absence "she beat Hareton, or any child, at a good passionate fit of crying" (66). And when Catherine falls ill

shortly thereafter, Ellen notes that “our fiery Catherine was no better than a wailing child” (97). Even at her moment of death in childbirth, Nelly casts Catherine (by that time, Linton) as a child herself, describing to Heathcliff that in her final moments “She drew a sigh, and stretched herself, like a child reviving, and sinking again to sleep” (130). In concert, these descriptions of Catherine as childlike and helpless further enshrine Nelly as an inadvertent mother-like figure, albeit one who unnaturally sees the death of her faux-daughter. Indeed, it is important to note that even during Catherine’s short adult life, Catherine’s childlike behavior defies traditional power dynamics between a parent and child insofar as she is still a higher class than Nelly, aligned with the servant’s employers, so her infantile “tears” are what convince Edgar and Hindley to relocate Nelly to Thrushcross Grange after Heathcliff’s disappearance (70). Nelly has a mother-like influence over Catherine to a certain extent, but both its ability to flourish in the first place and its limitations are dictated by the class difference between the two women. Nelly is another woman in the home with Catherine, begetting an almost inevitable intimacy marked by caretaking and deep, private knowledge. However, the influence Nelly wields over Catherine is curtailed by the fact that Catherine, via her class association with powerful men in the novel, has the power to dictate the terms of Nelly’s employment, and subsequently, her livelihood.

When one Catherine Linton leaves Nelly’s life, another enters in her place, and the housekeeper continues to tend to the younger Catherine Linton but to greater success because in this instance the two female characters in question are of different generations. Although still not young Cathy’s biological mother and still of different classes, the irrefutable age difference between Cathy and Nelly substantiates a more potent motherlike authority over the girl. When the girl runs away to the neighboring Wuthering Heights estate, Nelly goes to fetch her and, upon entering the parlor, notes she “beheld my stray lamb seated on the hearth, rocking herself in a

little chair that had been her mother's when a child" (149). Inheriting her mother's place in some ways, the contrast between the two Catherines crystalizes in this moment; innocent and in need of direction, Catherine Linton charms Nelly where her mother vexed the housekeeper. Nelly feels a sense of ownership over the girl wedded with compassion that resembles a maternal bond to even a greater extent that Nelly shared with the girl's mother. However, the difference in their stations still inflects the deep sense of caring and desire to steward young Cathy that Nelly feels. Later, when Cathy is out playing among the trees in the moors between the two estates under Nelly's supervision, the housekeeper describes how "in summer Miss Catherine delighted to climb along these trunks, and sit in the branches, swinging twenty feet above the ground; and I, pleased with her agility and her light, childish heart, still considered it proper to scold every time I caught her at such an elevation, but so that she knew there was no necessity for descending" (176). The delight Nelly takes in Cathy is palpable, as is her sense of responsibility to keep the girl safe. Yet, this loving and disciplinary dynamic does not culminate in an influence strong enough to alter Cathy's actions. In this case, this boundary of Nelly's authority merely results in Cathy remaining in the tree. Yet, this limit to Nelly's influence later manifests more profound instances, such as when she learns of Heathcliff's entrapment of Catherine at Wuthering Heights. Nelly, reflecting on the realization to Lockwood, divulges: "I determined to leave my situation, take a cottage, and get Catherine to come and live with me: but Mr. Heathcliff would as soon permit that as he would set up Hareton in an independent house; and I can see no remedy, at present, unless she could marry again; and that scheme it does not come within my province to arrange" (227). To protect Cathy from the threat posed by Heathcliff, Nelly dreams of upending her own life and moving to a location literally unimaginable to the two women who have always lived only among the two moorland estates. Her motherlike kinship inspires Nelly to seek a new



life at great potential cost to herself, yet the material reality of patriarchal dominance that structures her life as well as the novel's world overrides this dream because she does not have the power to usurp Heathcliff's wishes.

Nelly uses this authority to try to accomplish with Cathy what she could not do for the girl's mother: she seeks to preserve Cathy's respectability and thwart Heathcliff's designs. And although she is unsuccessful initially, Cathy's fate in her hopeful union with Hareton is one made possible only through Nelly's intergenerational interventions. Like a disapproving mother, when Nelly discovers love letters from Linton in Catherine's drawer, she burns the letters and sends word that Catherine will not receive any more letters from Linton (176). Ellen does not explicitly explain her reasoning for this action, but the complete and violent destruction of these letters signals a profound concern beyond petty disapproval or mere uncertainty. She has no qualms about taking decisive actions to steer Catherine's romantic future, far more so than she took with her mother before her. Even though Catherine eventually does marry Linton, their marriage is relatively short-lived and, after Heathcliff's death some months later, she becomes engaged to Hareton. About the betrothed, Nelly remarks to Lockwood, "You know, they both appeared in a measure my children: I had long been proud of one; and now, I was sure, the other would be a source of equal satisfaction" (246). She feels ownership and fondness for the two like a mother would toward her children, and their association engenders a sort of knowledge not found anywhere else in the novel, that of a hopeful future and prosperous union. Nelly's diligent, loving attention toward Hareton in his youth — including laying the foundation of his literacy education that Catherine later brought to fruition — made this happy marriage possible. Put another way, the next chapter of the family history is a result of Nelly's faithful acts of everyday

domestic care and the mother-like influence she exerts over this generation, particularly Catherine.

## **Conclusion**

In both *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights*, literal and figurative mother figures prove vital for younger women in the novels as they find their existential footing because family histories have cemented their racial identities as well. Understanding their family histories — even when it is only partial or unflattering — enables younger women to forge their futures because these family histories help them realize their class status and subsequent material needs. Family history also gives these women a sense of who they are, the kind of stock and social legacies they possess by mere virtue of their birth. These inheritances are ordinary for the white, British women who populate both Brontë novels. Even when the histories themselves are tragic or troubling, these novels naturalize the fact that white women are afforded family histories. Heathcliff, by contract, becomes head of household but never gains the generational inheritance of a family history. As Susan Meyer spells out, “Heathcliff’s missing surname marks his unknown ancestry: deprived of his history by British imperialism, he is simultaneously deprived of the authority and the claim to ancestral ownership of the land that such a list of names establishes” (108). Heathcliff is set apart from other men because he lacks the ability to “claim ancestral ownership.” Put another way, lacking a surname means lacking a family history, which undermines his masculinity insofar as this kinlessness prevents him from “authority” automatically given to other men. In tandem with *Wuthering Heights*’ description of his physical appearance as “dark” (akin to a Roma person), this lack of family history differentiates Heathcliff in terms of race from the women in the novel who know their lineage, fraught as it

may be. Ordinary life as it emerges from generational gaps, therefore, mediates race as well as gender, and this simultaneous production is even more pronounced in the subsequent chapter.

## Chapter II

### Making Monumental Masculinity in *On the Face of the Waters*

“The casting of statues and razing of monuments alike involve the exercise of power.” (3)  
— Sumit Guha, in reference to “the monumental and the malleable” in *History and Collective Memory in South Asia, 1200–2000*

Novelist Flora Annie Steel wrote her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity*, thirty years after her final visit to India in 1898. Prior to this visit, she had been in the country in 1894 to research her most famous novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), and, before that, to live in various cities while her husband served in the Indian Civil Service for twenty-two years. Over the course of these significant stays in India, Steel reflects with her characteristic hyperbole and ostentation that “the first thing I must note in the list of what I learnt in India is its immutability, its perfectly amazing stability. Read Arrian, read Megasthenes;<sup>23</sup> then turn to actual facts. They are absolutely the same, or they were so when I was in India” (242). This conclusion that India is unchanging and decidedly unmodern is a trite, orientalist generalization. Such a claim also positions Steel in an unlikely genealogy with the likes of Greek historians, all of whom share the desire to document life in India from the perspective of an outsider. It is this outsider positioning that, implicitly, equips her with the necessary empiricism to characterize an entire nation, despite her lived experience with only slivers of it. She qualifies her evaluation but does not walk it back, admitting that, “I had, of course, small experience of the life led by those who had been across the black water; I had none in regard to the home life of Bengal; but so far as the Panjab [sic] was concerned there was no change — there had apparently been none for close on three thousand years” (242). She readily dismisses the experiences of Indians or those in the Bengal

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<sup>23</sup>Arrian and Megasthenes are both ancient Greek historians who wrote histories of India, both entitled *Indica*. Arrian remarked on India’s military history whereas Megasthenes’ work described Indian society and culture.

presidency but believes her time in the Punjab region is comprehensive and authoritative to speak to an overarching Indian condition, not only during her decades there in the nineteenth century but over the past thirty centuries. This preposterous notion makes explicit underlying racist understandings of colonial territories as nascent, static, raw material for colonizers to wield and reform in their vision, and it also asserts that Steel is qualified to make sweeping historical claims like this one even if her purview is admittedly narrow. This authority subsequently allows her to critique those who make historical claims that complicate or challenge her account of India, as one historian to another. Although she does not go into detail about these challenges, she acknowledges generally: “Yet we are told that thirty has wrought complete change” (242). In the late-1920s when Steel wrote her autobiography and this critique of India’s recent past, she seeks to rebuff early-twentieth century accounts of India as changing — specifically as a modern incipient nation-state and, therefore, not in need of colonial oversight. She brings her readers into this fold, enlisting them to the skepticism of contemporary historiography that she finds odious and implying that they must, then, respect her purview of India’s past and nature. She feels so strongly about this view because, in *Garden of Fidelity* and in her novel, *On the Face of the Waters*, Steel puts forward an understanding of India that ultimately serves her personal as well as her national narrative purposes; in both, the Indian colony is largely uniform, unchanging, and, above all, a grateful beneficiary of colonial control. It is a site where her (and her husband’s, in the British Civil Service) work is necessary and righteous, and it is a place on which she can be an authority.

Put another way, the construction of this narrative about India in both her nonfiction and fiction writing is predicated on particular practices of understanding and writing history. Regardless of genre, Steel cannot write about India without writing history because writing

history serves the political present in which she writes and gives her writing relevance. Using narrative to shape the past of India — especially the recent past — shapes contemporary understandings of India because it lends credence to historical claims of knowledge that bolster understandings that a country has always been a certain way or has entrenched problems in need of sustained intervention. Steel’s present interest in India is understandably, then, focused on the recent past, where her lived experience is the most salient and because the imagined recent historical past connects her to her readers who also came of age in an immediately post-Mutiny Britain. For her intents and purposes as a credible storyteller, India of the recent past is inextricably connected to the India of the present.

In particular, Steel conceptualizes the Indian colony as the site of the 1857 Indian “Mutiny” (now more commonly referred to as the Indian Rebellion or Uprising of 1857). This event defines her and her generation’s understanding of India, due to its tremendous, often-gratuitous violence over the course of eighteen months as well as the prolific symbolic afterlife of the conflict, which was written about and depicted in media to an unprecedented extent. It raised profound political and existential questions that permeated mid- and late-century British life, making their mark on Steel’s own life while growing up with military men in her family and then as an adult married to a member of the Civil Service stationed in India. To understand the society — and especially the British men who ran society — around her, Steel had to reckon with British colonial activity in India after 1857 and its complicated aftermath. This reckoning was always necessarily historical for Steel, but she also embraced the trappings of historical inquiry to garner authority in her writings, even in her fictional works. In contrast to the pitfalls of history and historical fiction that I argue take center stage when evaluating why *Wuthering Heights* and *Shirley* are novels of the recent past, *On the Face of the Waters* strategically

embraces the methods and trappings of history intimately rendered in the novel of the recent past.

*On the Face of the Waters* weds the romance of fiction to the authority of history to tell a captivating story with allegorical implications about both the British nation and the Indian colony. I contend that this intersection of sentimental and political aims — particularly presented in a retrospective narrative — results in what is best understood as commemoration. In her “mutiny novel,” Steel is looking back and telling a stirring, emotional narrative about past events of nationalist import. To accomplish this, the novel is laden with deaths threatened and actualized, and this motif presents insistent opportunities for commemoration of lives lost or heroic efforts carried out. The different treatments these opportunities for commemoration receive suggest an implicit but resolute suggestion of whose lives are important enough to be historical and whose are not worthy of commemoration. This chapter outlines how Steel’s historical engagement in *On the Face of the Waters* adopts the form and methods of commemoration; the novel looks back on the recent past to emphasize the valor of British military actions and to sustain a vision of the 1857 conflict that casts British citizens as fundamentally heroic in life and in death. Because commemoration insists on keeping a memory alive — maintaining an ongoing connection between the past event being commemorated and the present — it is uniquely well suited for the novel of the recent past form. Furthermore, because Steel seeks to center the character of individuals (who, despite being largely fictional, are metonymic of larger swaths of the British population), the novel of the recent past accommodates the romance required to elevate man to myth. Ultimately, I argue that the simultaneous proximity to and distance from the 1857 conflict enabled by the novel of the recent past fashions a sort of paradoxical commemoration that reifies idealized, racialized gender roles

of Victorian Britons; specifically, I contend that *On the Face of the Waters*, through its generic predilection to commemorate, codifies extraordinary bravery and righteousness as ordinary in English men and women.

### **The “Mutiny,” its History, and Literature**

There are few facets of what Steel refers to as “The Indian Mutiny” that are free of critical debate or contention. Perhaps most fundamental is the moniker assigned to the event (which is, in fact, better understood as a cluster of events of contested scope) that took place in northwestern Indian provinces from 1857-1858 — the precise start and end dates and locations being, of course, up for debate. As Steel exemplifies, British citizens at the time of conflict referred to it as the “Indian Mutiny” or “Sepoy Mutiny.” As Priti Joshi usefully problematized, neither part of this label is really true. Even while the events were unfolding, some Brits and other European observers of the conflict began characterizing it as a “war,” a matter of national security and identity. Later, Indian historians would recall it as an “uprising” or “rebellion,” which both are inclusive of the fact that not only members of the military participated in the conflict and cast the events as a matter of justice. All of these labels for roughly the same event demonstrate how ideology and politics are inevitable in all aspects of understanding, codifying, and discussing 1857.<sup>24</sup>

It is generally agreed upon that 10 May 1857, sepoys — Indian soldiers serving under British orders — stationed in Meerut mutinied and attacked officers after 85 of them received sentences of hard labor in response to their defiance to use new Enfield rifle cartridges that were

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<sup>24</sup> In this chapter, I will defer to the term “Mutiny” or “Indian Mutiny” at times because, while factually incorrect and ideologically problematic, they are the terms Flora Annie Steel uses to describe the events in *On the Face of the Water* and elsewhere. Put another way, because this chapter seeks to comment on how Steel commemorates what she understands as the Indian Mutiny, I take as my object of analysis Steel’s Indian Mutiny.



rumored to be greased with the fat of cows or pigs (which would have gone against both Hindu and Muslim religious doctrines). However, even before this incident, tensions were high between Indian soldiers and British military leaders due to multiple sources of political, social, economic, and cultural conflict. Politically, the British dismantled Indian political power structures that had existed for centuries. Such an affront was typified in the 1856 annexation of Awadh (Oudh), which further exacerbated political discontent leading up to the Rebellion. In tandem with destructive political actions, British economic interventions — such as the imposition heavy land taxes, commercialization of agriculture, and introduction of cheaper British-made goods — devastated the Indian economy and left peasants, landowners, and artisans impoverished. All the while, the British imposed Western education and legal systems to supplant traditional values and social structures. Practices such as the Doctrine of Lapse, which allowed the British to annex any state where the ruler died without a direct heir, were especially resented by the Indian nobility and fueled fears of losing sovereignty and cultural identity. In concert, these imperial overtures stoked a simmering distrust and disdain between the sepoys and their British officers that flared up when faced with the affront of the tainted cartridges. Though, even before May, sepoys such as Mangal Pandey led attacks on British officers that set the stage for a larger-scale rebellion.<sup>25</sup>

After Meerut, the rebellion spread quickly across northern and central India, with major uprisings in Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow. The sepoys who mutinied released prisoners from the Meerut jail and the mutineers, escaped prisoners, and others made their way to Delhi where they demanded Bahadur Shah, the figurehead Mughal Emperor who mainly worked as poet, lead their

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<sup>25</sup> For more comprehensive and nuanced histories of the events of 1857 than this one, see Saul David's 2003 *The Indian Mutiny*, D. Kingsley's 2001 *They Fight Like Devil: Stories from Lucknow During the Great Indian Mutiny, 1857-58*, Julian Spilsbury's 2007 *The Indian Mutiny*, Biswamoy Pati's 2007 *The 1857 Rebellion*, and Andrew Ward's 1996 *Our Bones Are Scattered: The Cawnpore Massacres and the Indian Mutiny of 1857*.

charge. Their arrival in Delhi inspired the Delhi regiment of the Bengal Army to join the mutiny. In the subsequent weeks, as Joshi puts it, “a similar pattern repeated itself across the map Gangetic plains: a garrison mutinied, sepoys shed their uniforms, civilians from surroundings towns and villages joined the sepoys, and a former local noble (generally one ousted by the British) was pressed to lead the insurgents.” While the rebellion saw significant local support and initial successes, it ultimately suffered from a lack of unified leadership and coordination among the diverse groups involved.

By contrast, the British response to the uprising was organized and effected ruthless retaliation onto the sepoys and some Indian civilians. Sir Colin Campbell, later known as Lord Clyde, was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of British forces in India. He orchestrated several crucial military campaigns, including the vital relief of Lucknow, where his strategic acumen turned the tide in favor of the British. Meanwhile, Major General Henry Havelock emerged as another key figure. Havelock's rapid and effective actions in recapturing Kanpur and subsequently joining forces with Campbell in the relief of Lucknow underscored his importance in the British counteroffensive. Lieutenant-Colonel James Neill also played a crucial role in suppressing the Mutiny through his infamously brutal tactics, particularly in Allahabad and Kanpur, where his harsh measures helped stabilize key positions until reinforcements arrived. Additionally, in the northwest, John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, played a crucial role in maintaining stability. His efforts to secure the region and provide reinforcements to British troops ensured that the rebellion did not spread further. His administrative savvy arguably helped keep the Punjab relatively peaceful during this turbulent period. Due to these and other decisive British military responses, by mid-1858, the British had regained control by executing key rebel leaders and dismantling the remnants of Mughal and regional powers. The

transfer of Indian administration from the East India Company to the Crown on 2 August 1858 effectively marked the end of the uprising. By that time, 6,000 British were dead as were probably 800,000 Indians due to the fighting.<sup>26</sup>

The certainty of violence on both sides and little certainty of anything else defines 1857, and this vacuum of stable understanding of the events emerges from the frenetic and unreliable media documenting and refracting the conflict. There is not a lack of discourse about the mutiny but rather a superabundance of biased information. As Salahuddin Malik describes it:

Most of this literature was written hurriedly, and in the heat of the moment, was more passionate than objective, sensational and rarely sober. [...] Biographies and articles excluded — of the latter hundreds flooded the periodicals — over five hundred works pertaining to the Indian “mutiny” were published in the English language between July-August 1857 and December 1862. (106)

Those texts published during and immediately after 1857 implicitly or explicitly yield to a roaring demand from the British public to “determine responsibility” for the violent events happening in the colony. However, Malik also reflects, “historical writings on the ‘mutiny’ could be neither restrained nor objective” due to the ideologically charged nature of the discourse surrounding the conflict (110). Specifically, Christian religious zeal oftentimes shaded accounts of the conflict as moral and existential. In turn, all history of 1857 and its aftermath must be understood as politicized historiography.<sup>27</sup> Put another way by Gautam Chakravarty: “the

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<sup>26</sup> William Dalrymple’s *The Last Mughal The Fall Of A Dynasty Delhi* offers a detailed account of the final days of the Mughal Empire, focusing on the 1857 Indian Rebellion and its impact on the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, in remarkable detail.

<sup>27</sup> Politicized at once by the British but also later on by Indian historians. As Biswamoy Pati points out: “By the end of the 19th century, the rebellion attracted the first generation of Indian nationalists. In fact, with the development of Indian nationalism, 1857 and the events that occurred as part of the rebellion were soon incorporated and appropriated as a part of nationalist imagery. Thus, V D Savarkar, who was perhaps the first Indian (and the progenitor of Hindu nationalism, incidentally) to write about 1857 in 1909, called it the ‘Indian War of Independence’” (1686).

imagination that seized on the rebellion of 1857-9 was the vulgate of late-nineteenth century British expansionism” (1). He goes on to diagnose the symbolic and political significance of 1857 as follows:

The rebellion and its much-debated causes underscored a model of radical conflict between cultures, civilisations and races; a conflict that at once justified conquest and domination and proved the impossibility of assimilating and acculturating subject peoples. No less significant were the several thousand British casualties in the war the rebel militia launched. For, not only did the fatalities reveal the precariousness of British power, and the inherent difficulty of knowing and controlling the motions of the communities and politics of India, they were also a serious interruption of the habitual hierarchy of status and authority that structured British relations with India. (4)

The effect of the Mutiny’s importance is far greater than the sum of its constituent parts. A lightning rod for symbolism, it introduces doubt about the worthiness and legitimacy of the colonial, in turn triggering a backlash of fierce British imperial patriotism as well as kindling nascent Indian nationalism.

Because it encapsulates fundamental ideologies of the British nation as a preeminent colonial power, the Indian Mutiny’s import compounds, rather than diminishes, for decades after the conflict resolves, especially in literature and poetry. In fact, the most prolific decade for “mutiny fiction” is not the 1850s or 60s, but the 1890s, when *On the Face of the Waters* is published (Chakravarty 6). Literary accounts and references to the Mutiny, while not history proper, are still adjacent to history because they are active participants in the ideological and political project of codifying the Mutiny as a consummate instance of colonial dominance (rather than colonial overstep, misstep, or decline). Steel’s mutiny novel and its contemporaries situate

themselves in a literary history that, Chakravarty explains, “form a significant constituency that is inseparable from those regimes and practices of knowledge, representation and colonial control that drove the British machinery in India through the nineteenth century and after” (13). Although critics like Susmita Roye credit Steel with a humane and generous portrayal of Indian colonial subjects in her novel, the relatively benevolent form diverges from the novel’s ultimate political function.

This stubborn participation in the project of colonial history stems in large part from Steel’s obsession with “fact” that frames and permeates *On the Face of the Waters*. The novel’s preface begins apologetically about the uneasy marriage in her work between fact and fiction:

A word of explanation is needed for this book, which, in attempting to be at once a story and a history, probably fails in either aim. That, however, is for the reader to say. As the writer, I have only to point out where my history ends, my story begins, and clear the way for criticism. Briefly, then, I have not allowed fiction to interfere with fact in the slightest degree. The reader may rest assured that every incident bearing in the remotest degree on the Indian Mutiny, or on the part which real men took in it, is scrupulously exact, even to the date, the hour, the scene, the very weather. Nor have I allowed the actual actors in the great tragedy to say a word regarding it which is not to be found in the accounts of eye-witnesses, or in their own writings. (i)

Such a sentiment immediately orients her reader to a complicated and contradictory topography of both gender and genre. Her opening sentence is self-deprecating and presupposes that the novel to come is a failure because it is generically promiscuous, that telling a story and telling history simultaneously is impossible, or the two projects detract from or compromise one another. The syntax is indirect and obscures agency, as might be expected from a nineteenth-

century woman writing about a serious matter like history (especially national and military history). She does not acknowledge the affordance of the hybrid genre, nor does she seem to recognize *On the Face of the Waters* as a novel of the recent past. Such a genre — not purely novel nor purely history — aptly accommodates Steel’s bifold purpose but rather than celebrating the harmonious union of the two genres (and the two epistemologies to which they correspond) in the novel of the recent past, she offers a mock-apology, as if this machination is haphazard, insufficient, or awkward.

To reckon with the problematic that she identifies at the heart of her project, Steel adopts metaphors of space and material. In her model, there is finite, discrete space for story, history, and criticism thereof. She then casts herself as a protector, policing the borders between discursive objects so that fact remains unsullied by fiction — fiction being the meddlesome force that might “interfere” with history. To underscore the fervency of her policing efforts, she eschews ambiguity or hybridity in favor of hyperbolic language like “in the slightest degree,” and “in the remotest degree.” She also deploys empirical metrics to plot the truth of history, using coordinates that include dates, hours, “scene,” and weather. Apart from “scene,” these are all measurable and recordable (and recorded in EIC records). Scene, by contrast, isn’t measurable but it is still rings of something measured and controlled by outside executors. This reference to the stage connects to her invocation of “actual actors,” who are paradoxical constructions of truthful reenactment, by her measure. This use of dramaturgical language indicates her foundational understanding of the mutiny as a phenomenon of “great tragedy,” something that is scaffolded above all by a knowable narrative framework and that has profound symbolic meaning (as well as entertainment value as a spectacle). Her novel, then, stages and animates historical knowledge the way a play stages and animates real human actors.

Her zealous insistence on the use of facts and what she goes on to call “pure history” both seeks to legitimize Steel herself as a serious authority and to consequently confer the historical aspects of her plot with a credence and importance not typically endowed upon memsahib literary works. Mary Poovey traces the genealogy of the “the modern fact,” the unit of knowing that Steel brandishes in her preface, and argues that early-nineteenth century thinkers sought to “install disinterestedness at the heart of knowledge” because “by implying that numbers were impartial because they could erase interest and politics,” which, in turn, “helped enhance the status of numbers as a mode of (disinterested) representation” (xix). Poovey demonstrates how, in the decades preceding Steel’s lifetime, European society and academia shape and foster what constitutes a fact and subsequently create the understanding that facts are akin to evidence as well as the concern of experts (xxiv). In other words, facts become the currency of epistemological authority and naturalized as truth. Steel’s emphatic embrace of facts, by which she means researched, empirical pieces of information, infuses the emotional and political events of the Mutiny with a rationality that, to Steel, is necessary for a narrative of such a significant event. Marshaling facts as she does in her preface is a preemptive strike against charges of romanticism or sentimentalism. Her use of facts additionally subjugates her own lived experience in India, or at least suggests that a dozen years of lived experience alone is not enough to give an authoritative account of India, past or present. This acknowledgement undermines the sorts of knowledge that women more often had access to, and it valorizes hierarchical, masculinist institutions of knowledge. It also enshrines colonial hierarchies of knowledge; she prizes British civil records of data detailing weather in India, for example, but overlooks any knowledge produced by Indian people or organizations in her research for the novel. Steel leverages selective “knowledge” and “facts” at the expense of other sorts of

knowledge to invest her fiction with an authority that allows her to commemorate hegemonic facets of British culture.

### **Flora Annie Steel: Her Life, Literature, and Politics**

The reasons Steel undertakes the charged, complicated project of writing a novel about the 1857 Uprising are manifold, but they primarily spawn from her lived experience in India as a British “*memsahib*” and her feminist politics that nevertheless valorize British colonial rule of India. An enterprising spirit and dynamic disposition characterize Flora Annie Steel’s life. She was born Flora Annie Webster (1847-1929) in Middlesex into a family of six children. Financial instability marked Flora’s upbringing, in part precipitated by the loss of income that occurred in the years following the Slavery Abolition Act as well as from mismanagement of her mother’s estate by her extended family (*Garden* 10). Despite this ambient financial anxiety, she reports in her autobiography that she had an overall happy childhood. She married Henry William Steel in 1867 and the young couple immediately moved to India where Henry Steel served in the Indian Civil Service for twenty-two years. The couple moved frequently (nine times, by Steel’s count, in their first three years) but largely remained in the Punjab region of the country. Early in their tenure in India, Steel had one child, a daughter, whom she, like many English parents living in British colonies in the nineteenth century, sent to be educated and raised in England while she remained in India. During her husband’s frequent absences due to his business, Steel busied herself learning the native languages of India, observing and learning about indigenous cultures, and later establishing schools for girls and serving as an inspectress of extant girls’ schools (Roya xi). Her work in girls’ education dovetailed with her fervent participation in the women’s suffrage movement that characterized her later life back in Britain. Shampa Roy discusses in



thoughtful detail the ways Steel's feminism as it presents in her short stories goes farther than other Anglo-Indian women writers of the time to grant political subjectivity and agency to Indian women, though such interventions fail to break free of some colonial hierarchies and logics, explaining: "English women reformers wrote about their Indian 'sisters' in ways that predominantly reveal their self-empowering need to cast Indian women reductively as silent victims of decadent traditions and themselves as enlightened rescuers. Written within this context Steel's short stories bring into focus some of the contradictions and inadequacies in the Imperial reform projects and the assumptions of benevolent impact that underwrote them" (72). Despite this relative benevolence from Steel, however, her portrayal of Indian women still oftentimes defaults to tropes and reductive stereotypes.

Steel's literary production was extensive and sprawling in both form and content, although her experiences in India inflect nearly all of her work to some extent. Her early writings stemmed from her intermingling with Indian women and girls; her first publication, *Wide Awake Stories* (1884), collected Indian folk tales for children. A few years later she co-authored *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888), which was revised and republished multiple times in the coming years. Over a writing career that spanned forty years, Steel published multiple collections of short stories, romance novels, historical novels, essays, and reports. Nineteenth-century Indian culture infused much of her work, but Steel was also fascinated by Indian history, as evidenced by her trilogy of historical novels written between 1908-1913 and a 1908 history entitled *India through the Ages: A Popular and Picturesque History of Hindustan*, which presented in a different form much of the historical research she conducted to compose the historical novels about the sixteenth-century Mughal emperor, Akbar.

*The Prince of Dreamers* (1908) is the first of a series of historical novels written by Steel fictionally recreating a portion of the Mughal Empire, an early modern south Asian Muslim empire, and consequently serves as a prehistory to *On the Face of the Waters*. This novel situates its plot during the reign and among the court of Akbar, the third Mughal Emperor, who ruled over the south-Asian empire from 1556 to 1605. Among his many storied accomplishments as Emperor, Akbar is generally best-known for expanding Mughal territory into much of the Indian subcontinent, establishing a robust administrative state, and instigating relative cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim factions in the territory. It is for his modern prescience that Steel begins her suite of historical novels with Akbar. In the novel, Steel emphasizes Akbar's personal and political greatness, and in the introduction, she reminds readers that the emperor was "literally centuries ahead of his time" (xi). Steel makes Akbar more of a myth than a man because his story is told with an insistently presentist narratorial voice. He is refracted through early-twentieth century politics and sensibilities, and his most lauded traits are those that correspond to Steel's modernity such as his predilection for "freedom, of equality, of universal brotherhood" (79). With this focus in mind, Steel's historical novel cares less for recording or unearthing Muslim or south-Asian history than it does pruning it into a prehistory of modern British political greatness.

The political purpose of Steel's historical novel is largely aligned with that of her novel of the recent past, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), which was also her most commercially successful and critically energizing literary work. The novel details the domestic and military events of both Indians and the British immediately before and throughout the 1857 Indian "Mutiny." The timing of its publication in relation to its subject matter makes the text a novel of the recent past just as its topical focus qualifies it as a "mutiny novel." "Mutiny novels" are

novels that take place during or in the immediate aftermath of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, and the historical events of the uprising feature as events in the plots of these texts. Gautam Chakravarty outlines a thorough bibliography of Mutiny novels from 1857 (with Dickens and Collins' displaced narrative) to the late twentieth century novelized accounts (5-8). The overview situates *On the Face of the Waters* in "the most productive period in the history of the Mutiny novel," the 1890s. Of the nineteen mutiny novels written in this decade, Chakravarty notes "their most obvious difference from earlier writing is that the rebellion now turns into a site of heroic imperial adventure, and an occasion for conspicuous demonstrations of racial superiority" (6). Jaine Chemmachery also traces the motif of the Mutiny in British fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Flaminia Nicora's genealogy of mutiny novels builds on this corpus, demonstrating how mutiny novels are also historical novels. By contrast, Aishwarya Lakshmi provides an incisive analysis of how mutiny novels signal a move away from India as an adventure space to India as a domestic space in popular literature. Christopher Herbert's, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma*, argues that mutiny novels played a significant role in shaping British public perception of the rebellion and, therefore, the British Empire's justification of its colonial rule in India by consistently demonizing rebels, casting the British as heroic, and enshrined racial hierarchies and leveraged these in tandem with gender norms to portray white women as uniquely vulnerable to Indian brutality.

*On the Face of the Waters* conveys a complicated plot with a robust cast of characters in the lead-up, action, and aftermath of the 1857 Uprising. It begins in the months before the Rebellion, sketching intricate portraits of the domestic lives of British soldiers and their families — namely Kate and Captain Erlton, Alice and George Gissing, and the bachelor officer Jim Douglas. It also portrays the sepoys' discontent and introduces key players on the Indian side,

including the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah II, an Indian military advisor named Azimullah Khan, and a courtesan named Lalun who navigates both the Indian and British social worlds. The novel depicts the beginning of the Rebellion, which begins in Meerut and quickly spreads to Delhi. The siege of Delhi is the central focus of the rebellion in the novel, depicting its logistics and impacts to both soldiers and civilians. In the tumult, Kate Erlton finds herself trapped, her husband is killed, and Jim Douglas steps in to protect Kate among the chaos. The British troops eventually manage to retake Delhi, and Steel details this campaign in bloody and specific detail. The novel concludes by detailing the aftermath of rebellion, in which British forces take forceful control of colonial administration, and Kate and Jim — both changed by the ordeal — eventually do marry and move to another part of India (Shimla) to begin a new life.

The novel oscillates narrative focus, jumping from the imagined activities of the Delhi royal family to those of the British forces to those of the Indian armed forces. On the British side, Jim Douglas serves as the heroic, albeit redeemed, locus of British bravery and good character, whereas a woman named Kate Erlton complements Douglas in her unflagging portrayal of a loyal and moral Englishwoman, even in crude and challenging circumstances. The Indian court and royalty, although granted far more subjectivity than in other novelistic (or historical) accounts of 1857, still posits Bahadur Shah Zafar (the “last Mughal emperor”) as an absent waif and his wife, Zeenut Maihl [sic], as a corrupt and conniving opportunist. Although a work of fiction, Steel conducted extensive background research for the novel, bringing it into alignment with historical fiction. However, because it is a novel of the recent past, it accomplishes something her historical novels do not. In her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1929), Steel supposes:

And here let me say that the subject had more to do with the success of the work than any quality of mine. It was one to touch all hearts, to rouse every Britisher's pride and enthusiasm. The Indian Mutiny was then the Epic of the Race. It held all possible emotion, all possible triumph. So it is no wonder the book, when it was published, sold like hot cakes; it is no wonder that after almost countless editions and formats, it still sells. (226)

The novel stirs national feeling and appeals to historical imagination that even Steel's historical novels proper do not. It encapsulates a moment of profound symbolism that still has direct bearing on the British reading public into the initial decades of the twentieth century.

The cultural importance of the Mutiny for Steel and other Brits during and for decades after the event is indisputable, but few of the scholars or nineteenth century writers who broach this central truth acknowledge the perhaps obvious reason for its massive sociopolitical (not to mention material) significance: the 1857 Rebellion was a matter of life and death. Its existential stakes for individual troop members were so immediate and stark that it readily became a vehicle for signifying a much broader existential crisis, that of the British imperial project. This understanding also explains why the 1890s (another decade of imperial expansion and accompanying anxiety) was a particular boom of Mutiny literary and commemoration, which Sebastian Raj Pender explains "should alert us to the growing sense of colonial apprehension in late Victorian India connected to the increasing Indian threat to British supremacy. Therefore [...] this celebratory memory of 1857 continued to be riven by intense anxieties that refused to be completely silenced by the excessive displays of confidence" (84). In both their immediate forms and those that circulated decades later, written discourse as well as visual depictions of violence, survival, and death were the bedrock of Mutiny media. Whether sensational or academic, these historical accounts of the mutiny (even literary ones) acted as sketches for the triumphant

survival of British colonists in the 1890s, detailing how to both live and die appropriately for the endurance of the nation and empire.

### **Women's Deaths as Nationalist Allegory**

To put it simply, one of the primary purposes of the mutiny novel — including *On the Face of the Waters* — is to consolidate and propagate British nationalism and this objective is also central when considering the novel as a work of memsahib literature. As Jenny Sharpe rebukes: “Despite such testimonies from her English readers, Steel does not break with an imperialist understanding of the rebellion. She explains the anticolonial uprisings in terms of a British failure to command authority and, for this reason, shows sympathy for loyal and obedient Indians alone” (87). The term “memsahib” (a haphazard portmanteau of the English female address “ma’am” and the Hindi term “sahib” denoting a respectable, white European or other person of rank in colonial India that originates in the 1830s) refers to a white, foreign woman, usually one married to a British civil servant, service member, or missionary. By the late nineteenth century, many of these married white British women were publishing fiction and nonfiction about their lives and experiences in India.<sup>28</sup> Memsahib literature tended to pay particular attention to women’s lives in India, homemaking in the colony, and interactions with indigenous girls and women. Although she adheres to these key themes of the genre, Steel does not use the term to describe herself. However, modern criticism of Steel takes it up as a key identifier of Steel and her work: Shampa Roy refers to Steel as a “Scottish memsahib” whereas

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<sup>28</sup> Other noteworthy memsahib authors c(ontemporary with Steel) include Alice Perrin, Bithia Mary Croker, Maud Diver, and Sara Jeanette Duncan. For more information about and context of memsahib fiction, see Indrani Sen’s 2012 *Memsahib's Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women*, Benita Parry’s *Delusions and Discoveries: India in the British imagination, 1880-1930*, Rosemary M. George’s *The Politics of Home*, and Mary Procida’s *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947*.

Susmita Roye harkens her an “unconventional” and “exceptional” memsahib whereas Alan Johnson characterizes her as an insurgent “*jungli memsahib*” (*jungli* being a Hindi term still used in India to characterize ostensibly coarse behavior) (94, xi, xvii, 123). Roye, interestingly, argues that while Steel’s biography and topical focuses align her with other memsahib writers, she differs in crucial ways: “Steel’s surprisingly in-depth knowledge of native girls and women is revealed in the rich variety of female characters that she depicts in her fiction. Thus, Steel stands tall and prominent in the group of memsahib writers and deserves far more attention than she has garnered so far” (xiv). It is both, therefore, due to her adherence to the cornerstones of memsahib literature and her departures from it that attract and warrant critical attention of Steel’s work, including *On the Face of the Waters*, which positions both British and Indian women as central figures in telling a story of the 1857 rebellion.

Steel’s identity as a memsahib also helpfully contextualizes her distinct strain of feminism. As subjugated subjects themselves, memsahibs like Steel experienced discrimination on the basis of sex but they also perpetrated race-based discrimination. Indira Ghose adjudicates the complicated subject position of the memsahib in nineteenth century India as well as the fraught legacy and historiography of the figure in more contemporary scholarship, explaining how “Victorian feminism used the image of the downtrodden Indian woman to negotiate an arena for Englishwomen in imperial politics. Running an empire required the superior moral sensibilities of women, Victorian feminists argued. Thus, the suffragette movement used the idea of the imperial mission of Britain to carve out a space for women in the public sphere” (108). As Antoinette Burton reframes it, “the quest for national subjectivity — to be a subject, in the formal political sense — involved identifying feminists and feminism with the nation and, in this historical context, with the empire” (16). Therefore, memsahibs served as emblems of the

righteous empire fused with feminine propriety, a civilizing, patriotic, and vital force that reified gender difference but gained political credibility by emphasizing racial and national allegiance with British men, i.e., voters. Steel was an outspoken suffragist and advocate for women's rights, and her work in India was informed by a respect for and kinship with Indian girls and women based on sex but was also curtailed by racial alliances and colonial stereotypes left uninterrogated.

Both Steel's domestic feminist activism and "civilizing" colonial practices in India invite strategic generalization about populations. Suffragists conjured arguments predicated on generalized notions (sometimes stereotypes) about white women in Britain just as imaginaries about native Indian women and girls justified colonial intervention. In Steel's fiction, this generalization is consolidated into allegorical female characters, whose primary impact on the narrative is to teach a moral lesson and act as a totem, delivering an indictment about the population they represent. Minor female characters become flattened to the point of almost sheer utility; implicitly, the ethical and political framework underwriting *On the Face of the Waters* justifies this vacuum of character complexity that resembles dehumanization because these women fail to be proper women in fundamental ways. For one woman, Zora, her race and ignorance disqualify her from proper, full-fledged womanhood, whereas another woman, Alice Gissing, is ousted from the story because she breaches the kinship rules of polite society — but her death is ultimately a valiant one because she dies saving a white child, like a good British woman should. The treatment of these two women corresponds to a broader pattern of characterization in the nineteenth-century novel. As Alex Woloch observes of the role of minor characters in nineteenth-century novels:



As the logic of social inclusiveness becomes increasingly central to the novel's form— with the development of eighteenth-century empiricism and nineteenth-century omniscient social realism [...] the novel gets infused with an awareness of its potential to shift the narrative focus away from an established center, toward minor characters. In this inclusiveness, the realist novel never ceases to make allegorical (or functional) use of subordinate characters, but it does ferociously problematize such allegory, by more clearly and insistently putting it in juxtaposition with reference. Allegorical characterization now comes at a price: the price of the human particularity that it elides. In other words, the realist novel systematically reconfigures its own allegorical reduction of characters through a pervasive awareness of the distributional matrix. (7)

Apart from Kate Erlton, women are always minor characters in *On the Face of the Waters*. They subsequently function as potent allegorical devices, but they do so at “the price of human particularity.” They convey a political commentary but in doing so are more pawns than people.

It is at the intersection of Steel's preoccupations with Indian political history (especially the Mutiny) and with the didactic role of women in society that *On the Face of the Waters* is located because the history of the 1857 conflict begs existential questions about the British nation, the Indian nation, and the differences of their (gendered) denizens. Reconciling what constitutes a British woman before, during, and after the 1857 conflict proves crucial to fashioning an understanding of the nation itself. Subsequently, *On the Face of the Waters* engages with “the woman question” of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century to grapple with national, imperial questions. The interconnected sociopolitical stakes become especially apparent in moments of life and death in the novel. *On the Face of the Waters* leverages survival and death as metaphorical sites to codify both the exalted futurity of the British man as well as

the strain of selfless heroism that distinguishes his death as noble. To accomplish this aim, the novel contends with what kind of woman has a future among these heroic men and which kinds lack futurity. Moments of gendered death in the novel operate in this didactic way for two reasons. First, they are tinged with an ironic historical wisdom that suggests that these men of the recent past are, unbeknownst to them, blueprints for the contemporary British man. Second, they are sites at which white masculinity forms dialectically in response to women and non-white death. Put another way, women's deaths are a conduit for idealized British masculinity whereas native Indian deaths serve as pitiful comparisons to British army men. The result is that deaths — even of women in the novel — ultimately demarcate what an idealized ordinary for the British man that may seem extraordinary but is, according to the novel, shown to be possible, if not inherent, over the course of the Mutiny.

When women die, their deaths are moments that cement a gender binary, in which what makes a man is how he is affected by a woman's death. Women, then, are means to an end, in life and death. So essential is this relationship between men and women in the novel, it even occurs before the 1857 Mutiny actually begins in the plot. The first death in the novel is that of Zora, a young girl who Jim Douglas "rescues" from destitution and keeps in a flat in Delhi. She never recovers from the birth of her and Douglas' stillborn son, but her decline is gradual. In the final encounter between Zora and Douglas, the narrator remarks, "She was like a wounded bird, he thought, as he watched her; a wounded bird fluttering to find shelter from death" (36). Zora stumbles meekly out of her sickbed and across the room to where Douglas awaits her. But like a wounded bird who cannot fly, she is the epitome of helplessness; she has been transformed from a fragile, caged specimen into a useless, tragic animal. However, in both states, she is something for Douglas to enclose, surveil, and summon at his will. She evokes his pity and paternalistic

benevolence, but his care for her stops short of stirring him to action, nor does he see her demise as something he can intervene in — he treats her beleaguered state as inevitable and out of his control, like all the happenings of the animal kingdom. When she makes her way from her bed to her lover’s arms, it is clear she has given her last reserve to the traverse. Responding to Douglas’ earlier endearment that she is his “queen,” she tells him, “‘I have come,’ she whispered. ‘I have come to my king.’ Her voice ended like a sigh. Then there was silence, a fainter sigh, then silence again” (36). This proclamation is Zora’s final utterance; she fades meekly from life. Steel’s account repeats the abundance of silence — of the absence of sound — in Zora’s dying moments, emphasizing her vacuousness. Her last action is a mere whisper, and subsequent utterances and sighs are not even directly ascribed to her, their agency obscured. Unlike Douglas referring to Zora as his “queen,” in the way a father performatively indulges a child’s logic, Zora bestowing the title of “king” onto Douglas is earnest and evokes a sort of pageantry of a pious Christian dying and meeting God in heaven. This instance of death evokes pity perhaps for Zora, but, more importantly, it solidifies Douglas’ status as a paternalistic entity.

The pronounced absence and vacuousness that marks her demise also foreshadows Jim Douglas’ eventual domestication from a rogue agent into an upstanding, married military man at the end of the Mutiny, married to a proper Englishwoman (Kate Erlton) rather than fooling around with an indigenous girl. Zora’s death, then, is means to a particularly gendered end for Douglas, both in the short and long-term. Zora’s companion, the maidservant named Tara that Douglas employs to accompany his ward, contests Douglas’ plan to lay Zora to rest without any traditional Hindu ceremony. She implores him that “none shall disturb Zora again. She hath found that freedom in the future. For the rest of us, God knows! The times are strange. So let her have her right of wailing, master. She will feel silent in the grave without the voices of her race”

(37). Tara's envy for the perceived freedom of death shades her recommendation, but the ultimate success of her insistence springs from her invocation of racial solidarity. To die and have the company of one's race — not just to die, then — is the thing that registers to the Englishman as proper and emblematic of respect. In response to this rebuke of his wishes, Douglas recoils: "He drew his hand away sharply; even in death a great gulf lay between him and the woman he had loved. So the death wail rang out clamorously through the soft dark air"

(37). This sentiment suggests that a gulf between them also existed during Zora's life and is merely cemented in her death; he makes the separation literal, breaking his body away from hers. There is nothing material remaining to connect the two, just a disruptive sound, albeit one destined to fade to silence. The death of an Indian woman propels Douglas away from India, though not necessarily towards Britain. In narrative terms, it creates a gap that Kate Erlton, the ultimate Englishwoman, will eventually fill (she will live in the same quarters, even adorn herself in some of the same jewelry as Zora), but this substitution corresponds to a profound character arc for Jim Douglas, one in which he settles down into the consummate English hero, despite his rogue past.

In stark contrast to the pitiful nature of Zora's death, the other woman who dies in Jim Douglas' arms does so heroically and spurs Douglas to stay in India and fight for his country. During the uprising, Alice Gissing, who, despite her domestic indiscretions earlier in the novel, dies valiantly and selflessly saving a British toddler from an unsuspecting attack. The narrator describes her final moments in vivid, romantic terms:

The crimson rush of blood from her still-smiling lips dyed his hands also, as he caught her up recklessly with a swift order to the others to follow, and ran for the house. But as he ran, clasping her close, close, to him, his whispered bravos assailed her dead ears

passionately, and when he laid her on her bed, he paused even in the mad tumult of his rage, his anxiety, his hope for others to kiss the palms of those brave hands ere he folded them decently on her breast. (210)

Rather than receiving Alice's death with literal open arms (as he did for Zora), Douglas rushes to Mrs. Gissing when she is in distress and races to provide her with additional aid even though he recognizes it is futile. The dying woman is lady-like in her final moments, "still-smiling" despite the grotesque imposition of blood from her fatal injuries and subject to the chivalrous care of a "passionate " British man. Douglas worships the dead woman like an idol, kissing her hands and feet before arranging her to preserve her decency and reflect her upstanding character. This physical engagement and deep, embodied commitment to this woman that he hardly knows is a stark contrast to his response to Zora's death. For this Englishwoman who dies a martyr protecting an innocent English child, Douglas is drawn in and stirred to reverence as well as subsequent military action. For Zora, who dies slowly after a stillbirth of Douglas' own child, he is repulsed and disengaged. A white woman's death inspires him whereas Zora's death merely presented him with an opportunity. There is something much more authoritative about Alice's death, and it compels Douglas to not only be a better man but specifically to be a better British citizen.

This effect of Alice Gissing's death is not reserved exclusively for Douglas; other men who witness and hear about the death respond with new militaristic fervor. In the hours after Alice Gissing's murder, Kate Erlton tends to the rescued child and newly galvanized troops. At one point she attempts to comfort the "young Mainwaring," who harbored an adolescent crush on the deceased, but "He paused, impotent for speech before his unbridled hatred, then strode away indignantly from her pity, her consolation" (228). Cementing the gender archetypes salient

at this moment, Mainwaring's brusque response stirs "her own gentler nature" and she becomes "conscious of a pride, almost a pleasure in the thought of the revenge which would surely be taken sooner or later, by such as [Mainwaring], for every woman, every child killed, wounded — even touched. She was conscious of it, even though she stood aghast before a vision of the years stretching away into an eternity of division and mutual hate" (228). Kate detects a facet of Mainwaring's character (and, crucially, others like him — presumably, white British men) that seeks revenge for Alice Gissing's death and the broader phenomena it represents, the incursion on British women and children, who are de facto innocent. Any contact, indeed, between indigenous participants in the conflict becomes synonymous with violence. Hyperbolic language here warps the definition and scale of violence; atoning for every moment of contact would require an extraordinary, not to mention wasteful, military response on the part of Mainwaring and other British soldiers. The narrator, on behalf of Kate Erlton, however, deploys this exaggeration to convey a complete dedication to retribution. In this way, an extraordinary reaction to Alice Gissing's — and other women's deaths, imagined and real — is codified as a typical and proportional response for the average British soldier like Mainwaring. Kate Erlton's consciousness of this hyperbolic patriotic, chivalric dedication co-exists with an awareness that this enables a hyperbolic, historical "divisions and mutual hate," presumably between British and Indian people. Although staggering, neither Kate nor the narrator indicate that this is too high a price to pay for this strain of patriotism. Instead, this historical chasm is treated as though it is necessary, perhaps even of the revolutionaries' own making. This perspective uniquely inheres to the novel of the recent past, a text that is in the aftermath of great events, such as *On the Face of the Waters* (not to mention Steel's own life) is borne of the aftermath of 1857.

Part of the reason Alice Gissing's death is such a clarion call for Douglas as well as English military men like Mainwaring is that the novel sketches a social world in which Englishwomen's lives are not compatible with violent death. Earlier on in the novel, when Kate Erlton learns of her husband's infidelity with Alice Gissing, she imagines a rousing confrontation with the other woman, one that results in a violent, maybe even deadly, cart crash. However, when Kate encounters Alice, the narrator admits that "these same words, which came so readily to her imaginings, failed her, as set words will, before the commonplace matter-of-fact reality. If she could have jumped from the dog-cart and dashed into them without preamble, she would have been eloquent enough" (204). There is a chasm between imagination and reality. Kate's dream recourse takes a pragmatic backseat to the "matter-of-fact reality" in which the two Englishwomen are polite acquaintances. They engage in what's proper: "the necessary inquiry if Mrs. Gissing could see her, the ushering in as for an ordinary visit, the brief waiting, the perfunctory hand-shake with the little figure in familiar white-and-blue" and these perfunctory niceties "were so far from the high-strung appeal in her thoughts that they left her silent, almost shy" (204). What is ordinary for British women overpowers Kate's feelings about this British woman. Ordinary expectations are a powerful, disciplining force, one that leaves Kate Erlton "shy" and sheepish for even imagining breaching them. The rigor of these everyday, gendered expectations in this instance correspond to a broader framework of ordinary, gendered expectations that govern the world of the novel for men as well. Part of establishing extraordinary bravery as what is ordinary for British men relies on establishing what is ordinary for British women, specifically that they are dutiful and demure and therefore in need of protection.

## **Masculine Death as Commemoration**

If women's deaths illustrate what sort of women will and should have a future in Steel's Britain, men's deaths in the novel illustrate what sort of men will shape and protect that noble, romantic future. Put another way, men's deaths in *On the Face of the Waters* are moments of ideological and material nation-building. When men die over the course of the novel, they are moments for comparison, especially between white British men and native Indian men, both loyal and those who fought against the British in 1857. These comparisons ultimately enshrine a racialized hierarchy of masculinity and crystalize a mode of ordinary British masculinity that is fundamentally heroic even when it seemingly or initially errs. Although Indian characters are granted a degree of interiority atypical of mutiny novels of the nineteenth century, this potentially humanizing narrative choice in *On the Face of the Waters* ultimately furthers racial stereotypes and confirms assumptions that Indians are monolithic and ignorant about intricate military strategy and patience. Relayed in a novel of the recent past, these deaths of British and Indian men are always already history of a certain strain, and they therefore function not merely as instances of recording facts but as instantiations of potential commemoration, which is part of a trenchant political project.

As the root of the word suggests, commemoration is inextricably linked to memory. The word means to both create and honor the memory of a person, event, or place. Commemoration as an action symbolically refashions the phenomena of the past into something useful or salient to the present moment in which commemoration takes place. Furthermore, although it can be a private event or artifact, more often and for the purposes of this chapter, I emphasize commemoration as a public affair. Indeed, as a noun, a commemoration is oftentimes synonymous with a monument, a public site of memory, or collective ritual. Also embracing this



attention to commemoration and community in discussion of twentieth-century commemorations in France, Peter Carrier, observes a relationship between the present and past that is applicable to commemoration beyond his particular geohistorical focus, remarking “the evolution of the event as represented in commemorations over the long term serves essentially to elucidate both the present with respect to the past, and the uses and abuses of the past in each successive present” (433). There is a reciprocal, co-constituting relationship between the past and the present at the heart of commemoration. There is the conventional wisdom that the past teaches us about the present moment but studying the mechanics of commemoration also reveal that the present moment also influences the recollection of the past, even discrete past events like a battle or a death. There is a generative yet ambivalent intimacy, then, from which all projects of commemoration arise.

However, since commemoration is stubbornly tethered to the present, its engagement with the past must be mediated through memory as well as the social and political matrices that shape memory in the first place. Subsequently, most critical accounts of commemoration (its mechanics, history, politics, etc.), connect it to collective memory. Collective memory resembles history because both are knowledge-formation projects invested in codifying past events, especially social and political ones. However, collective memory is affirmatively narrower in its articulation of the past than history generally construed. It details how a specific group experiences an historical phenomenon. Collective memory relies on a sense of the past still being alive; those who cultivate and carry on collective memory have a direct connection to events. History, by contrast, does not need such direct connections to create accounts of the past, and, in fact, often eschews the subjective tether to past events that collective memory prizes. As such, rather than artifacts or documents that serve as traditional historical sources, shared human

experience is the primary material for collective memory. The emphasis on affect as well as lived human experience align collective memory with the ideological objectives of commemoration more so than detached, traditional history.

More specifically, following French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the interwar period who distinguished between formal history and collective memory, many scholars of commemoration argue that it is imbricated with the assemblages and processes of both history and collective memory because it is attempts to stabilize an account of the past while remaining susceptible to influence from myriad social processes of a particular space and time. For instance, John Gillis asserts, “commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and, in some instances, annihilation” (5). Here he alludes to a crucial characteristic of collective memory that is especially fractious in the context of commemoration: a collective does not necessarily mean unified and homogenous. Collective memory ideally captures the inherently fragmented nature of any collective (7). Collective memory, therefore, while political and inevitably informed by the social, is not in itself radical or equitable and, in fact, has the potential to enshrine inquiry or tyranny.

Due to this powerful political potential, commemoration is frequently a means of nation-building, which is to say, fostering (and policing) a sense of what constitutes a national collective. This connection between commemoration and nationalism emerges from the homogenizing inevitable in commemoration; even if the collective memory of an event is heterogeneous, the commemoration cannot account for all the intricacies of memory and makes certain representational decisions that reflect a political hierarchy. Put another way by Carrier,

“political gestures, monuments, or ceremonies generally prescribe monolithic readings by implicitly referring to a tradition of related commemorations of the past, which serve either to revise or consolidate a popular myth in the present, or to reinterpret a past event within a new historical context, or even consign sets of undesirable elements to oblivion” (436). It is this potential for oblivion and erasure that enables commemoration to serve, specifically, as a tool for imperial nation-building, one that is connected to or even constitutive of violence. In their introduction to *Sites of Imperial Memory: Commemorating Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Dominik Geppert and Frank Muller go as far as to say that “identity-forming symbols and rituals arguably played an even greater role for the maintenance of imperial cohesion than in the national context, because control through actual institutions was necessarily looser in geographically vast and multi-ethnic empires” (4). Commemoration, then, seeks to create or assert national cohesion especially where there are deep-seated divisions, like in nineteenth century British colonies. As such, commemoration was a key technique for writing (and overwriting) a particular kind of colonial national history. As Sumit Guha argues, “the construction of national pasts to replace the many local and community ones became a global anxiety in the nineteenth century” because it was understood that “to be a nation, and not (as Winston Churchill famously described India) ‘merely a geographical expression,’ it was now necessary to have a historical consciousness expressed in a national history” (118-119). Professionalization of history in academia and the centralization of historical knowledge in state-sanctioned educational materials and curriculum laid the foundation for this political and ideological project, while commemoration buttressed these efforts by codifying these efforts in the public sphere.

This broader aim of and trend in commemoration is borne out in commemoration of the 1857 Rebellion, in particular; the subsequent waves of commemoration devoted to the events of 1857 may appear disparate, but they nevertheless share a commitment to fulfill the nationalistic needs of the present. Put succinctly by Sebastian Raj Pender: “the past is moulded through practices of commemoration to serve specific purposes or to satisfy contemporary needs” (15). Contemporary needs satisfied by commemoration are most often those of nationalism because “commemoration is a powerful tool in the hands of modern nation states and large institutions, which routinely utilise commemoration to further their own social agenda and achieve specific political objectives” (15). Commemoration of the 1857 Rebellion began as the conflict was still underway, but iterations of remembrance continued and gained magnitude for many, many decades after the conflict was resolved. Yet, these ongoing iterations were not merely repetitions of the same message nor served the same political objectives. Rather as Nayanjot Lahiri describes of the monumentalized Indian landscape, especially that of Delhi and other key cities, manipulated into commemoration by the British during and after 1857, “In the decades that followed [the Mutiny], this memorialized landscape continued to be confirmed and elaborated by the victors [...] But, simultaneously, there were also policy shifts that materially changed and occasionally inverted aspects of the revolt's brutal aftermath” (50). These material differences belied political differences and Lahiri concludes that “the form in which the commemoration of 1857 has come to be materially constituted has much to do with the selection and construction of a particular kind of past. In Delhi's ‘national’ culture, very little place has been created for a historic moment in its ‘local’ history” (Lahiri 57). Although the reciprocal relationship between a present moment’s political aims and its material and ritual manifestations in practices of commemoration are mercurial over time, the fact that they remain tethered at all testifies to the

stubborn insistence that commemoration of 1857 reinforces a sense of a national community, one that overwrites accounts of local communities in the process.

Overwriting local histories is one of the ways in which commemoration necessitates destruction. Dialectically, constructing a commemoration of an event means inflicting violence, both material and metaphysical. This incumbent destruction asserts a supremacy of the values and politics put forward by a given commemoration. Lahiri explains how, for instance, in Delhi, the British destroyed sacred places, hubs of commerce, and key agricultural sites in and around the city to erect memorials in the years after 1857 (40-42). Just as important as asserting a version of British history that glorifies their “victory,” is that this manifestation erases and destroys any potential versions of history that would assert Indian triumph or even acknowledge loss of Indian life as a tragedy equivalent to the loss of British life. This destruction is intentional, as Lahiri explicates:

While the British commemoration of their victory was deliberate, creating as it were, a palpable ‘landscape of heroism and conquest’ that can be archaeologically located, hardly any physical traces of the resistance offered by Delhi's residents exist. A populace that has been brutally suppressed cannot be expected either to commemorate sites of resistance or to set up memorials. (36)

British commemoration creates an archeological record because it occupies physical space, making confrontation with their desired legacy of 1857 inevitable for occupants of the city as well as closing down literal space for other accounts of the Rebellion or its aftermath.

Commemoration is a show of power that, in the context of 1857, also ascribes powerlessness.

This ability to simultaneously commemorate winners and losers is also why sites

commemorating the British victory in the 1857 Rebellion were ripe for reclamation in the early twentieth century during the burgeoning Indian independence movement (Lahiri 42).

Despite sharing ideological commitment, the production undergirding commemoration of the Mutiny did not produce memorials uniform in message or focus. Much of it, however, valorized the British military, often by way of holding up particular men as paragons of British heroism who triumphed over unruly and uncivilized Indian rebels. The physical monuments created to honor British servicemen are so emphatic in their appeals to patriotism Lahiri acknowledges their striking overlap with mutiny novels, a non-monumental but still historical, form of recalling the past in a certain, politicized light, pointing out that both center “similar tales of ‘selfless bravery’ in the face of ‘native atrocities’” (45). These acts of commemoration that zero in on soldiers as heroes and defenders of a British way of life, both in literature and monuments, coincide with what Pender calls “the growth of popular militarism which spread throughout the empire” in the second half of the nineteenth century. Commemorating the Mutiny, especially soldiers’ role in the conflict, served a larger political purpose as Pender summarizes:

Idealised symbols of masculinity which were represented so as to embody all the attributes of the late nineteenth-century soldier hero, such monuments were erected to honour the glorious deeds of valiant British soldiers or else immortalise the contributions of whole regiments who took part in one or another of the various colonial ‘small wars’ that characterised the age. (6)

Commemoration is an opportunity to selectively remember and to write a version of history that emphasizes a particular gendered participant. Such accounts implicitly, albeit not subtly, establish both an archetype of British masculinity and a subsequent hierarchy atop which this

archetype resides. This both incentivizes British men to aspire for patriotic sacrifice in the name of empire and cements a hierarchy in which white European officers are superior to non-commissioned and native soldiers (and have a duty to enforce as much). This hierarchy is most apparent when one surveys who is not commemorated for their efforts or sacrifices during the Mutiny; some British soldiers were not deemed worthy of commemoration and sometimes troops that fought against the rebels were subdivided or omitted from the record. For instance, Lahiri notes that memorials are absent in Delhi at sites where British lost battles and instead deaths are only commemorated where British forces successfully quelled the rebels. There is also more commemorative attention granted to officers than non-commissioned officers and soldiers, and, critically, “even in death, Englishmen were privileged over their racial ‘others’” (50). At the “Victory Fort” in Delhi, “the inscribed names are ‘European’ mainly those of dead officers. The fourteen ‘native’ officers who perished remain anonymous, reduced to a mere statistical detail in the monument's inventory of casualties” (50). Finally, Lahiri also underscores that at other sites of commemoration “there were, for instance, no state memorials for the ‘civilians’ — mainly women and children who were killed in front of the Naqqar Khana in the Red Fort nor for the others who were put to death by the rebels in different parts of the city” (46). These patterns that govern commemoration of 1857 reinforce its propensity for propagating certain political ideas and ideals that occur under the guise of humanitarian recording of history.

The simultaneous drives of construction and destruction embedded in the political project of commemoration come to the fore in moments when characters in *On the Face of the Water* that rely on imaginings of Indian people’s attitudes toward British people, especially British men and soldiers. Unlike so much of Steel’s narrative that she anxiously insists correlates to documented fact or evidenced history, the thoughts and attitudes of Indian people are impossible

to substantiate due to the projects of commemoration after 1857 that overwrite and silence such accounts. Rather than accept or honor this lacuna, Steel generalizes the feelings of Indian people. For example, as tensions erupt early in the conflict, a young Indian man named Soma becomes the representative for urban Indian men outside of the royal family who have competing impulses when it comes to adjudicating their loyalties. The narrator details that “a strange conflict was going on in [Soma’s] mind, as it was in many another such as his, between inherited traditions, making alike for loyalty and disloyalty” (170). The conflict is not between present and past, but between two past, formative influences that historically coexisted harmoniously but now appear to be at odds. He fondly recalls “the knowledge of his forbears' pride in their victories, in their sahibs who had led them to victory, and the knowledge of their pride in the veriest jot or tittle of ceremonial law. A dull, painful amaze filled him that these two broad facts should be in conflict; that those, whom in a way he felt to be part of his life, should be in league against him (170). To Soma, the presence and authority of the “sahibs” are a benevolent influence, enabling victory in the past. To conceptualize them as antagonists is stupefying but it is a conundrum that demands immediate sorting out, he reasons: “All the more reason, that, for showing them who were the better men; for standing up fairly to a fair fight. By all the delights of Swargal he would like to stand up fair, even to the master—the man who, in his presence, had shot three tigers on foot in half an hour—the demi-god of his hunting yarns for years” (170). Soma’s analysis does not admonish the British treatment as colonizers, nor does it diminish British power and status. Instead, it uses British masculine greatness (seemingly comprised of a chivalric embrace of fairness combined with noteworthy hunting prowess) as the benchmark to which he hopes that he can measure up.



The novel goes on to reaffirm that many — perhaps even a silent majority — of Indians prefer British governance and revere military execution, especially in comparison to the administration proffered by native leaders, namely the infirm king. After the infamous Siege of Cawnpore (during which hundreds of British men, women, and children were killed), British troops in Delhi respond with fury rather than fear: “there was but one opinion. It found expression in a letter which the General wrote on the last day of July. ‘It is my firm intention to hold my present position and resist attack to the last. The enemy are very numerous and may possibly break through our entrenchments and overwhelm us, but the force will die at its post.’ There was no talk of retirement now!” (307). Here, the British are monolithic in their resolve, but because their resolve is that of avenging the death of innocent British women and children, it is characterized as an admirable unity. A nameless General here stands in for the British military everyman, voicing a sentiment that at once sounds extreme but ultimately laudable because it is unequivocal. No threat will compel these British men to retreat or even show fear. Curiously, beyond mere revenge, the British troops justify their stance as one mindful of peaceful Indian citizens; the narrator explains: “The millions of peasants ploughing their land peaceably in firm faith of a just master who would take no more than his due, the thousands — even in the bloody city itself — waiting for this tyranny to pass, were not to be deserted. The fight would go on. The fight for law and order” (307). Cast as protectors of the innocent regardless of race, so noble are British troops that they are resolved to risk their lives for the helpless Indians in the country and city. They are a “just master” whereas the Indian rebels (and even the rulers) are tyrannical. “Law and order” evokes a broad, ideological plight motivating the British men and it suggests that their opponents are seeking lawlessness and disorder. To conclude the chapter, this presumed disdain for the Indian plight becomes explicit as the narrator mocks the de facto leader

of the Indian side: “So the sanctimonious old king had said sooth, ‘Whatever happens, happens by the will of God.’ Those two hundred had not died in vain” (307). The king’s words here come to mean the opposite of how he spoke to them; instead of insinuating Indian triumph over the British, on the heels of this moment where British men iterate their rousing conviction to fight until the death, the suggestion is that the king and those who fight for him will be defeated and this defeat is justice being served, the will of God. It is the will of God, the passage implies, to make sure that those who died at Cawnpore did not do so in vain, that their deaths contribute to a nationalist cause.

### **Rendering the Extraordinary Ordinary**

Although some scholars, including Pender, distinguish between commemoration of and literary production about the mutiny, mutiny literature (especially mutiny novels) share crucial underpinnings, namely their ideological motivations and political implications. Their overlap is so profound in terms of function that mutiny novels like *On the Face of the Water* are in fact best understood as instantiations of commemoration, ones that are especially ripe for demarcating what is ordinary. Both physical sites of commemoration and mutiny literature aim to enshrine the extraordinary nature of the common British soldier and citizen by leveraging the trappings and authority of history. As Guha argues, appeals to factual history and “the casting of statues and razing of monuments alike involve the exercise of power,” specifically colonial state power (3). Put another way, both literature and traditional commemoration traffic in a particular strain of British nationalism, one in the 1890s that emerged in response to a nascent yet cogent Indian nationalism movement as well as a burgeoning wave of domestic anxiety surrounding the colonial expansion and responsibility (Pender 84). Despite superficial differences in strictly

material terms, both mutiny literature and mutiny monuments also operate on an extraordinary scale and density, dominating public space as well as the space in periodicals, on bookshelves, and in popular transatlantic literary discourse.

Grasping this connection between commemoration traditionally construed and mutiny literature not only expands the category of commemoration; it unlocks a more capacious understanding of mutiny literature as deeply bound up matters of collective memory and national identity, specifically these things in the present moment of publication even though it topically purports to be about the past. Mutiny novels, including *On the Face of the Waters*, does not disseminate new historical information about the past, nor does it break new literary ground in terms of form and content. Instead, it recapitulates a story that Steel's readership already knows, deploying common literary and cultural tropes of the time to do so. It nevertheless enjoys massive popularity and commercial success because it reinforces the sociopolitical myths that ordinary British men (and some British women) are extraordinary, especially in comparison to Indian colonial subjects. It leverages the creation of what is considered nationally ordinary and in doing so tells readers what they want, or even need, to hear during a moment of mounting tensions in and about the Indian colony. It commemorates the past to influence the present. And because commemoration, specifically, serves as a blueprint for Steel's political project, the novel inscribes its central messages primarily via accounts of heroic deaths and reverent attention to geographical sites. These thematic loci in the novel further cement *On the Face of the Waters* as a commemorative text as well as a novel fixated on demarcating the ordinary and extraordinary, the banal and exceptional.

A critical implication of the nationalistic, political power of commemoration that proves especially important for understanding the paradox at the center of this chapter — that

commemoration renders the extraordinary ordinary — is that commemoration, in its homogenizing, myth-making prowess, situates the extraordinary bravery of British officers among the everyday. Peter Carrier calls this ability the tendency to “banalize history” because “the necessarily public nature of monuments, for instance, renders them banal” (438). Being banal, however, does not mean that commemoration as such is toothless or apolitical. Rather, Carrier posits that “the analysis of commemorative forms exposes and opens to question the mechanisms and structures of the political manipulation of memory. As theoretical or everyday political applications of social history [...] they undermine the normalization of historical consciousness” (Carrier 441). Because they are “everyday” phenomena and, at least in theory, presented as accessible to the “public,” commemoration appropriates collective memory because it claims to be common history, quietly but stubbornly present in everyday spaces and life. Pender implicitly touches on this appropriation in his observation of the pitfalls of 1857 commemoration, noting, “Collective memory more often resides in the quotidian experiences of those who sit quietly in the shadow of the monument, reflecting on the subject of commemoration. Such accounts are harder to locate and often simply don’t exist” (17). It is collective memory, according to Pender, that corresponds to quotidian experiences. However, when commemoration becomes integrated into everyday life, it takes the place of collective memory that might be understated and splintered. The everyday, then, is critical for the efficacy of commemoration’s ideological and political objectives, although it is always already an incursion into the banal ways of ordinary life.

This incursion spurs from the fundamentally spectacular and extraordinary nature of commemoration, which clashes with the ordinary nature of everyday, quotidian life. But leveraging this tension ultimately enables commemoration of 1857 to be especially trenchant and

potent, commensurate with its level of cultural import as a “obsessively rehearsed story and a central component of colonial identity” for late-nineteenth century Britain (7). The most obvious way in which commemoration of the 1857 Uprising is extraordinary is the scale and longevity of commemorative activity. As Pender recounts:

The Indian Mutiny of 1857 stands out for the unprecedented outpouring of commemorative attention it received. The subject of enormous commemoration ceremonies and the inspiration for numerous statues and large-scale public monuments, the mutiny of 1857 became a cultural lodestone in the late Victorian era and continued to grip British attention in India until the very last days of the Raj. (6)

Commemoration of 1857 occurred in waves for decades after the conflict; it happened in an increasing number of Indian cities and included monuments and rituals. The sheer extent and insistence of the commemoration apparatus was unmatched by any other historical event in the nineteenth century, rendered further extraordinary by how unabashedly it was out of proportion to the material and temporal scale of the event itself. In addition to its form, commemoration of 1857 was also fundamentally extraordinary due to its content: its aforementioned emphasis on “English martial prowess demonstrated by heroic soldier-saints who embodied all the essential qualities of an idealised conception of masculinity” (85). Soldiers are tautologically uniform. Commemoration of individual officers therefore attempts to marshal this sense of a British man in uniform as an everyman into a paradoxical mythos of a brave British masculinity that is simultaneously exemplary and inherent. It is extraordinary, then, that individual British officers demonstrated what is commemorated as bravery and that British men and soldiers possess this innate potential to act similarly. Furthermore, near-identical actions taken by native officers serving the British or Indian rebels clashing with their colonizers are not commemorated as

meritorious because acknowledging such acts as extraordinary would endow them with a reverence that, for the nineteenth century British colonial state, needs to be enshrined with those atop the hierarchy of humanity, the white British officers.

This vengeful, nationalist, yet noble British paradigm is embodied in the novel by General John Nicholson who, critically, is more influential dead than alive, as an ideal rather than a rank-and-file mortal. The General, who swoops in to put the British military response back on track, is equal parts measured, just, and dogged. Upon his arrival, he attempts to lead a regiment into battle through the Cabul gate of Delhi but encounters apathy and cowardice from his troops. The narrator describes how “Nicholson saw the waver, knew what it meant, and sprang forward sword in hand, calling on those others to follow. But he asked too much. Where the 1st Fusiliers<sup>29</sup> had failed, none cared to try. That is the simple truth. The limit had been reached” (399). He pursues forward movement where the other men hesitate or seek retreat, but this choice is not that of a proud fool but one of a man who understands the situation better than those around him and dares to act differently. He, however, attempts a feat that even the legendary 1st Fusiliers failed to accomplish; he insists his men to be braver than the regiment who has set the standard of military success in India for the past two centuries, but this proves too ambitious for the common men around him. The moment highlights the difference between the extraordinary General and his ordinary troops: “So for a minute or two he stood, a figure instinct with passion, energy, vitality, before men who, God knows with reason, had lost all three for the moment. A colossal figure beyond them, ahead of them, asking more than mere ordinary

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<sup>29</sup> The 101st Regiment of Foot, also known as the Royal Bengal Fusiliers and later the 1st Bengal (European) Light Infantry, was only renamed 1st Bengal Fusiliers in 1859 (so the invocation here by Steel is a slight anachronism). The storied infantry regiment of the East India Company was the first all-European infantry regiment when it was established in 1652. The regiment is remembered as an integral force in quelling the 1857 rebellion in Delhi and Lucknow for the British and five members of the regiment were awarded the Victoria Cross for their actions during the rebellion.

men could do. So a pitiful figure — a failure at the last!” (399). He is, in fact, a “figure” amongst men, possessing hyperbolic amounts of life-force that his troops, merely mortal, lack in this moment. The observation that he is “beyond” and “ahead” of his men also hint of a narrator with a broader vantage point of history, readily able to situate a figure such as Nicholson in subsequent years when society has presumably progressed. In this way, Nicholson is a man of the novel’s time of publication (the 1890s) more so than of its plot setting (the 1850s). Casting him as a “figure” more so than a man also enshrines him and grants him a statuesque status, an archetypal reference point that demands commemoration.

His attempt to bridge the ontological gap between himself and those around him, to urge the common man to become extraordinary, turns out to be his first and final act of war. In response to his troops’ inaction, he implores: “Come on, men! Come on, you fools — come on, you—you—” (399). However, an enemy bullet interrupts his sentence: “What the word was, which that bullet full in the chest arrested between heart and lips, those who knew John Nicholson's wild temper, his indomitable will, his fierce resentment at everything which fell short of his ideals, can easily guess” (399). The bullet does not kill Nicholson at once, but it does stop his utterance in its tracks. The implication is that Nicholson is on the precipice of using language more incendiary than “fools” but the narrator demurs from disclosing the real or speculated sentiment. Either the narrator does not know Nicholson well or seeks to create an aura of exclusivity around the figure; both possibilities underscore Nicholson’s mystique as above and beyond the men around him.

Strikingly, Nicholson’s unique ability to simultaneously stand out from the British troops and be inextricably of them endures even after his death. The novel closes, after British victory in Delhi, with a recognition that “one man was taking an eternal hold upon them; for John

Nicholson was being laid in his grave” (425). Rather than being lost forever, death affirms Nicholson’s grasp on those who fought alongside him. He requests to be buried not in the land the troops ultimately regained but in the spot where he failed to rouse his troops and got shot, facing the Gate he sought to conquer. He, apparently, calls himself a failure but the narrator gently asserts otherwise:

So he lies there facing the city he took. But his real grave was in that narrow lane within the walls where those who dream can see him still, alone, ahead, with yards of sheer sunlight between him and his fellow-men. Yards of sheer sunlight between that face with its confident glance forward, that voice with its clear cry, “Come on, men! Come on!” and those — the mass of men — who with timorous look backward hear in that call to go forward nothing but the vain regret for things familiar that must be left behind. “Going! Going! Gone!” (425)

The distinction between where his body lies buried and his “real grave” suggests that the “narrow lane within the walls” is the place where his memory is best conjured because it is the site where his actions and words best typified his existence as a brave Englishman, ahead of his time and his contemporaries. The repetition of spatial terms as well as the phrase “sheer sunlight” create a refrain that imbues this recollection with a reverence as one would depict an other-worldly, holy force and his grave takes on the significance of a shrine. Furthermore, the attention to individual body parts furthers this sense that Nicholson was not merely a man, but a whole being far greater than the sum of his human-like parts. As such, his call to take forward military action, echoed here, takes on a much greater resonance. The intentionally ambiguous “mass of men” includes men beyond those storming the gate with Nicholson; it includes men who feel afraid in the face of a challenge, big or small, past or present. This fear becomes the



broader existential fear of change that inevitably occurs over the course of history (hence it being “vain). Lest this stirring recollection leave readers guessing as to Nicholson’s enduring impact and broader significance to reflect the gulf men must cross to become the men of the future British nation, the narrator adds and reiterates that “John Nicholson stands symbol of the many lives lost uselessly in the vain attempt to go forward too fast. Yet his voice echoed still to the dark faces and the light alike: ‘Come on, men! Come on!’” (425). This final repetition of Nicholson’s words is a striking edit as well as a telling call to action on behalf of the novel itself. Nicholson is again deemed precocious, but as a beacon to men of all races, not just British men. This upends the meaning of his utterance — initially an appeal to British soldiers to attack and defeat Indian combatants — into a rallying cry for cooperation between races. The Englishman of the near future then is one who seeks progress, a coming forward, for men of all races. Finally, the rhetorical fact of this repeated “Come on, men!” in this passage demonstrates how the act of reiteration can revise meaning. This happens over the course of the repeated phrase, and it happens at the much larger scale of the novel itself. The narrative choice to repeat a phrase or a history imbues its subsequent iterations with both a gravity and a scope that did not belong to it originally, oftentimes imbuing it with potent didacticism that commemorates Nicholson’s — as well as British men’s — extraordinary heroism.

## **Conclusion**

At the first moment when the novel begins to write history within itself — in its closing Appendices, written in late 1858 in the form of letters sent from India to recipients in Britain recounting the aftermath of the Mutiny — it makes clear that retrospection, even from mere months after the fact, is a tool of commemoration that casts British soldiers as uniformly heroic. The second and final Appendix is a letter from young Charles Morecombe’s letter, dated on

Christmas Day 1858, and sent to Mrs. Kate Erlton in her domicile in Scotland, where she is nursing her new husband, Jim Douglas, back to health so the couple can perhaps return one day to India. Morecombe's remarks are paradoxical: he first claims that the "return to commonplace life" makes the events of the Mutiny seem as if they belong to another person's life, but then asserts that "I fancy that few who went through the Indian Mutiny will ever need to have the faces and places they saw there recalled to their memory. Terrible as it was at the time, I myself feel that I would not willingly forget a single detail" (430). There is something enduring and precious about the Mutiny and memories thereof. Morecombe ventures, "the most remarkable thing to my mind about the whole affair is the rapidity with which it proved the stuff a man was made of" (430). The conflict was so important and remains indelible because it revealed the character of participants. Even in the face of tremendous death, violence, and chaos, this soldier insists that the most extraordinary effect of the Mutiny is that it showed massively and swiftly the essential nature of British men. Implied here but spelled out more specifically in subsequent lines is the notion that the "stuff a man was made of" is laudatory, meritorious stuff. He goes on, explaining, "you can see that by looking into the cemeteries. India is a dead level for the present; all the heads that towered above their fellows laid low. Think of them all! Havelock, Lawrence, Outram. The names crowd to one's lips; but they seem to begin and end with one — Nicholson!" (430). The second-person narration permitted by the genre of the personal letter also allows this imploring sentiment to address the novel's readers more squarely, underscoring how recent recollections of the Mutiny fuse the personal and political. Morecombe evokes the dramatic image of thousands of soldiers laid to rest. Ironically, though, he suggests that these new graves serve as a sort of new "dead level" foundation, inviting something to be built upon all those "laid low." Whatever happens in India in subsequent years happens atop the legacy — here rendered

embodied and material, as if the very earth is one large site of commemoration — of British men. The grammar of Morecombe’s musing reinforces the stubborn yet disjointed relationship between the recent, morbid past in India and its present ripe with opportunity; a semicolon fastens the present-tense assertion about India to a past-tense fragment recounting slain British men. Although there are so many lost that Morecombe exclaims about the scope of loss and the “names crowd” his mouth, all the men, according to Morecombe, can be symbolically encapsulated by Nicholson. The exceptional general, in this retrospective account, becomes shorthand for all British soldiers who died, meaning that his exceptional bravery now characterizes the whole crowd and is inherent to the symbolic topography underlying the British colonial state in India in the years after 1857 — the extraordinary rendered as ordinary and ubiquitous as the ground in which the countless dead are buried.

### Chapter III

#### The Historical Comes Home in *Middlemarch*

“Whatever the raw material on which historiographic form works [...] the ‘emotion’ of great historiographic form can then always be seen as the radical restructuring of that inert material.” (101)

— Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative As a Socially Symbolic Act*

*Middlemarch*'s magniloquent narrator begins the novel's Finale reassuring readers:

“Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending” (Eliot 832). Here, at the edge of the narrative, the end of the known begets uncertainty, which in turn prompts scintillating speculation about characters' fictional futures. By the final chapter of *Middlemarch*, the eligible young women of town have found husbands (albeit to varying degrees of contentment) and nuances of these relationships are more than enough to furnish a novel; however, the accounts of courtship are so lush and detailed because they are the rich and complex soil in which modern society continues to grow. These unions are fundamental to the world order, the narrator asserts, claiming, “marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness” (832). The tribulations Middlemarchers experience in pursuit of a suitable marriage are merely the “honeymoon” and now, married, they are to face the “wilderness.” Marriage may be the expected, if not required, objective for citizens of Middlemarch, but its ubiquity undermines neither its importance nor its challenge. Because of its gravity and staying power, the story of a marriage serves as a ready parable for the fate of humankind more broadly, including a burgeoning nation that must operate as a united front that both grows with time and remains an abiding, cohesive unit. As the narrator concludes: “It is still the beginning of the home epic—the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete

union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common” (832). Marriage is incontrovertibly intertwined with the formation and fate of “home” on both a personal and national level. The making and maintenance of a marriage can be a process that can be an expansion and growth or one of consolidation and shrinking. In either case, the consequences are “epic” in their import. It cements a shared experience between members of the union, an experience that can be “sweet” but could also result in tragedy, as epics sometimes do. In particular, in *Middlemarch*, marriage is a site of profound meaning for women because, as arbiters of the domestic sphere, it demarcates the confines and conditions of their lives. Famously, the novel concludes with the supposition that “for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (838). “Unhistoric” acts are often those undertaken by women, and they elude history because they are “faithful” to the point of banal and “hidden” in the domestic sphere. Although local and even intimate, these acts nevertheless are integral to the vitality of the “world” according to the novel’s narrator.

As the term “epic” also invokes, marriage is a defining historical moment in the personal lives of those who wed, particularly so in a novel of the recent past, which emphasizes everyday life. Published in 1871-72 and set from 1829-32, *Middlemarch* is a novel of the recent past — as Thomas Pinney points out, most of Eliot’s novels are (133). The novel’s plot takes place forty years prior to publication in an England that resembles the reader’s present but registers as somewhat alien due to the precipitous social and political changes that occurred during the mid-nineteenth century. Pinney makes the useful observation that this interval means that most

George Eliot novels are set in the time of her childhood. Rather than sheer nostalgia, though, he argues that they all promote a sort of pragmatic conservatism in regard to the past:

In the light of this belief in the moral supremacy of feeling George Eliot's conservatism is best understood. Old and familiar objects and associations are cherished not because they possess a necessarily superior intrinsic value, but because they have drawn to themselves those affections which supply all the meaning of life, and have become inseparable from the feelings which exalt them. The affections, because freshest and most intense in our early life, are inevitably backward looking. (135)

In this way, the retrospection of *Middlemarch* shares many commitments with that of *Shirley* and *Wuthering Heights*. All these novels rely on self-conscious retrospection as the foundation of narration because an individual's (or family's) recent, lived experience has the most emotional charge and narrative freight, whether it come from the logistics of Nelly Dean's dramatic tenure as housekeeper or the robust relationships Caroline Helstone forms, including the shocking reunion with her mother. This mode of personal retrospection is deeply emotional but also has the potential to have a political charge. Eliot's penchant for the interval a few decades in the past, locating in them an unparalleled existential germ, compels her to account for this period in her fiction because it is impactful and potentially didactic.

Eliot's engagement with the past in *Middlemarch* also embraces some facets of nostalgia, while nevertheless eschewing the thorough sentimentality oftentimes associated with nostalgic literature. Camilla Cassidy usefully argues that Eliot deploys a unique fusion of memory and history that is reminiscent of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels. This fusion effectively "articulate[s] an experience of rapid and disorientating historical change" (118). During this period of domestic upheaval at both the national and individual level, Cassidy avers that Eliot

conjures “an emotional tenor something like nostalgia or homesickness” to “describe a psychological experience of historical transition and modernisation” (118). Cassidy’s concept of “homesickness” is helpful to understand *Middlemarch*’s distinct leverage as a novel of the recent past because homesickness blends an acute familiarity with longing, which is uniquely possible in a novel of the recent past that at once evokes proximity and distance. Homesickness also prompts us to consider how the novel of the recent past, unlike the traditional historical novel, harkens to notions of home. As Cassidy puts it: “apprehension of uprootedness dependent on its converse, a feeling of security and stasis. This literal but precarious at-homeness corresponds to and interacts with a liminal historical setting” (113). Home connotes safety and security, a feeling of belonging, that is perhaps particularly prized during times of upheaval and alienation. A novel of the recent past highlights the importance of “at-homeness” both through its familiarity to the reader and, conversely, through the ways it showcases changes between plot and publication. *Middlemarch*’s fascination with and focus on marriage, then, is better understood as a preoccupation with homemaking — the process that marriage facilitates that furnishes the setting and plot of a “home epic” situated in a novel of the recent past — heightened by the “at-homeness” highlighted specifically by a novel of the recent past

This chapter maintains that homemaking in *Middlemarch* enacts a return, a sort of homecoming, that is ontologically ordinary. Returning to the past is a generative process for women characters in *Middlemarch*, one that is particularly vital in homemaking through and after marriage. In *The Aesthetic Commonplace: Wordsworth, Eliot, Wittgenstein, and the Language of Every Day*, Nancy Yousef observes that Eliot’s plight to render the unremarkable remarkable in her fiction requires a return, drawing narratorial attention back to a detail previously overlooked: “the task of *making* ordinary things interesting must involve a fusion of

invention and recollection, a (re)presentation of phenomena that are unknown because neglected, overlooked, bypassed” (38). Not quite an instantiation or a reclamation, this process of return generates via regeneration. A recycling of sorts, this process relies on something already extant to create something new. Critically, the returned-to thing or phenomenon does not change, but it is the attention paid to it that changes, something external and structural. This attention, Yousef goes on, has a distinct emotional valence: “urgency is intrinsic to the appeal of the everyday, as is the indictment — as much intellectual as emotional in its charge — of forgetting, leaving unattended, tending to overlook” (38). Because the ordinary and everyday emerges from return, these phenomena always already have the traces of feeling; specifically, there is a determination not to forget or a willfulness to counter the tendency to overlook the banal. Without this careful attention to the intent and charges behind returning and its instantiation of a present ordinariness, it is possible to miss the work such return requires and creates. For example, Henry Staten remarks that “*Middlemarch* ends where it began, the social order of England fundamentally unchanged, detachment from what things cost still possible under the ideological spell of gentility; but it is questionable whether the novel constitutes an endorsement of this state” (Staten 1003). The maintenance of the status quo is not just an eschewing of outside influence as Staten suggests. It is a laborious undertaking to maintain the feeling that *Middlemarch* is home to the Vincys, Garths, and its other denizens. As time moves forward, maintaining this feeling of home requires ongoing return.

Consequently, this metaphysical move — that of return — is a central cog in the machinery of Eliot’s realism in *Middlemarch* because of its ability to emphatically engender everyday phenomenon as constitutive of individual characters, the collectives to which they belong, and the setting (both physical and sociopolitical) in which they exist. In particular, Eliot



repeatedly relies on returning in telling the stories of women's lives because women exist in private, domestic settings where the bulk of the banal minutiae of everyday life takes place. Women return in *Middlemarch* to essential aspects of their personal pasts even as time marches forward. Female characters may appear as though they are diligently moving forward in life or that they are merely nostalgic, but they are, in fact, building a personal and community future that is intimately imbricated with their pasts. When women make homes, especially those that begin with marriage and entail relocating to a new domestic setting, they go through the motions of breaking new ground but in practice they ultimately return and cement something essential about themselves and something ordinary. For Dorothea Brooke, Rosamond Vincy, and Mary Garth, the novel makes clear that their future is incumbent on their personal histories. The past is something to be cherished and preserved; even though they marry, and time moves forward, their eventual homemakings are also homecomings, enshrining fundamental parts of their individual, gendered pasts. For their husbands, by contrast, marriage advances their careers (with the exception, arguably, of Will Ladislaw), continuing to fortify and advance a professional life that is the central fact of their lives. The metaphysical return that happens through marriage is unique to the women of *Middlemarch*.

As Yousef's conceptualization of the ordinary also suggests, emotions are central to this process of returning to the past in *Middlemarch*. Strong feelings drive women to cherish and return to critical parts of their pasts as they make homes in marriage. This focus on feeling fills the novel of the recent past with a divergent mode of history. Staten is one Eliot scholar who presumes that traditional history is the only container which can hold the past, and therefore dismisses sentiment as a critical element in defining the import of past events. He mistakes *Middlemarch*'s emotionally driven, private history as "ahistorical" because "historical

specification” (i.e., public, political historical events to be recorded by professionals) are sparse and largely relegated to the background “in the most intricate yet economical fashion” (999). For instance, local political writing and activism serves as “the means by which Ladislaw is kept near Dorothea so that he can see her from time to time and their romance can develop” and the underlying motivation for their attraction insofar as Dorothea’s love for Will is, in part, an affection for his fundamental “political energy” (999). The novel, by this account, is hardly about history because historic events are merely means to interpersonal ends. Only when one endeavors to “peel away the overlay of sentimentality from the showing — which emerges, not as a symptomatic reflection of a ‘historical impasse,’ but as an intricate analysis of the way in which this impasse is articulated” can a savvy reader suss out legitimate history in *Middlemarch* (992). Sentiment, by this account, warps history nearly beyond recognition. Such an account of history not only lacks imagination but overcomplicates the nature of history. Rather than something to excavate from feeling, history is born of it in *Middlemarch*.

Rather than tracing the effects of sweeping political changes that are traditionally deemed “history,” *Middlemarch* as a novel of the recent past demonstrates how personal pasts orient characters towards the future. In this chapter, I argue that in women’s lives in the novel, homemaking becomes an act of homecoming, paradoxically returning to or honoring their past desires or outlooks to furnish a future. These instances of return, although disparate in many ways, all emphasize the vitality of ordinary life and the constitutive everyday phenomena that may be otherwise dismissed as banal because it is unhistoric. The chapter traces this arc of return in three female characters: Mary Garth, Rosamond Vincy, and Dorothea Brooke. For Mary Garth, her embrace of the ordinary secures her a humble domicile that nevertheless brings her personal contentment and public approbation. Rosamond Vincy contrasts with Mary’s plight: her

affinity for the extraordinary leads to marital acrimony and she only finds relief once she absconds from the humdrum environs of Middlemarch, its social universe, and its legacy. Finally, Dorothea Brooke returns time and time again to the pursuit of historic greatness, but she finds that ordinary acts and relationships are the most profound options available to her, even if they are inscrutable and “unhistoric.” Although these characters' trajectories are divergent in many ways, they all testify to women’s inevitable, ongoing reckoning with ordinariness in *Middlemarch* and demonstrates how they draw on their personal pasts to contend with this confrontation.

### **George Eliot and Victorian History**

Many literary critics have done painstaking work to adjudicate George Eliot’s relationship to the discipline of history during the nineteenth century. Eliot’s life coincided with a transformative time in knowledge creation and codification in Britain and the broader western world. Various academic fields and hobbyist pursuits morphed and fused during the Victorian era to create interconnected yet distinct disciplines, practiced by learned and specialized practitioners, and with regulations that served to protect knowledge-creation but also inevitably erected boundaries. History, for example, amalgamated aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarianism, archeology, philology, and literature. Different practitioners of the nascent professional field imbued the art of history with different philosophical and political aims and ideals. Among Britain’s academia and intelligentsia, two schools of historical thinking dominated discourse: Comtean and Whig. According to Neil McCaw, Comtean historical thinkers — channeling the scientism espoused by French philosopher and founder of modern sociology, Auguste Comte — centered positivism and “envisaged history as a human totality in

which the idiosyncrasies and particularities of human identity are subsumed and silenced” due to an overarching similarity and shared totality of experience (McCaw “Imagining,” 6). By contrast, Whig historians favored a perspective that “history has a metanarrative, implying a direction and purpose that sanctions a particular mode of human existence, in this case English national identity” (McCaw “Whig,” 22). The former cohort proffered a detached ambivalence whereas the latter’s view laid the groundwork for ontological differences to be understood as historical fact. Both models made an implicit link between history and human populations, either blurring distinctions between them or etching the dividing lines more clearly. Therefore, all iterations of historical understanding that emerged in the nineteenth century had ideological and political implications. Whig historicism became inextricable, perhaps obviously, from the Whig political party’s agenda and platform, one forwarding an understanding of English nationalism and exceptionalism on the international stage.

Many nineteenth-century politicians and political thinkers made their viewpoints known about how they view history, but George Eliot’s personal orientation to these conflicting historical modes can only be guessed at. Indicators from her nonfiction writings demonstrate that she saw the virtue and limits of both doctrines. Referring to Comte, Eliot remarked in an 1860 letter that “with regard to History I venture to say that no philosopher has ever laid so much emphasis on it, no one has more clearly seen and expressed the truth, that the past rules the present, lives in it, and that we are but the growth and outcome of the past” (Eliot, *Letters*, 320).<sup>30</sup> From this view of the past, Eliot prizes the connectivity between past and present, a sort of connection characterized by vitality rather than understanding history as a lifeless artifact.

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<sup>30</sup> *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art* (1975) by Neil Roberts, *Criticism and Ideology* by Terry Eagleton (1978), and *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (1986) by T.R. Wright all offer in-depth analysis of the overlap between Comtean philosophy, especially its positivism, and George Eliot’s writings.

However, despite Eliot's enthusiasm about the animacy present in Comte's philosophy of history, his specific model of the "we" that grows from history, as well as the trajectory of this growth, seemingly falls short for Eliot. As McCaw goes on to argue, Eliot's writing — though especially her fiction — is obsessed with not just history, but English history, and themes of national identity are central in nearly all of her novels. And, as Jason B. Jones maintains: "a key moral and aesthetic question for George Eliot was whether history progresses teleologically" (78). Eliot's doubts about the direction and aim of history means that she did not completely subscribe to Comtean history, and her proclivity for a past thoroughly English in her literary works in fact register as affinities with Whiggish history, albeit not complete allegiance.

For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is most critical to consider how and why Eliot engages with history in her fiction. Eliot engages with history constantly in her novels, but at a critical distance that allows her to tinker with the past more than enshrining it; as Bernard Semmel notes, "all of Eliot's novels but one [...] were historical romances set at least a generation earlier" (McCaw 10). Engaging with the past, then, is foundational for Eliot's fiction. The ubiquity of "historical romance" in Eliot's work oftentimes means that history in some form has some degree of influence on the plots or characters. Attention to the past is subtly woven into the textile of realism; as McCaw astutely observes, "history becomes apparent in the novels through the privileging of contextual detail that works to anchor the fictional narratives to what is seen to be a more ontologically stable base. Eliot uses what was a typical narrative device of formal realism, but in a way that was qualitatively different from other authors" (11). Historicity (or details of a historical past) is part of Eliot's novels to the extent that politics inflect any present moment in the domestic sphere; they are often implicit and their influence indirect but certainly not absent.

In her novels of the recent past, Eliot joins other authors of the genre — including Flora Annie Steel — in leveraging the overlap between history and memory. She does so to emphasize the connection between not just the past and present but also the personal and the public. Memory, individual as well as collective, corresponds to *how* an individual or group experiences a past phenomenon; it emphasizes emotion over empirical facts or logistics of a past event. Where Steel used the emotional dimension of memory as the foundation for acts of commemoration in her novel, Eliot relies on the nature of memory to better capture complex, oftentimes emotional, implications of home. As Cassidy argues that Eliot imbues history with the dynamics and capacities of memory within her narratives to more convincingly sketch a blueprint of existential, emotional home that is based on “an apprehension of uprootedness dependent on its converse, a feeling of security and stasis” and that “this literal but precarious at-homeness corresponds to and interacts with a liminal historical setting,” as she refers to novels of the recent past (113). Looking back makes one — a character or a reader — necessarily unmoored from the present in some way, but this detachment begets a certainty that one is in fact tethered to the present continuous with this past.

One reason Eliot relied on history, albeit in a form hybridized with memory, so often was that it complemented her preoccupation with the English nation, offering a vehicle for political fantasy that agreed with the sensibilities of realist literary fiction. If one takes the past and present as connected, writing history can appease contemporary anxieties or prod present existential questions. As McCaw usefully describes it: “History (namely a particular imagining of the past) was the twilight world wherein human existence and especially English national identity were meaningful and spiritually enlightened. The reassuring, cohesive narratives of England’s past [...] offered solace to combat the doubts and insecurities of Eliot’s mid-Victorian

present” (12). Such resonance was “reassuring” for those amid a politically tumultuous century like Eliot and her contemporaries. Even Whiggish histories that maintain English difference and exceptionalism consolidate conflict, ultimately forwarding a historical narrative of continuity that many regard as progress.

In addition to this philosophical and political reason to mobilize history in her novels, it also serves as a generative dialectic for aesthetic production, an engine for intricacy and vitality in fictional writing. Jason B. Jones details this generative potential inherent in telling stories about the past:

Because the past is partially lost, there can be a present; because we cannot know everything about it, we are driven to learn as much as we can about it. Not because our knowledge of the past would one day become complete, but rather because the past’s inaccessibility gives us room to speak. Perversely, then, the fact that the past is lost is not only why we have to write history, but it is also why we have a history at all.” (2)

While I stop short of agreeing with Jones’ subsequent comparison between this drive to fill in the blanks of the past with Freudian psychoanalytic drives, the mechanism Jones describes here is a useful one for understanding Eliot’s use of the recent past when she seemingly has no topical interest in history. She does not seek to give definite answers or sketches about the past in her novels — she writes fiction after all — but she seeks to capture some aspect of the ineffable thrust of the past that influences every present. Cassidy offers another useful way to think about the useful aesthetic energy proffered by the recent past in Eliot’s work; she describes how setting plots in a memorable but just-out-of-reach past “creates a sense of historical dynamism within apparently unchanging scenes” that communicates “a cultural narrative of unsettling change which, paradoxically, is pinned to this ‘relatable,’ remember-able time scheme” (117). Yoking

the knowable to the unknowable generates new verve from something familiar or even considered to be old news, suggesting that the familiar need not be dull or barren. The recent past as a historical temporality recharacterizes the banal as a familiar stability, from which vital developments of history (be they social, political, or otherwise) emerge, ultimately instantiating “a sense of historical dynamism within apparently unchanging scenes” (117). This “dynamism” adds complexity and liveliness to Eliot’s scenes of the recent past while also ensuring they do not become esoteric.

And because history in some form is vital for Eliot’s fiction, it is also ordinary for Eliot. She engages history in various modes and to various ideological and aesthetic ends, but the codified, written-about past is ubiquitous in her novels. For the purposes of this chapter, it is the most salient to consider how *Middlemarch* capitalizes on a different kind of authority engendered by the past than the dominant coherence handed down by history as envisaged by nineteenth-century thinkers and academics, one that both centers women’s everyday experience and is a novel of the recent past. *Middlemarch* showcases the import of what is mistaken by hegemonic history as “ahistorical” and private past that belongs to women, a past laden with emotional and personal history — but one that isn’t picturesque or sentimental.

The novel’s famous Prelude begins by questioning history, confronting readers about its tenets and figures, and specifically asking after the import of a little girl — Saint Theresa. The assertive narrator inquires:

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl



walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors? (3)

This opening sentiment understands history as a mutable art more than an empirical science. The narrator describes “the history of man” as both composite in nature and subject to the “varying experiments of Time,” a mercurial alchemy of knowledge creation. Such an equation testifies to the understanding that the historical moment influences how individuals and society understands themselves and their past; at each new moment, a new understanding of the past emerges.

Additionally, the grammar of this opening productively undermines the boundaries of history and accommodates women’s lives in what history can — and, to this novel’s narrator *must* — include. The narrator’s opening begs such a grandiose question that to answer in the negative seems absurd. Of course, then, any serious inquiry into “the history of man” must engage with and honor Saint Theresa. This engagement is not only requisite, but also steeped in feeling.

Rather than studying the girl from a cold and critical distance, historical study of Saint Theresa triggers genial feeling because considering her historical existence entails, here, imagining her as an embodied girl situated in a young, vital life with a sibling and a lilt in her walk, not merely the woman defined by her death like traditional historical records might sketch her. Because this sentiment is phrased as a rhetorical question, the critique of traditional history is hardly scolding. Instead, the question kindly invites readers and those contemplating “the history of man” to integrate women and girls, their bodies, and feelings, into the ongoing process of writing history.

This model of history envisioned by the Prelude’s opening sentence resembles Eliot’s use of history in what has generally considered her most clearly historical novel, *Romola*, but also proffers a futurity for a woman’s life and its impacts that the traditional trappings of a historical novel simply cannot accommodate. The novel relays the tumultuous history of fifteenth-century

Florence as refracted through a fictional young woman named Romola de' Bardi — whom Oscar Browning deems “a saint living in the world, a prototype of Dorothea ” (142). As that connection suggests, *Romola*, like *Middlemarch*, is a novel that centers one woman’s everyday experience. However, it is not a novel of the recent past and is more preoccupied with explicating the historical setting in descriptive detail. As such, Kelly Battles argues that Eliot’s historical approach in *Romola* hews more closely to nineteenth-century antiquarians than to professional, academic historians because “it is characterized particularly by an interest in material objects, local histories, and chronicles” (217) and Romola’s character and plot engagement is too because of her position in society as a woman, specifically as a daughter, sister, and wife. Yet, rather than being banished to the margins of a thoroughly-researched and rich historical novel, Eliot provides “a place for Romola, as a woman, to participate in the public arena of her time, the novel,” which “suggests that grand, masculinist, national narratives of history and fragmented, localized (and feminized) antiquarian narratives are not necessarily antagonistic modes of historical knowledge” because the former is the center of narrative gravity for the latter (222). However, this coexistence of feminized and masculinist history that *Romola* fashions is fragile and does not, ultimately, subvert gendered hegemony. As Battles concludes, “the novel comes to a close, indicating that the events with which it is concerned, the historical events, have been resolved and that therefore there is nothing left to tell regarding Romola’s place in history” because by the end of the novel “she has consigned herself to seemingly insignificant daily, domestic, quotidian life” (233). When historical events end, the quotidian carries on, but thus concludes a traditional historical novel, even one prominently featuring a woman and her travails. The temporality of traditional history dictates that the everyday activities are not

sufficient to accommodate the precepts of historical novels, so the activities of a woman's daily, domestic life are resigned to oblivion by the genre.

Eliot sidesteps this inability to accommodate women's everyday lives when they stand apart from the grand political and social events demarcated as history when she writes novels of the recent past, such as *Middlemarch*, which capitalize on the grandeur of the imagined past while also garnering an intimacy with the reader that endears them to domestic plots. The *Prelude* goes on to assert that Saint Theresa's history is an ongoing tradition, a living history of sorts inherited by women in subsequent generations of humanity. However, they are not readily recognized as saints, as historical figures. Theresa becomes an archetype for a class of women, albeit one harder to discern over time because changing and fracturing material and spiritual circumstances make it challenging to translate their innate goodness into commensurate good actions. The narrator laments, "for these later-born Therasas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardor alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse" (3). Their lives, rather than the clearly didactic story of a saint, are rather misinterpreted by "common eyes" as a tragic tale of fallible womanhood. Notably, by observing this misrecognition the narrator occupies a savvier position, seemingly above and beyond the mere mortals who cast aspersions on these more modern Therasas. The *Prelude* subsequently becomes a cautionary tale or a clarification of these instances of misrecognition, telling the story of an undeniable modern Theresa as she receives the very disapproval and condemnation that the narrator chides. This cautionary message is possible in the first place because the narrator of the novel, from its onset moment, is set apart from the fools who mistake modern Therasas and implicitly invites the

reader to join them in this superior understanding of these women and of the history that woefully misunderstands them.

*Middlemarch*, then, is acutely aware of nineteenth-century hegemonic history, but establishes this familiarity only to credibly depart from it in the way it practices reverent, attentive retrospection on women's lives in Middlemarch. The narrator's alternative model of history suggested by the Prelude paradoxically eschews the trappings of traditional history. Without regularity and with only colloquial chronological terms, the narrator concludes: "here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed" (3-4). Although "foundress of nothing," these later Therasas are still impactful; their accomplishments just look different from founding a religious order. Rather than being the stuff of measurable documentation, these women make their mark through "heart-beats" and "sobs," emotional exertions that are insistent and disruptive but private and individual. Put another way, it is her character and her emotional life that renders her historic in this framework put forth in *Middlemarch*, a framework that argues for the importance of a history of everyday, emotional life. Nothing summative or even conclusive may come of these exertions because these women face dispersed obstacles more diffuse and subtle than the villains of traditional, didactic stories of saint's lives. However, these women are Therasas even if their impacts are not "long-recognizable" by an unnamed external audience. It is not lasting and broad recognition, then, that makes these women historical and extraordinary. Ironically, the implication is that these modern saints are comfortably consigned to ordinary life and its achievements, as well as its "hindrances."

Because the Prelude upends expectations for what constitutes a historical figure, especially when the figure takes the form of a woman, it primes readers to feel sympathy for the modern Theresa, Dorothea Brooke, whose character is unassailable but whose accomplishments are relatively humble. However, I argue this rearticulation of what counts as historic also freights the life stories of her resoundingly unhistorical female peers, Rosamond Vincy and Mary Garth, with a reverent significance because these women's pursuit of home and embrace of the past makes visible how women's everyday activities underlie any and all historical phenomena (even if Rosamond Vincy proves this in her failure to situate herself an ordinary livelihood). In concert, these three female characters' lives create a necessary revision to traditional history, one that can only be traced by focusing on women's pursuit of ordinary lives

### **Mary Garth: Ordinariness Beatified**

Any consideration of everyday life in *Middlemarch*, unhistoric or not, must begin with a study of the epitome of ordinariness: Mary Garth. She is a telling character due to her affinity with ordinary life. In light of Laurie Langbauer's assertion in her summary of Gayatri Spivak that, "the everyday as a category is especially useful when attending to the differences excluded from stories of consensus," Mary Garth is the measure deployed to determine what is ordinary in *Middlemarch* and her character's arc shows how vital ordinary life, especially as practiced by women as in their homemaking, is to the livelihood of an individual and a community (33). Through attending to Mary Garth, the epitome of ordinariness in *Middlemarch*, one can understand what comprises historical "stories of consensus" in the novel.

Mary Garth cements the connection between ordinariness and domesticity in the novel, and her commitment to the ordinary suggests that progress over time is ultimately indebted to the

private past. Despite her plain appearance, Mary has the choice between marrying Fred Vincy and Camden Farebrother. Both men admire her sensible nature and find her charming in her humble aspect. She has been close with Fred since childhood, the two families both being Middlemarch institutions, though she keeps his romantic advances at arm's length because she insists that she must marry a practical man and Fred struggles to find his way and establish stability in young adulthood. Reverend Farebrother is a kindly outsider, and a man Mary deeply respects. However, she ultimately gives her hand to Fred once he begins to work under her father because he then offers her a familiar and deep love paired with responsible dependability. This decision — of how to make a home and with whom — takes on symbolic freight. In marrying Fred, she opts to return to her own childhood allegiances and to old Middlemarch bloodlines. The couple has children and leads a happy life by all accounts; Mary's returning paradoxically engenders a propitious future, sketching a model of progress that is deeply imbricated with the private past.

Mary Garth is defined in service and in contrast to others, steady to the point of being a fixture rather than a growing young woman. When the narration turns to Mary Garth as she cares for her uncle, Mr. Featherstone, it is only to compare her to the extraordinary Rosamond Vincy, albeit dwelling on her ordinariness to an extent that ultimately suggests that it is remarkable:

Mary Garth, on the contrary, had the aspect of an ordinary sinner: she was brown; her curly dark hair was rough and stubborn; her stature was low; and it would not be true to declare, in satisfactory antithesis, that she had all the virtues. Plainness has its peculiar temptations and vices quite as much as beauty; it is apt either to feign amiability, or, not feigning it, to show all the repulsiveness of discontent: at any rate, to be called an ugly thing in contrast

with that lovely creature your companion, is apt to produce some effect beyond a sense of fine veracity and fitness in the phrase. (112)

The narrator fixates on Mary's plainness with remarkable detail, suggesting that ordinariness belies complexity. To further underscore that Mary, although plain, is worth regard, the narrator's initial observation alludes to Mark 9:16. The biblical passage reads: "Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man Jesus is not from God, for he is working on the Sabbath.' Others said, 'But how could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?' So there was a deep division of opinion among them." Both in the Bible and in *Middlemarch*, "ordinary sinner" is not a pejorative term so much as a descriptive one, communicating here above all that Mary contrasts with Rosamond Vincy, whom the narrator describes in the preceding sentences. Using the phrase here to describe Mary also invites the potential for one to doubt the evaluation of Mary as "ordinary" since the verse suggests that some onlookers mistook Jesus Christ himself as merely an ordinary sinner. How one appears might appear ordinary but might also belie something extraordinary. Hence, the narrator examines Mary's ordinariness from the outside in. The narrator explicates her "aspect," first noting her physical features before evaluating her moral comportment, which also falls short of exemplary. However, falling short of this "satisfactory antithesis" of a moral paragon clad in plainness, Mary Garth ironically becomes an object of curiosity. She is not a trope or totem, but instead a complicated figure with a body and a character that is difficult to neatly comprehend. In fact, the narrator declares that the plain Mary Garth is just as remarkable as the beautiful Rosamond, since she too is still susceptible to "temptations and vices" and prone to presenting in unsettling and unpredictable manners. In the end, her ordinariness shores up very little about Mary Garth, raising more questions about the "effect" produced by her plainness than the simplicity associated with the unadorned would

suggest. There is just as much complexity in her being as in Rosamond's, even though the two women's internal lives differ as greatly as their external appearances.

The comparison of Mary to Rosamond indicates a larger phenomenon that defines Mary; her ordinariness connects her to a broader and essential population of women. The narrator's description concludes with the observation that "advancing womanhood had tempered her plainness, which was of a good human sort, such as the mothers of our race have very commonly worn in all latitudes under a more or less becoming headgear" (113). Gendered time, "advancing womanhood," fundamentally alters the nature of Mary's plainness, which pertains both to her appearance and substance. Tempering, specifically, changes a material to improve it, generally to make it stronger and more effective in fulfilling a utility. The same principle applies to Mary's ordinariness, which, once tempered, changes her character to situate her in a lineage of Englishwomen. It is also ironic that advancing in age connects Mary Garth to the past because as she ages, she is more likely to become a mother, like the women who came before her. Specifically, she comes to resemble mothers of "our race," according to the narrator. The implication here is that these mothers are white Englishwomen who may be in various geographies but nevertheless coalesce into a common collective that, like a "more or less becoming" garment, is eminently appropriate and felicitous. Mary is emblematic of these women and, being not yet a mother herself, promises to carry on this tradition of a particular presentation of English womanhood.

Naturally, Mary cannot keep this promise of being an English mother without first becoming a respectable wife. Consequently, the novel takes pains to yoke her plainness with her abiding affection for Fred Vincy. She keeps his affections at arm's length because she insists, he become reliable and practical before being a suitable romantic partner for her. Fred's travails,



therefore, are always already intertwined with Mary's existence and future. Even though Mary could become engaged to the reliable and affable vicar, Camden Farebrother, she demurs, choosing to patiently wait for Fred to mature under the tutelage of her father. This decision symbolizes her embrace of the familiar as well as her own personal past over the pursuit of even the most genial outsider. When her father ventures to inquire about Mary's feelings for Fred once the young man agrees to work under Caleb, Mary calmly informs him, "My feelings have not changed, father," and that "I shall be constant to Fred as long as he is constant to me. I don't think either of us could spare the other, or like any one else better, however much we might admire them" (828). Their mutual feelings are fixed, and the allure of others will not rival the constancy the two young people offer one another. Mary goes on to explain that no amount of admiration could surmount their affectionate bond because "it would make too great a difference to us—like seeing all the old places altered, and changing the name for everything. We must wait for each other a long while; but Fred knows that" (828). To not pursue their marriage would be unthinkable because it would instantiate too much change. The change would be as stark and immersive as if long-familiar surroundings were altered in appearance and name, essentially rendering them alien. To marry one another, even if it requires great patience, is preferable to the unfamiliar and unsettling futures that might otherwise be possible for Mary. She presents this explanation to her father with certainty that conveys her resolve and, in turn, how fervently she values the knowability that Fred represents.

Mary's plain girlhood transforms into ordinary womanhood with the occasion of her marriage, an event that is once forging a future and returning to the past. Fred makes good on his promise of constancy and the couple eventually marries and has three children, all sons. The narrator confides that their offspring please even the divisive elements of Fred and Mary's

family: “Mrs. Vincy [...] was much comforted by her perception that two at least of Fred’s boys were real Vincys and did not ‘feature the Garths.’ But Mary secretly rejoiced that the youngest of the three was very much what her father must have been when he wore a round jacket” (833). Although not perfectly symmetrical or empirical, Fred and Mary’s legacy is a combination of carrying on both the Vincy and Garth lines. This conclusion comforts the previous generation as well as Mary herself because they both see themselves represented and carried forward in time and, specifically, in Middlemarch; their satisfaction springs from the continuity, made manifest, between the past and future. This embodied connection between the past and future is further cemented in the narrator’s curious choice to not conclude Fred and Mary’s life story. Instead the narrator leaves it conspicuously open-ended, speculatively remarking that: “On inquiry it might possibly be found that Fred and Mary still inhabit Stone Court—that the creeping plants still cast the foam of their blossoms over the fine stone-wall into the field where the walnut-trees stand in stately row—and that on sunny days the two lovers who were first engaged with the umbrella-ring may be seen in white-haired placidity at the open window” (834). Their existence and residence is ongoing, situated in a scene of bucolic and tranquil domesticity. They are not frozen in time or static—the implication is that they grow along the “creeping plants” though they remain as seemingly fixed as the stately “walnut-trees” as they enjoy their later, “white-haired” years. Like the foliage around them, they are deeply rooted to a place that sustains their ongoing growth.

What Mary Garth achieves via her commonness is not extraordinary, but it is peaceful and dependable, tantamount to success in the eyes of the sage narrator. In fact, Mary Vincy’s charming domestic success suggests that embracing ordinary English womanhood begets contentment. In keeping with her plain characterization, her fate seems squarely domestic and

traditional for a woman; she dutifully makes a home for and with her husband and births and raises children who honor their parents' bloodlines. Crucially, she makes progress that relies on the past, particularly on family tradition. This is no small feat. It is the kind of life's work that ensures Middlemarch, like the foliage on Stone Court, continues to steadily and healthily grow and bloom. The ordinary, then, that Mary represents and practices more than any other character in the novel, is the bedrock of continued growth of the community. This portrait of idealized ordinary life that the narrator bestows upon Mary at the end of the novel, however, elides the ways in which Mary defies traditional gender roles throughout the novel, even after her marriage. She earns wages as a single woman and writes a book after she marries Fred. The narrator does not dwell on these traits, and instead enshrines her fundamental ordinariness at the end of the novel, indicating that ordinariness comes at the cost of extraordinariness for Mary Garth, and she loses the latter with the practice of the former.

### **Rosamond Vincy: Extraordinary Failure**

As Mary Garth's character demonstrates, what is ordinary is always relative. In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond Vincy is the outlier against which the ordinary appears plain, banal, and common. In both appearances and actions, Rosamond is at odds with ordinary life and her presence in the novel complicates any presumption that Mary Garth's life might suggest that the typical Englishwoman's life is automatically comfortable and meritorious for all women. She is the most glaring example of Kate Flint's assertion that, in *Middlemarch*, "Eliot establishes her case for recognizing the presence of the extraordinary within the everyday on a quite different basis from that of plot and event, the staples of the sensational novel" (414). In marrying Lydgate, she confronts how incompatible she is with the ordinary domesticity that defines other

married women's lives. Her unhappiness in marriage occurs due to ongoing encounters with the common and she ultimately finds contentment only after she returns to a state of being prized and on display, materially accommodated by extraordinary means that her first husband could not furnish. Rosamond's arc is affirmative in the negative, showcasing how ordinariness is the de facto providence of women in Middlemarch — even extraordinary ones — and how it can fail to accommodate those conscripted to it. Ultimately, her failure to thrive is not squarely her own failing (it is also Lydgate's for his love-struck poor judgment), but her suffering must become an artifact of the past to be recognized as such.

Seemingly all of Middlemarch believes Rosamond Vincy to be outside of the ordinary, a designation born from how resplendent she is compared to other girls in town. The mistress of the local finishing school, Mrs. Lemon, “had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional” (Eliot 96). The approbation focuses on Rosamond's intellect and skills, which best the scores of girls that have received Mrs. Lemon's instruction. However, the narrator goes on to suggest that Mrs. Lemon's judgment may be faulty because “probably if Mrs. Lemon had undertaken to describe Juliet or Imogen, these heroines would not have seemed poetical” (96). Her understanding of Rosamond, then, is either so inflated that her pupil makes these Shakespearean characters look prosaic or so suspect because the instructor could not recognize quintessential representations of female grace if they were right in front of her. The fact that Mary, and not Rosamond, instructs other pupils and Mrs. Lemon's school further undermines Mrs. Lemon's dreamy rendition of Rosamond. But even if it is dubious, Mrs. Lemon's perspective is one of a Middlemarcher, one whose life is dedicated to

evaluating girls of this English town. By this local standard, Rosamond is nevertheless set apart, even if wrongly so in the eyes of the narrator.

Rosamond's looks also supersede those around her. Standing next to Mary Garth, Rosamond makes her friend appear "all the plainer" because she looks like a "nymph" with "eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite" (112). Indeed, she is so striking that she seems out of the realm of humankind, instead belonging to a more magical, mythical ilk. Her beauty is so enthralling that it is simultaneously welcoming and disorienting to behold, gleaming but perhaps blindingly so. In addition to the other girls and women about Middlemarch, the men of town also judge Rosamond as a remarkable otherworldly beauty. As the narrator describes, "most men in Middlemarch, except her brothers, held that Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world, and some called her an angel" (112). She is held in hyperbolic regard based on her beauty and angelic demeanor. Again, her excellence is couched in relative terms, specifically that she is more beautiful than other girls. What is ordinary and what is not is relative and gendered.

Oddly enough, despite the widespread agreement that Rosamond fails to conform to the ordinary, there is no doubt on the part of Rosamond or those around her that she should face the ordinary fate of marriage. Rosamond seeks a husband fitting for her exceptional nature, but her dreamy first impressions of Dr. Tertius Lydgate fade to a bitter reality after the two wed and he grows to resent his wife's social ambition which chafes against the docile domesticity of ordinary life. Trouble sets in for the young couple once they endeavor to make a domicile together. Lydgate is ignorant about the cost of home goods and Rosamond insists on finer goods to suit her finer nature, so the couple quickly racks up a sizable debt. Rosamond insists on asking

their families for financial assistance, but Lydgate objects. However, the young wife goes behind her husband's back, garnering acrimony and instantiating a cycle of conflict and fragile resolution. During one such instance of conflict, Rosamond accuses Lydgate of hiding the cause of his distress, and he retorts, "Why should I tell you what you cannot alter? They are every-day things: —perhaps they have been a little worse lately" (350). From this moment on, "everyday things" become the totem of their suffering as a couple. As their debt and desperation grows, the narrator reflects later in the novel that "The Lydgate with whom she had been in love had been a group of airy conditions for her, most of which had disappeared, while their place had been taken by every-day details which must be lived through slowly from hour to hour, not floated through with a rapid selection of favorable aspects" (661). In their marriage, the everyday, ongoing details of life supplant the lofty, dreamy imaginings that Rosamond once harbored about Lydgate and their relationship. It is perhaps no surprise that the woman so fervently set outside of the ordinary before her marriage languishes once bound to the banal ordinariness of married life. Domestic logistics subsume her fantasies about Lydgate and the two remain locked in conflict until Lydgate's premature death.

Because she cannot assimilate with ordinary life as Lydgate demands, Rosamond does not experience contentment until after her first husband's death and her subsequent remarriage, when she returns to the material conditions that she believes are deserved and appropriate for a woman like her. In the wake of Lydgate's death, Rosamond "married an elderly and wealthy physician, who took kindly to her four children. She made a very pretty show with her daughters, driving out in her carriage, and often spoke of her happiness as 'a reward'—she did not say for what, but probably she meant that it was a reward for her patience with Tertius" (835). In her second marriage, Rosamond returns to putting her beauty on display — a beauty presumably

compounded by her daughters. She has the means to make “a very pretty show” of her life in a way unavailable to her when caught up in the everyday minutiae of Lydgate’s home. Notably, her second husband is not named in the novel. He is transparently means to an end for Rosamond. His wealth and the liberty it permits is not only an improvement, but a “reward” in Rosamond’s view, material gained to recognize an accomplishment and to make good on a hardship endured. Implicit in this characterization of her second husband’s wealth is a sense of justification; access to a carriage and the lush comfort it represents is what such an extraordinary woman deserves. She knew and sought this for her entire life, but her marriage to Lydgate was an unlucky swerve into the ordinary. Ultimately, she returns to the grand aspirations of her young womanhood and situates herself among material comfort and relative autonomy to spend her time as she wishes, mainly in pursuit of admiration of herself and her daughters that will carry on her likeness. Rosamond’s return to being prized and extraordinary, unbothered by everyday affairs, cements the fact that ordinariness as an ongoing domestic labor is not for all women, though all women must contend with it as they make their homes through marriage. In eschewing the ordinary, however, Rosamond loses out on even the more capacious model of “unhistoric” history that accommodates women like Mary Garth. Whereas Mary Garth lives on through her well-to-do Middlemarch family and their modest but steady business practices, Rosamond’s husband’s and children’s names are not recorded, her contentment seemingly ephemeral as her beauty.

Rosamond’s return to her extraordinary, outsider social position also frames how class corresponds to ordinariness in *Middlemarch*. As Mary Garth exemplifies, the middle class, laboring individual and family are both respectable and tantamount to ordinary. Those outside of the middle class are out of the ordinary, so it is hardly surprising that Rosamond, whom Lilian

Furst introduces foremost as a “social climber,” is attracted to Lydgate because of his aristocratic heritage and prospects for prosperity as an up-and-coming medical man (429). His economic promise suits Rosamond’s extraordinary sensibility for more material wealth indicative of above-middle-class tastes. However, when Lydgate’s success proves to be far humbler than Rosamond’s lofty expectations, her affinity for him withers away. The “every-day” concerns of ordinary life married to Lydgate gradually supplant her whimsical hopes for their union. But beyond a mere disappointment, this position proves existentially untenable to Rosamond. As such, merely passing through time while married to Lydgate becomes laborious for Rosamond. She only finds ease again once remarried to a man whose wealth, above all, defines him.

### **Dorothea Brooke: The Ordinary Feeling of History**

The extraordinary and ordinary curiously coexist in Dorothea Brooke, whose moral character and aspirations are continuously undermined by unforeseen social, political, and material obstacles. She is a woman with profound potential to effect positive change, who initially suffers domestic life as a tragedy when her first marriage confines her to isolation and her to banal work and that enriches nothing. However, after Casaubon’s death, Dorothea refigures ordinary life into the means of real happiness by returning to her own humble fortune, actual altruism, and her family (especially her sister). Her evolving relationship with ordinary life demonstrates its ambivalence, and how it is both vital and imbricated with feeling. Consequently, Dorothea’s return, sparked by her second marriage to Will Ladislaw, supplants her romanticized imagining of a great historical past (as conjured by her first husband’s fruitless scholarship) with a lived understanding of the import of an emotional, personal past that emphasizes continuity and sentiment.



Dorothea marries Edward Casaubon, in large part because he is a scholar, possessing a comprehensive and intense knowledge of certain subjects of which Dorothea herself is ignorant. She believes aiding his scholarship will be serving the greater good, and she humbly submits herself to serve her husband and his cause. However, the alienation between this vision and the reality of her husband and his work becomes evident as soon as they marry. The couple honeymoon to Rome, where Rev. Casaubon can do work and Dorothea is left to navigate Rome without her husband's scholarly bearings. This experience casts a pall over the grand city:

To those who have looked at Rome with the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts, Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world. But let them conceive one more historical contrast: the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort. (193)

The narrator delimits two categories of traveler: one that has the knowledge to animate the grand meaning in the historic city of Rome and another that possesses a knowledge of a different sort and consequently reacts to the storied city with apprehension and mystification. They are presented as diametrically opposed, having radically different experiences of the same geography. To the former, Rome is a symphony of antiquarian significance performed in glorious concert. To the latter, the European city is a cacophony of "broken revelations" that registers as a disquieting affront. The narrator takes pains to clarify that this response — experienced by the newly-wed Dorothea Casaubon — is not one born of ignorance. Dorothea is "a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing

her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain” (193). A complex albeit provincial array of educating influences as well as a trenchant proclivity for the practical coalesce in Dorothea, leaving her vulnerable to shock in the face of Rome’s lofty art and culture. She is “ardent” in her pursuit of knowledge, but the limited, practical knowledge available to her combined with her intense emotional life results in invariably strong responses to both the familiar and unfamiliar. Her capacity for feeling and understanding is great, but she has not been equipped with the tools to detect and fathom the nuances between “a pleasure or a pain.”

Furthermore, this orientation to Rome uniquely belongs to “a girl who had lately become a wife, and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot” (193). The sensory and cultural jolt of Rome is the direct result of her marriage, and the inundation of the unfamiliar that the city represents corresponds to the shocking, alien new world she finds herself as a wife. In both situations, she is teeming with determination to best the challenge but is unequipped to do so, rendering her distraught. This response to Rome (specifically, to its history) and marriage are decidedly related to her girlhood. Gender dictates how she relates to historical, cultural education just as it dictates her behavior and comportment as a wife. It ensures that women and men have different ways of understanding history that are as different as the roles of husband and wife. These distinct orientations towards history subsequently shape how one navigates, understands, and feels in the present.

So paradoxical is the gendered difference in access to historical knowledge that at the moment when Dorothea’s world is materially expanding, her emotional life shrivels. The narrator remarks that the suffering she experiences is not “anything very exceptional” because she is one of many “young souls” who must grow up and learn to comport themselves in the face

of life changes (194). As such, even though she feels abject sadness, her situation will not “be regarded as tragic” because “some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual” (194). Put simply, hardship is part of life. Supplanting romantic speculation with a harsh reality is essentially inevitable. Specifically, it is “not unusual” — the repeated double-negative emphasizes its banality as well as creates a lacuna of what would, precisely, prompt others to be “deeply moved.” Presumably, the “not unusual” resembles the usual, but there is no way to be certain. In part, this uncertainty may spring from the fact that, as the narrator’s logic suggests, a collective of outsiders measure what is unusual (and therefore also what is usual). The reader is folded into the “we” that assesses whether Dorothea’s misery is usual or not, in a rhetorical move that coerces readers to align with the set of expectations about sympathy laid out by the narrator.

In addition to this stratification between the reader and Dorothea, aligning the former with the narrator and conscripting the latter to be held and studied at a critical distance, this moment is one in which the narrator reveals a temporal gap between the plot events of the novel and the narration. However, this moment of stratification is also one that paradoxically garners sympathy for anyone who feels strongly during a life:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (194)

Humankind will come to regard frequency as an axis for gauging tragedy, the narrator speculates. Incessant anything could register as hardship in this framework, though the fact that the narrator can grasp this and comment on their absence for Dorothea situates the narrator in a later historical moment when such an understanding is possible, if not taking hold. However, this notion of tragedy is not merely an expanded opportunity for sympathy. Interpreting frequent phenomena as potentially tragic due to its insistence might be counterproductive and even destructive. If all of the seemingly small things that comprise “ordinary human life,” such as Dorothea’s weeping as she reckons with the bleak reality of her marriage, could be observed and felt the effect would be overwhelming to the point of debilitating. It is important that the narrator couches discussion about ordinary life in terms of feeling because it suggests that emotion is constitutive, the matter that is vital to narrating and recording for posterity human lives. This tether between ordinariness and feeling is also ironic given that Dorothea’s crying is a seemingly dramatic outpouring of feeling. Yet, the implication is that she, and the reader, is insulated from the acutely overwhelming tragedy that would be realizing the ordinary nature of women’s disillusionment in marriage.

Taken in tandem, the narrator’s assertions that Dorothea’s understanding of history is paltry and that her meager marriage is ordinary, and therefore not a tragedy, create an important tension: knowledge is not always empowering, the narrator’s thinking suggests. In fact, a broader awareness of repeated, ongoing hardships or complexities compounds their gravity to a dangerous extent. Even though Dorothea laments her upsetting marriage, her narrow focus on solely her own life and disappointment paradoxically protects her from the greater tragedy that such unhappiness is ordinary. Just as impactful as the whole of human history and culture

represented in Rome, then, would be the understanding of the sum of everyday banalities that comprise ordinary human life — especially the lives of women like Dorothea.

In fact, history and sentiment remain intertwined for Dorothea even in her personal life. Once she and Rev. Casaubon return home from their honeymoon, his health declines, and he eventually suffers an untimely death, leaving a vindictive, paranoid clause in his will targeting Dorothea and Will Ladislaw. After learning of this petty, hurtful action, Dorothea sees her marriage and her husband in a different light: The living, suffering man was no longer before her to awaken her pity: there remained only the retrospect of painful subjection to a husband whose thoughts had been lower than she had believed, whose exorbitant claims for himself had even blinded his scrupulous care for his own character, and made him defeat his own pride by shocking men of ordinary honor” (493). In “retrospect,” Dorothea gains clarity on her husband’s hurtful behavior. In part, this clarity afforded by time elapsed occurs because the interval of time separates Dorothea from her husband’s “suffering” (suggested here as nearly synonymous with his “living”) and the consequent “subjection” that he inflicted on his wife. This interval between past and present allows Dorothea to better understand the nature of her husband’s thoughts and character, seeing them as faulty and self-sabotaging. The metric to judge Casaubon’s actions is to measure the response of “men of ordinary honor,” an imaginary collective of peers who are not exceptional but testify to the decorum expected by even common men. Casaubon falls short of this benchmark, both in life and especially in death. However, crucially, this is not legible to Dorothea until it is part of her personal history.

In a complementary manner, Dorothea’s second marriage can only come to fruition once both she and Will Ladislaw come to terms with the necessity of embracing what is ordinary, rather than pining for extraordinary phenomena that would traditionally make history. Will, for

one, cannot imagine marrying Dorothea at first because he deems her “so exquisite” that “he could not long for a change which must somehow change her” (468). The narrator expounds on Will’s logic, asking rhetorically, “Do we not shun the street version of a fine melody?—or shrink from the news that the rarity—some bit of chiselling or engraving perhaps—which we have dwelt on even with exultation in the trouble it has cost us to snatch glimpses of it, is really not an uncommon thing, and may be obtained as an every-day possession?” (468-9). The answer to this series of queries is clearly “no” — it goes against reason, at least superficially, to substitute something rare with something common and call them interchangeable. This analogy also draws a parallel between Dorothea and a piece of artwork or architecture, an object to behold with adoration. However, the form of the rhetorical question leaves room for doubt about the “common sense” that makes such questions appear obvious. It also raises uncertainty about whether the value of an art object (or a woman) stems from its inherent form or from the form’s scarcity. What if keeping such a treasure at arm’s length out of a preservationist impulse actually does the treasure a disservice? What if a unique kind of treasure is to be had in “an every-day possession”? Will must come to understand this value in everyday, ordinary phenomena to grasp the possibility of his union with Dorothea.

Similarly, Dorothea must also grapple with the utility and dignity of ordinary life. She must accept that she may not perform extraordinary public service, but that more humble and personal pursuits can still be virtuous. When her sister, Celia, conveys her shock about Dorothea’s engagement to Will, the elder sister affirms that “I might have done something better, if I had been better. But this is what I am going to do. I have promised to marry Mr. Ladislaw; and I am going to marry him” (821). She admits that marriage to Will Ladislaw may not be the apogee of achievement or the best use of her good nature, but the implication is that it is good

enough. She is honoring her word, as well as her own feelings. Doing so is noble, albeit on a personal, domestic scale. Finally, the couple's exaltation and embrace of ordinary life is cemented in the moment they become engaged. Dorothea famously renounces her first husband's wealth and assures Will that they can be married because "I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs" (812). Dorothea's pledge to Will consecrates the everyday minutiae and means that would define their daily married life. It is upon this pledge, to render the ordinary central, that the pair can build a happy union.

Making her life the stuff of history — akin to the epic heroics of Saint Theresa who came before her — is not possible for Dorothea because of the contemporary social structure in which she lives affords her different channels from those available to premodern women. The narrator acknowledges that "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" so even the most willful female visionary in Middlemarch "will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone" (838). The "medium" that made Theresa's and Antigone's actions heroic and historic has lapsed. Dorothea's humble accomplishment of a loving marriage and enacting minor good within her local community is what a great soul's existence looks like in mid-nineteenth century England for a woman. The narrator does not supply what, precisely, replaced or overtook this medium that historically fomented greatness. However, it potentially refers to the medium of communicating the life stories of these women because the narrator goes on, as if to explain, "but we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know" (838). Yoking the reader to the

narrator as a united “we” of “insignificant people,” the narrator suggests that the writing and reading of Dorothea’s story (and others like her), are fostering further Therasas, even if their manifestations and impacts diverge from historical precedent and the cultural narrative about what constitutes greatness. The everyday work of telling Dorothea’s story — that is neither utterly heroic or tragic, but instead ends up squarely ordinary — enables greatness to continue, albeit transmuted under new social and narrative conditions, a new kind of “home epic.”

## **Conclusion**

Through their returns to the roots of who they are, Mary, Rosamond, and Dorothea, enact a pattern of homemaking as a mode of homecoming, a kind of engagement with the past that demarcates and enshrines ordinary life. In doing so, Eliot renders the pattern itself ordinary, and consequently highlights just how ordinary feeling is as an animating force in forging the future by way of recalling the past. Put another way, women’s homecomings and homemakings in the novel render sympathy for these women ordinary. Here, I build on a robust scholarly consensus that remarks *Middlemarch* is a novel about and that inspires profound sympathy, a feeling of fellowship and understanding on an emotional register. As Forest Pyle puts it: “Eliot’s pedagogy of the novel aims to fashion sympathy” (21). Pyle specifies, “Its task is to produce through narrative effect and affect, through the formal conventions of the Victorian novel, a sympathy that in its turn will establish the conditions for community” (21). Sympathy is a worthwhile aim for Eliot because it facilitates the formation of community, of characters and readers alike partaking in a shared emotional experience. Feeling together in *Middlemarch* and Eliot’s other novels “makes [them] into the agents of cultural history that they have indeed become” (Pyle 5). Feeling, then, is the critical germ of “cultural history” because the past of a community — a



group united by sympathy — is tautological to history. However, this begets the question: who precisely, is bound together by sympathy in *Middlemarch*?

This chapter suggests that women, because of their distinct tethers to ordinary life, engender a uniquely gendered sympathy and cultural history. This gendered stripe of sympathy and history resembles traditional history in some ways but accommodates the feelings and ordinary phenomena eschewed by masculine history. In her chapter entitled “Sympathy,” Carolyn Burdett maintains that “Eliot provides her most finely textured portrait of a sympathetic woman in Dorothea Brooke. Whatever readers’ response to the small-scale canvas of her story’s close, the ‘unhistoric acts’ of a ‘hidden life,’ there is no doubting Dorothea’s agency as she confronts her great life crises” (Burdett 333). Dorothea is the epitome of sympathy as well as utterly “unhistoric.” Yet, as Burdett’s characterization suggests, Dorothea is a paragon of agency and this is suggestive of a great historical figure, one whose impacts simply diverge from the expectations of what is ‘historic’ because they are “small-scale.” Burdett uses Dorothea as part of her larger argument that sympathy in nineteenth-century British novels written by women ultimately sought to refashion women’s place in a rapidly changing world. This supposition appears even stronger when one considers that Dorothea is not the only “sympathetic woman” in *Middlemarch* — Mary also garners sympathy in their pursuits of ordinary life and returns, whereas Rosamond, in her stubborn narcissism and shallow pursuits, demonstrates the limits of sympathy for women in the town (and novel).

Sympathy, in light of this preponderance, can also be understood as ordinary. As Kate Flint suggests: “Eliot seeks to make our exercise of sympathy a habit of mind — yet a habit completely unlike the routines and fragmentation of labor that increasingly came to define modern society” (415). In doing so, Eliot underscores that what is ordinary comprises the

material and phenomena of livelihood — but all ordinaries are not created equal. Women's ordinary lives, with the feeling and sympathy they harbor and beget, are vital for a sort of home that goes against the grain of modern, masculine history and society.

## Coda

### Towards (a Victorian) Ordinary

“It’s well to attend intimately to literary texts, not because their transformative energies either transcend or disguise the coarser stuff of ordinary being, but because those energies are the stuff of ordinary being.” (1-2)

— Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You”

This dissertation emphatically undersigns Sedgwick’s assertion that literature does not transcend the lowly “stuff of ordinary being,” but rather usurps the presumed hierarchy in which the ordinary needs to be transcended in the first place. Ordinarity is the apt focus of literature because it is vital to being; what makes literature compelling and relevant is oftentimes its resonance with the reality of its readers, lives inevitably populated by everyday routines. Victorian novels of the recent past take this resonance especially seriously because they are tasked with connecting readers of the publication’s present to the lives of the characters who live in the recent past. These novels showcase connection and continuity despite the temporal gaps, showing that some things endure even as the times change. This generic affinity for the topic of ordinary life is even stronger when the novelists are women and feature the lives of women as central to the novels’ narratives because of the trenchant nineteenth-century association between women and the quotidian domestic sphere. Women and their ordinary experiences, in these novels of the recent past, bridge the gaps, and these bridges trigger identification, intrigue, and delight from readers’ who carry on with their own ordinary lives.

Indeed, this schematic of a break as a generative divide, one specifically implicated with temporality and ordinariness — is at the heart of this dissertation. These formal gaps that structure Victorian novels of the recent past create an affinity with ordinary life because the

relatively intimate interval of retrospection between publication and plot emphasizes family history and private, domestic relations. To chart this intimate connection between breaks and the ordinary, this dissertation draws on Sara Ahmed's autotheoretical insight that: "my own experience of breaking allowed a break to become a connection, not even one discerned at the time: a retrospective realization of how a body is not given room to move by a world; how what for some are ordinary bumps for others are walls" (181). Ironically, Ahmed teaches us, recognizing a break between them yokes two things together. Such a recognition, however, can only happen later in time. "Break," as Ahmed employs it, corresponds to fractures that come about due to trauma, but her mention of retrospection connects to another usage of "break" that similarly describes a generative, albeit unlikely, connective experience: temporally, a "break" designates a middle-interval between two discernable segments of time. Such a break both connects and divides two eras, halves, or other units of time. Furthermore, without being "cut a break," as the saying goes, recognition of struggle is impossible. Such a break is necessary to confer the recognition of curtailed liberty that Ahmed describes. A break in time begets a break in circumstances that in turn grants access to a vantage point from which to survey the wildly uneven landscape of what constitutes "ordinary." Victorian novels of the recent past offer such vantage points that this dissertation locates as generational gaps, commemorations, and homecomings. From these sites, this dissertation sketches a complex portrait of what, precisely, constitutes ordinary in nineteenth century Britain as well as articulates some of its functions and outputs. Ordinarity, according to these novels, is a social situation with material implications, one that is always collective, relative, fluctuating, and ongoing. Ordinarity subsequently informs the extraordinary, underscores the vitality of home, and expands the aperture of historical focus.

Foremost, collectivity is always implicated in the ordinary. Drawing the line between ordinary and extraordinary occurs because of social connectivity and alienation. In the nineteenth century, in particular, there is something fundamentally aspirational about ordinariness because of its association with collectivity. Speaking to this aspirational dimension to ordinariness, Ahmed surmises, “The ordinary can be what you are for. For: it comes from not” (231). By this supposition, ordinariness is an object of desire. Even if it is banal or seemingly unremarkable, ordinariness can mark a certain form of fulfillment. For example, in *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone yearns for what she considers an ordinary life, namely one populated by biological parents and a suitable husband. These markers of ordinary life stem from the cultural norms of her society, in which a family is composed of married parents and their biological children and an adult woman’s success is measured by the perceived quality of her marriage. Such family arrangements beget stability in the domestic and public spheres, as the novel’s condition-of-England overtones underscore. The implications for public life are even more overt in *On the Face of the Waters*, where the collectives that determine what is typical are those of nationality and race. Ordinariness here resembles citizenship but rather than legal implications, this kind of social grouping engenders a feeling of belonging shared only by fellow countrymen and women.

The aspiration for ordinary life belies that, ironically, the ubiquity of the ordinary does not ensure access to it. Although ordinariness always exists in some form, individuals’ access to it can vary and wane as it shifts and those living outside of the ordinary experience alienation or ostracism. As Ahmed argues, “Sometimes you have to battle for an ordinary. When you have to battle for an ordinary, when battling becomes ordinary, the ordinary can be what you lose” (217). By this formulation, losing ordinariness is akin to losing a battle, a defeat marked by deficit and potential punishment. Here, too, an ordinary life is a prize, something coveted but still potentially

mutable or fleeting. Perhaps the most glaring example of this aspect of ordinary life in this dissertation is the glaring lack of ordinariness in the characters of *Wuthering Heights*, who defy traditional kin structures and norms of polite society. In a sense, the abject lack of ordinariness fuels the narrative as Nelly Dean reports on the Linton and Earnshaw's nightmarish trajectories away from tranquility and stability. Nelly Dean, in this narrative arrangement, serves as the arbiter of what is ordinary, suggesting that she has the greatest, most reliable access to ordinariness in the novel.

The example of Nelly Dean also reveals how ordinariness often stems from narratives put forth by a dominant collective and how ordinariness is best understood as a shifting, subjective framework depending on an individual's connection to larger social groups. Nelly Dean may be an outlier among the disquieting households she serves, but she embodies and projects normative, mainstream social attitudes about decorum and kinship in Victorian England. The novel, in turn, gives her the greatest platform to arbitrate what is and is not ordinary. Ordinariness, then, is a matter dictated by those who tell stories about individuals, and this position is most frequently occupied by those who have the perceived credibility to relay and comment on the lives of others.

Aside from generating alienation or outsiders, part of the flux of ordinary life entails the dialectical production of the extraordinary. The extraordinary — what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “out of the usual or regular course or order; often in expressed opposition to ordinary” — stands out *compared to the ordinary*; it is the ordinary that therefore engenders its significance. But being out of the ordinary is not always extraordinary because extraordinariness connotes, as the OED remarks, “now with emotional sense, expressing astonishment, strong admiration or the contrary.” Sentiment distinctly laces the extraordinary,

which is why it is so well-suited to the political, ideological ends of *On the Face of the Waters*. In that novel, the emotional freight of the extraordinary lends itself to the didacticism Steel desires to tell stories about the social and ethical characters of individuals and nations alike. This tether between feeling and the extraordinary critically allows one to recognize the inevitability of sentiment of living an ordinary life. As the third chapter discusses in Dorothea's pathetic plight while honeymooning among extraordinary cultural sights (albeit more so in terms of history and feeling) ordinary life requires and begets sentiment, even if that sentiment is powerlessness, dissatisfaction, or irritation.

Why, though, do extraordinariness and ordinariness register “now with emotional sense”? This dissertation offers the explanation that ordinariness garners such sentiment because it is a matrix for the ongoing experience of braided material, social, and political phenomena that is imbricated with home. Home, here, translates to a habitus of belonging and agency. This model of ordinariness helps explain why Ahmed claims that “we reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday, and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other” (221). Envisioned thus, the ordinary *can* be a site of care work<sup>31</sup> that begets changes to individuals and communities. Modeled as a metaphysical site of kin and care, this explains why — especially in the nineteenth century where the ideology of separate spheres gained both credence and critics — ordinariness correlates with domesticity, the location of feeding, nursing, child-rearing, and other vital acts of care. In all the novels studied in this dissertation, characters seek out care in the domestic. Some, like Caroline Helstone and Mary Garth, find it in

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<sup>31</sup>Sanda Laugier establishes a fascinating connection between care and ordinary language philosophy in her article “The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary” that is useful to my thinking here, despite being primarily concerned with the import of ordinariness in contemporary theoretical thought rather than as a historically specific materially implicated concept articulated uniquely by realist novels. My understanding of “care work” is also indebted to Talia Schaffer’s extensive exploration of care communities in her 2019 article “Care Communities,” published in *South Atlantic Quarterly*.

abundance, whereas others, like Heathcliff and Rosamond Vincy, require ordinaries that do not resemble those of the nineteenth-century domiciles they attempt to enter. The ordinary is not automatically a haven, then, but it holds space where the requisite conditions may conspire to make such reprieve possible. For women in Victorian novels of the recent past, especially, preoccupation with ordinary life expresses their desires to find, make, and be home.



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