Disruptive Threads and Renegade Yarns: Domestic Textile Making in Selected Women’s Writing 1811-1925

By

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Abstract

Images of domestic textiles (items made at home for consumption within the household) and textile making form an important subtext to women’s writing, both during and after industrialization. Through a close reading of five novels from the period 1811-1925, this thesis will assert that a detailed understanding of textile work and its place in women’s daily lives is critical to a deeper understanding of social, sexual and political issues from a woman’s perspective. The first chapter will explore the history of the relationship between women and domestic textile making, and the changes wrought to the latter by the Industrial Revolution. The second chapter will examine the role of embroidery in the construction of “appropriate” feminine gentility in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). The third chapter, on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), will explore how the older female body became a repository for anxieties about class mobility and female power at the beginning of the Victorian era. The fourth chapter will compare Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *A Social Departure* (1890) and Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) to consider how later Victorian women both internalized and refuted public narratives of domestic textile making in a quest for “self-ownership.” The last chapter, on Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* (1925), examines the corrosive, yet ultimately redemptive, relationships of a family of women trapped by abuse and degradation. For all five authors, images of textiles and textile making allow them to speak to issues that were usually only discussed within a community of women: sexuality, desire, aging, marriage, and motherhood. In all five works, textile making “talks back” to the power structures that marginalize women, and lends insight into the material and emotional circumstances of women’s lives.
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Chapter 1 The Intimate Language of Domestic Textiles

Her speechless lips could tell
No tale of what was done. But there’s a fund
Of talent in distress, and misery
Learns cunning. On a clumsy native loom
She wove a clever fabric, working words
In red on a white ground to tell the tale

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Aunt Jennifer’s fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull
The massive weight of Uncle’s wedding band
Sits heavily on Aunt Jennifer’s hand

Adrienne Rich “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”

Most contemporary readers, when pressed to think of examples of needlework
and textile making in the literature they have read, can name at least several: the weaver
Silas Marner in George Eliot’s 1861 novel of the same name or Madame Defarge’s
vengeful and blood-thirsty knitting in Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) often
come to mind. Some might mention the quilting of Grace Marks in Margaret Atwood’s
*Alias Grace* (1996) or Hester Prynne’s embroidered red “A” in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s
*The Scarlet Letter* (1850). A few more will remember the books they read as children and
will recollect the dress of brown gloria that Mrs. Lynde makes Anne Shirley in *Anne of
Green Gables* (1908), or that the widowed Mrs. Pepper must take in sewing at home in
order to feed her children in Margaret Sidney’s *Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*
(1881). For the most part, however, images of sewing, embroidery, weaving and knitting
operate in the background of literature. Whether written by male or female authors, hands,
particularly women’s hands, are often busy and almost always full of textiles, primarily
in the literature written prior to the Second World War, whether socks, embroidery, children’s clothing or items for charity. Yet whether that textile making is described in detail or referred to only as “work,” very few readers notice or remember it, unless perhaps it offers forward momentum to the plot, as when Anne Shirley finally gets her fashionable dress with puffed sleeves, or if the maker’s hands appear in extraordinary or unusual circumstances, as when Madame Defarge encodes into her knitting the names of those to be executed during the French Revolution. In most cases textile work does not register as anything more than background detail because textile goods are so intrinsically woven into day-to-day life and the making of them has disappeared from modern, post-industrial lives.

The two quotes above, however, speak to two deeply intertwined narratives about the making of textiles. In the first place, textiles tell stories. Anthropologists argue that the role of textiles in any society is both general (common to all humans) and specific (important to that particular society) (J. Harris 11). On the one hand, textiles fulfill our everyday need for warmth, shade, shelter and protection from the elements. On the other, textiles also function as a means to distinguish individuals and groups of individuals in terms of social class, gender, occupation, stage of life and financial status. In ancient Rome, for example, robes dyed purple with an indigenous sea snail called murex were reserved for emperors and other high-ranking noblemen and their wives (Sandberg 20-23). The exclusivity of the colour purple acted both as a marker of status and a visual reinforcement of the economic and social power of the Roman nobility. This is because textiles, as Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider insist, have always had an intrinsic role in the organization of social and political life, for the “broad possibilities of construction,
color, and patterning give cloth an almost limitless potential for communication” (1).
Moreover, because for thousands of years until the industrial era textiles were made
laboriously by hand by workers of both genders with production techniques that remained
unchanged over the centuries, textiles connected people both physically and
metaphorically. Cloth goods played a vital role in all social, economic and religious
aspects of the life-cycle, and the making, decorating and use of these textiles were often
given complex spiritual meanings in a traditional society (Weiner and Schneider 2-13). In
traditional Merina and Betsileo culture in Madagascar, for example, families continue to
honour their ancestors every few years by gathering together the living clan, exhuming
the bodies of their dead, wrapping them in locally woven silk textiles and reburying them.
This establishes the authority of the ancestor and helps to cement the relationships among
the living kin (Feeley-Harnik 74). In this way, textiles contain a symbolic value to
individual social groups with significations that will be pertinent only to that social group:
cloth needs to be read and understood by the group’s members in order to interpret the
meanings hidden within a textile’s origins, construction, colour and decoration. In other
words, in all cultures and all periods, textiles tell stories, but the most important elements
of those stories are only available to insiders who can “read” what lies behind the cloth.

In Ovid’s version of the Greek myth of the sisters Procne and Philomela, the
hidden details within Philomela’s woven tapestry help to save her life. Procne is married
to Tereus of Thrace, but is lonely without her sister, and persuades Tereus to bring
Philomela to visit. Unbeknownst to her, he takes Philomela prisoner, rapes her and cuts
out her tongue so that she cannot tell the tale of his assault. Without the means to verbally
tell her story, Philomela weaves a tapestry that speaks for her and secretly has it sent to
her sister. According to Ovid, Procne “reads” the story, flies to her sister’s rescue and together they plan a terrible revenge on Tereus. All three characters are eventually punished for their sins by being turned into birds: Tereus into a hoopoe, Philomela into a swallow, and Procne into a nightingale. Yet how does Procne read and understand what has happened to her sister? Ovid’s description suggests that written words are hidden within the images on the tapestry. What is not stated, but infinitely more likely, is that because Procne and Philomela are both weavers, from the same cultural group and from the same family, Procne is able to accurately read and interpret the threads, tensions, dyes, and decorations that make up Philomela’s weaving.

It is also their shared gender that allows Procne to “read” Philomela’s story, for there is a second powerful narrative contained within Ovid’s tale. It is a history that is charged with double meaning for women and is particularly pertinent to the post-industrial story behind Adrienne Rich’s 1951 poem “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers.” Archaeologist Elizabeth Barber argues that for thousands of years, the making of textiles had special significance for women. While both men and women could, and did, make cloth for trade, women across all western cultures were solely responsible for the production of domestic textiles, which were the textiles used within the immediate family or community. Barber suggests that this was initially because spinning, weaving and sewing are relatively easy to pick up and put down, work well within the parameters of child care and management and can be done at home, which was an important consideration when high mortality rates made pregnancy, childbirth and the first five years of child development risky undertakings (29-33).
Though domestic textile making as “women’s work” may have had a practical origin and intent, many cultural anthropologists also argue that domestic textile-making became a means through which patriarchal cultures could control the movement of women, particularly in Abrahamic religions, where the family patriarch was considered the head of the household (Weiner and Schneider 4). In the temperate world before industrialization, where cloth was considered a necessity against wind, sun, rain and cold (though not always, argues Barber, as much a physical necessity as a psychological one), the making of clothing and household furnishings was arduous, back-breaking labour that had to be repeated again and again as cloth deteriorated and wore out with repeated use (Barber 31-41, 128). The making of the textiles needed by a household required extensive planning and shared labour, and most of the labour of a woman’s day was spent engaged in textile work of some kind, primarily for herself and her family and only secondarily for trade or profit (Barber 31, J. Harris 15). Though many women could, and did, work for trade in the western world and in some cases even wielded considerable power in its distribution, as in the medieval silk trade, Barber insists that women of all classes except those in the uppermost social and economic echelons “were so busy just trying to get through what had to be done each day that they didn’t have excess time or materials to experiment with new ways of doing things,” in the way that men did, and so were often not the progenitors of new technology (32). Because so much of the family’s basic survival needs was dependent on women’s labour, there was little margin for error, and the intense focus on domestic textile production helped to prevent women from pursuing book learning and public life (Parker 75).
Philomela is allowed to continue weaving after her rape and imprisonment because Tereus does not see a single woman weaving on a “clumsy native loom” as a threat to his social or economic power. In cutting out Philomela’s tongue, Tereus believes he has controlled the dissemination of Philomela’s story, just as he believes he controls the distribution of her weaving. In a sense, he is accurate in this assumption: without a tongue, Philomela cannot “sing” her tale in the public sphere. He discounts the power of the private sphere, however, and further discounts the emotional, intellectual and practical relationship that women have to textile when it has formed the bulk of their daily lives almost from birth. If, as Barber asserts, “cloth for thousands of years was the notebook that recorded the woes and joys, hopes, visions, and aspirations of women,” it also recorded the violence, marginalization and fears experienced by women (256). As Kathy M’Closkey insists, textiles are a non-linguistic means of communication that require both context and content in order to be made relevant (121). Philomela’s tapestry tells the story of her kidnapping, assault and imprisonment. In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” Aunt Jennifer’s embroidery gives an alternative version of herself: her prancing tigers retain all the confidence, strength and spirit that Aunt Jennifer is not able to express in her physical life. The ring on Aunt Jennifer’s finger and the needle in her hand are symbolic of her husband’s legal and social right to control her movement, her work and her body, but her tigers are autonomous. Yet unlike Philomela’s tapestry, Aunt Jennifer’s tigers have no power to change the trajectory of her life.

Weiner and Schneider insist that in all parts of the world, textiles are associated symbolically with women’s power (21-24, J. Harris 13). I am going to suggest that it is a strength that asserts itself only when women are united in a cause. In narratives of women,
about women and written by women, domestically-made cloth has the ability to tell the stories that women cannot always “sing” aloud, but it requires another woman to read and act on the story behind the cloth. Without Procne to “read” the suffering behind Philomela’s tapestry, the weaving itself is meaningless. Without Procne to help extricate her, Philomela is another victim in a larger story of violence against women. It requires Procne’s understanding and support for Philomela to free herself from Tereus’ control. In contrast, the speaker in Rich’s poem, whom we assume to be a woman because she can “read” the story behind Aunt Jennifer’s embroidery, is not able to bridge the divide between her aunt and herself. Aunt Jennifer will ultimately die alone and fearful because the one person who can read the story of her tigers either cannot or will not extricate her aunt from the horrors of her marriage.

The crux of the difference between Ovid’s interpretation of feminine power and Rich’s story of fragmented and isolated female rebellion lies in the Industrial Revolution and the changes it wrought to how women’s domestic textile work was perceived and ideologized against the backdrop of changing attitudes about work and society. The labour of producing and reproducing domestic goods did not completely end with the advent of industrialization. The mechanized spinning mules, looms, lace net machines and knitting frames developed in rapid succession, starting in the eighteenth century, rendered women’s traditional domestic labour at textiles all but redundant, yet they did not really change the essentials of what women, particularly those of the middle class, made until the very end of the nineteenth century. Rozsika Parker argues that this is in part because these inventions arose concurrently with new humanist discourses on sexual difference. Predicated on an ideology of feminine and masculine as diametrically
opposed forces, where a docile and weaker femininity is constantly posited against male dominance and strength, these public discourses were in turn propelled by an increasingly prosperous merchant class (thanks to their new inventions) and a growing desire within this new middle class to attach significance to the home as physical evidence of social and economic power (63-64). As a consequence there was increased pressure for women to stay within the sphere of the home and make domestic textiles, no longer out of need, but as proof of male authority and familial wealth. The desirable woman in this new world of wealth, was, as Nancy Armstrong argues, a mix of several qualities: discretion, modesty and frugality (73). As Parker asserts, “the merchant class wanted wives who combined the appearance of nobility with the activities of the labouring class,” and textile work provided both (63). It gave the appearance of industry, servility and subservience, but because it was no longer necessary to survival and the steps to producing a finished good had been materially shortened, it began to indicate a life of ease and material wealth. By the mid-nineteenth century, domestic textile-making in the English-speaking world had become largely the province of middle-class wives and daughters who made objects for their families, homes and charity in order to affirm the family’s social standing. Until the Second World War, they were still expected to fill their time with sewing baby clothes, knitting socks and embroidering carpets, but the reasons for this work had migrated from one of substance to that of appearance and often did not match the work that women really did, both inside and outside the home.

Adrienne Rich’s poem was written after the Second World War, when western women were again expected to find fulfillment in domesticity, but it was also written after more than a century of public discourse, from sermons and speeches to newspaper
articles, that had largely idealized women as the centre of domestic life, and domestic
textile making as the epitome of appropriate female domesticity. The speaker yields
Aunt Jennifer’s story as a symbol of her subjugation and of her limited attempt to subvert
patriarchal authority. The narrator’s anger seems to be as much directed at Aunt
Jennifer’s passivity and ineffectual stance against authority as it is her uncle’s violence.
Yet we only get Aunt Jennifer’s story through the lens of the female speaker. The reader
is given no indication of how Aunt Jennifer herself feels about her embroidery, whether
she takes pride in her work or feels pleasure in its production, and without a fuller picture
of the ambiguities and contradictions of what domestic textile-making meant to its
practitioners, what M’Closkey calls the “context” of the text, we miss an important part
of Aunt Jennifer’s story (123). If textiles and textile-making connect women both
physically and metaphorically, they are also wielded subversively in the stories that
women tell about one another’s lives. Where Philomela has her tongue cut out by a man,
Aunt Jennifer has her ability to speak and be heard managed by another woman as well as
a man.

This thesis will argue that in British, American and Canadian women’s writing
from 1800 to just before the Second World War, images of domestic textiles and the
making of these items are not simply background fillers. Through a close reading of Jane
Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), Sara Jeannette
Duncan’s *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by
Ourselves* (1890), Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899), and Martha Ostenso’s *Wild
Geese* (1925) as examples of popular women’s writing from this period, this thesis will
insist that written images of domestic textiles and textile work give important clues to a
character’s class, family origin and status, socio-economic and cultural background and level of education. Moreover, a detailed understanding of textile work and its place in women’s daily lives is critical to a deeper understanding of social, sexual and political issues from a woman’s perspective. In an era that wanted to deny women education, property rights and a voice in the public sphere, and largely discouraged them from writing anything but polite, romantic fiction, women writers found other, more covert means of expressing the complexities of these issues. Domestic textiles and textile making, in their intimate association with human hands and bodies, and their implicit place in the regulation of those same hands and bodies, were the perfect vehicles for this subversive discussion, even as they appear to reiterate and reinforce public narratives about women’s lives. Moreover, domestic textiles and textile-making, through their close symbolic association with women’s power, provide an entry point into the ways that these five novels explore and problematize relationships between women during and after the Industrial Era. As Armstrong insists, middle-class women actively enfolded themselves into their own systems of power. This thesis will argue that images of domestic textiles and the hands that make them operate as sites of both resistance and submission, friendship and competition.

The nature of this project is interdisciplinary, and will draw on anthropological accounts of textiles and textile-making techniques as well as social and labour histories of the Industrial Revolution to establish how, what and why domestic textile making persisted in Britain, the United States and Canada long after machines took textile making for trade out of the home. It will also draw on recent anthropological and literary examinations into material culture and a history of the senses to understand what role
images of knitting, sewing, embroidery, quilting and crochet played in these five novels, and how public and private discourses of domestic textile making might have been circulated across the Atlantic. Material objects mediate emotions, relationships and personal and cultural identities, and help to transmit the beliefs and values of a community or society at any given time (Attfield 121). Because domestically made textiles are produced through the hands and live out their time on our bodies or in our private spaces, they often negotiate how inner lives meet the outer world. This thesis will show that domestic textile making within women’s texts could embody complex and even contradictory messages. It could reiterate existing social structures and women’s roles, and simultaneously refute them, or advocate for change in the form of economic self-sufficiency, while at the same time insisting that a woman’s role was in the home. Domestic textile making could be a source of delight and pride for a practitioner even as she resented having to do it in the first place. It could symbolize and portray experiences that women writers were discouraged from depicting openly, and make observations about women’s lives that were sometimes beyond words. I will show, moreover, that though all five novels have threads into each other, the stories contained within domestic textiles and textile making in women’s writing changed over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century as women moved away from daily textile making. Without the instinctive ability to “read” textiles the way our grandmothers and great-grandmothers could, we have lost the ability to interpret the layered stories behind these images.

In *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Carolyn Kay Steedman argues that “personal interpretations of past time – the stories that people tell themselves in order to explain how they got to the place they currently inhabit – are often in deep and ambiguous
conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture” (6). This thesis contends that from the early nineteenth century until the Second World War, most women had a deep knowledge of textiles and textile making that went far beyond the practical. Women of all classes were expected to make things: embroidered samplers, children’s clothes, hooked rugs, knitted shawls and sweaters. If they were able to go to school, sewing and needlework were taught to them as part of the curriculum. If they lived in a work-house, a poor-house or a hospital, then basic sewing and knitting were taught to them there. If they belonged to a YWCA, a temperance group or a church committee, then it was almost certain that they sewed, quilted or embroidered as part of their membership. Domestic textile making was central to how women’s social worlds were organized: it formed the backbone of social calls of the upper and middle classes and was the central teaching tool through which women of those classes instructed the working class. It was almost inescapable. By the Victorian era domestic textile making had become, above all, an aspirational hobby that proved or disproved a woman’s worth in all social interactions. As Parker argues of embroidery, domestic textile-making on the whole “occupied a key place in the exploration of what it meant to be a woman in the middle class, when industrial capitalism was increasingly disrupting the established economic and social structure” (151).

Yet the official stories of domestic textile making as appropriate women’s work, and the corresponding images that circulated through the public and private sphere of a chaste and submissive middle-class wife tending to her sewing in the home, did not always tally with women’s lives as they were actually lived, and became less relevant as the nineteenth century wore on. Moreover, if in sewing and knitting women’s lives were
often bound to one another for the exchange of patterns and help, for cooperation and for emotional succor, these exchanges could be equally corrosive and damaging. There were rules for how and what a woman was to make: not knowing these rules could bar her from the social world, just as an innate understanding of their operation could allow a woman to exploit her position within it. Rules about social inclusion were often made and enforced by women, sometimes to the detriment of their own and others’ mental and emotional health. The stories contained within a domestic textile are not always about or against patriarchal authority, nor are they always symbols of subjugation and suffering, as they are in Rich’s poem. Sometimes they are about the psychic damage that women do to each other. Sometimes they are about the pleasure of making. Sometimes they are simply about desire: the desire for twenty yards of fabric for a skirt, and the unspoken desire to live a more (or less) conventional life. As with Rich’s “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” the stories we tell now about what women did in the home are often at odds with the complexities of how their lives were really lived and how they felt about them.

The novels chosen for this project are from three different countries, in different periods, with divergent themes and have had varying critical receptions. All, however, have female protagonists and deal with issues of community and belonging, and of female power and identity within societies that were rapidly changing. Central to all five novels is an examination into the complexities of relationships among women. In all five stories, women’s lives are bound together by domestic textile making, even in instances where the main characters do not themselves practice a textile craft. Women come together socially to embroider, sew, knit and quilt, and sometimes find the power to make positive changes in their own lives through this cooperation. Yet these same practices can
drive them apart. In all five novels, domestic textile making elicits competition, divisiveness, jealousy and resentment among women, as much as it supports their friendships and mutual cooperation.

Jane Austen is now considered one of the greatest novelists ever to have written in English for *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1816). Yet critics have never known quite how to read Fanny Price, the central character of *Mansfield Park*, her third novel. They either revile Fanny as an opportunistic prig, or uphold her as the model of female patience and virtue. George Haggarty sums it up when he states that Fanny “challenges our sympathies in various ways. Why is Fanny so timid and self-effacing? Why so relentlessly moral and so unrelievedly judgmental” (176). What Haggarty and others seem not to see is that the novel is remarkable for its portrayal of, and insight into, a young female dependant who is the lowest member of the household hierarchy and commands a somewhat liminal space between servant and family. Fanny is utterly dependent: she has no money of her own and is unable to work, marry or leave Mansfield Park without the permission and support of her uncle, yet Austen chooses to place her at the centre of the novel. In real life, Fanny would be all but invisible, yet we are granted entry into her private world. The opinions she forms of her family and acquaintances are based on her own observations, not invited by or shared with her cousins or aunts.

Critics have had a similarly difficult time with Elizabeth Gaskell’s cast of twittering elderly ladies in *Cranford*. Though popular with the reading public on its initial serialization in the magazine *Household Words*, the novella has until very recently been largely dismissed as quaint, sentimental and old-fashioned, and its spinsters and widows
as relics of a bygone age. As with *Mansfield Park*, critics have been somewhat divided over Gaskell’s aim with *Cranford*: was it meant as homage to the small town where Gaskell was born and raised, or was it satire designed to gently mock the village inhabitants? Certainly, against Gaskell’s more thematically ambitious novels, such as *North and South* (1855) or *Ruth* (1853), which deal with the tragic consequences of aggressive industrial development and the need for social reform, *Cranford* appears at first to be the more inconsequential work. Yet it is notable for its focus on the lives and relationships of older women often relegated to the background of literature, and for the ways that this community of single women disrupts nineteenth-century tropes of domesticity and domestic life. As Lisa Niles has pointed out, the novel frames and fosters discourses of sexuality and aging and has at its heart serious questions about aging women and their place in a community (294).

Where *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford* have continued to enjoy popularity with the reading public, however, Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by Ourselves* has largely been relegated to the background of Duncan’s writings, despite its initial popularity upon publication in 1890. Based on Duncan’s experiences and the columns she and fellow traveller Lily Lewis wrote for the *Montreal Star* following their international tour in 1888-9, the book itself is somewhat fictionalized, most notably in the addition of the narrator’s naive travel companion, Orthodocia Love. Yet as with *Mansfield Park* and *Cranford*, critics have never known quite how to take either Orthodocia or the narrator, and as Faye Hammill has noted, *A Social Departure* does not fit neatly into available categories: it is not exactly a New Woman novel, nor is it exactly *fin de siècle* travel literature (“Round the World” 112-13).
Though it often mocks late nineteenth-century women’s causes, such as temperance and dress reform, and includes a scathing indictment of women’s charitable bazaars, the novel engages seriously with issues of female freedom, marriage and work outside the home. While the title of *A Social Departure* suggests, as Hammill points out, a departure from the conventions of domesticity and family obligations, the two young protagonists find that the domestic space they have escaped is reproduced aboard ship, with a captain who acts as patriarch. As in *Cranford*, there are often inconsistencies in what can be deemed private and public space, and how women’s roles can be shaped or adapted to fit within those slippages.

Like *A Social Departure*, American writer Kate Chopin’s second novel, *The Awakening*, is neither typical fin de siècle novel nor New Woman novel, nor does it fit into conventional nineteenth-century American narratives of domesticity. Considered immoral for its frank depiction of female sexuality and its protagonist’s desire to escape the confines of the conservative social structure of Louisiana Creole society, rejection of husband and children, and subsequent suicide, the novella set off a storm of controversy in the United States and Canada in its initial reviews. The reception of the novel in many ways ended Chopin’s writing career and the novel disappeared, like *A Social Departure*, from literary history. While it has seen a significant resurgence of interest by scholars since the late 1960s, *The Awakening* is still considered controversial for its ambivalence towards motherhood. *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening*, which will be examined together, are seemingly disparate stories, yet they share some key themes: a rejection of the traditional female roles of wife and mother, a desire to escape a cloistered society, and a desire for adventure and change. Both explore, from very different points of view, a
woman’s desire to break free from the life that she is supposed to want and the sometimes contorted manner in which she has to reinvent herself to do so.

*Wild Geese* shares with *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening* an exploration of the constraints of domesticity, marriage and motherhood, and like them, grapples with the nature of women’s power and how it is manifested in a largely patriarchal world. Though popular when published, *Wild Geese* has had, like *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening*, a mixed critical reception both in Canada and the United States. Written in six weeks in Winnipeg during the summer of 1925, the novel won a contest sponsored by publishers Dodd, Mead and Company and was subsequently published serially in *The Pictorial Review* and turned into a silent movie (Arnason 303-4, Casey 104). Yet like a number of other “middlebrow” novels written on both sides of the border in the modernist period, *Wild Geese* largely disappeared from the public consciousness in the post-war period (Casey 105, Hammill “Ostenso” 21). The novel is often now praised for its unconventional heroine in Judith Gare, yet the bulk of recent critical work on *Wild Geese* tends to focus on Ostenso’s use of both romance and realism, and the way the novel fits into theories of Canadian or American literary development. What most critics miss or appear uncomfortable with is the nature of the relationships between Judith and Lind Archer, a teacher who comes to stay with the family, and between Jude and her mother, Amelia, for, like *Cranford*, the novel makes explicit the needs of a small community of women who are dependent on one another for emotional and financial survival. The passionately charged relationship between Jude and Lind, in particular, explores the nature of female sexuality and same-sex desire against a backdrop of a controlling patriarchal community.
What links all five novels together is the work that forms the substance of the female characters’ daily lives and how that helps to define their relationships to one another. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny and her aunts are often either embroidering or sewing. What they each do indicates their class positions within the English gentry and their individual positions within the hierarchy of a Regency-period household. Aunt Bertram, who is the mistress of a landed estate, embroiders; Aunt Norris, as the rector’s widow, sews for the village poor box; while Fanny, at the bottom of the family hierarchy, assists her aunts, embroiders, sews and does any task that is set before her. The elderly and middle-class residents of *Cranford*, in contrast, mend, knit and crochet. Though they do not necessarily sew their own dresses, what they do aligns with their limited financial means and retired lives in a country village, and also aligns with the period in which the novel was written, when knitting had become a craze among middle-class women. Where sewing is a practical occupation that allows them to husband their dwindling financial resources and maintain at least the appearance of middle-class status, knitting is a personal pleasure for at least several of the characters, the results of which are exchanged as gifts.

In *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening*, the secondary characters are the makers, which throws into relief that the protagonists are not. In *A Social Departure*, the narrator and Orthodocia live amid women who endlessly make, from Jack Love’s nameless “aunt” and her crazy quilt, to the ladies’ sewing guild with dreams of travel in Orthodocia’s home village of Wigginton. The two young women extricate themselves from this world, only to find when they are aboard ship that they must hem the captain’s handkerchiefs in exchange for his paternal care over their welfare. In Japan, where they
choose to rent a house in order to escape the “hemmed about” world of hotel living, they find they are still bound by the limitations of what is considered a woman’s realm. In *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier’s empty hands contrast with those of her busy Creole neighbours and friends, like Adèle Ratignolle and Aline Lebrun, who sew and embroider for themselves and their children. They are aided in this work by their African-American servants, like the little girl in Aline’s sewing room who labouriously works the treadle of Aline’s old sewing machine. While Edna sometimes cuts out patterns at Adèle’s behest, she avoids sewing, preferring instead to draw or paint. In much the same way, Jude’s outdoor farm labour in *Wild Geese* differs significantly from that of her mother, who quilts alone in the house, and the educated Lind, who sews fine clothing for herself and others. In each of these examples, the domestic textile making reveals something of each character’s class, race, age and social position. It speaks to her desires, regrets and unmet needs and her relationship to the other women. It speaks sometimes to the sense of fulfillment she finds in occupation. At times it also speaks to painful emotional and psychic wounds between mother and daughter, aunt and niece, and among women who might otherwise be friends.

Textiles made perfect vehicles for talking about women’s lives because they were such an integral part of most women’s daily routines from birth to death. As Christine Bayles Kortsch has pointed out, most nineteenth-century female readers, even if they did not practice needlework themselves, were so accustomed to handling fabric and planning clothing that they would still be able to “read” the layers of meaning under the immediate surface of a textile image (11-30). More importantly, however, textiles and domestic textile making could be made to hold multiple, contradictory meanings at the same time,
meanings that could be skewed to read one way within public narratives and represent something quite different in private reality. For the speaker in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” embroidery is a mindless time filler that keeps Aunt Jennifer passively working in the face of her husband’s brutality. For Aunt Jennifer, herself, embroidery might be empty labour, but it might also be a productive outlet that gives her peace and a sense of emotional control. Domestic textile work could be both a gentle pastime and laborious work. It could offer a respite from the demands of the social world and offer an avenue through which to engage more closely in it. Textiles crossed and blurred class distinctions between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and knitting, sewing, embroidery, crochet and lace-making could give a woman the appearance of education and breeding, while at the same time labelling her a social climber, a bluestocking or a militant social activist. A female head bent over needlework could appear submissive, docile and passive, and at the same time impress as sexually provocative, manipulative and aggressive. An elderly lady, knitting in a corner, could appear benign, even harmless, and at the same time faintly dangerous. It is the very ambiguity of domestic textile work that lends it so much power in women’s texts.

Textiles form the connecting threads that join these and other works by women, yet analysis of the relationship among women, writing and textiles has been somewhat sporadic and disjointed, and it has only been in the last two decades that literary critics have shown a more sustained interest in the affinity between textiles and literature. Within this field of study there are two related areas that seem to have nourished the most exploration: the semiotics of dress culture and the social and economic costs of making clothing. Once (and occasionally still) thought to be trivial and unimportant, dress is a
rich and powerful symbol in human culture. Though both strands of study arise in part out of a Marxian preoccupation with the economics of textile production, women’s labour and consumption, and partly with the work done in dress and material culture from the early 1980s through to the mid-1990s by anthropologists, sociologists and art and dress historians, including Anne Hollander’s 1993 *Seeing Through Clothes* and Aileen Ribeiro’s *The Art of Dress* (1995), dress culture studies takes as its starting point semiotics, especially Roland Barthes’ influential study, *The Fashion System* (1967), and psychoanalytic theory. Barthes saw dress as a symbolic form of language that was not only to be seen, but read, for its ability to “communicate ideas, information, or sentiments,” whereby meaning was generated by the wearer and read by the observer (30). As Hollander asserts, dressing one’s body, whether in real life or in a work of art, is about picture making (311). However, as Elizabeth Wilson points out, clothing also links the corporeal body to the social being (2). Bodies and clothing work to define each other on multiple levels in an inconstant relationship: the look of clothing helps to create the self, but the self is also continually redefined by how society sees the individual’s body in clothing. Moreover, in literature, clothing has a symbolic function that differs slightly from real life. Clair Hughes argues that “dress is almost subliminally woven into the fabric of our lives and images of its appearance in a text may surface from other texts, from the visual or representational arts, from daily life, history or memory” (*Henry James* 3). She insists that dress is part of a social system of signs that operates both on a societal level and on the level of the individual author, for references to dress “may be plotted by some authors as part of a symbolic pattern” (*Dressed* 3). If clothing in real life works to
create the self, then in literature clothing helps to establish a character, a thematic concern or a social or political statement that links it to other literary works.

The recent spate of writings on fashion and literature has generally linked the semiotics of fashion to the function of dress as a commodity within what Jennie Batchelor calls a “consumer revolution” in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries (7). Anthropologists argue that the introduction of the capitalist production system and the invention of the modern factory eliminated the spiritual value attached to cloth, and in requiring endless variation and rapid turnover, helped to encourage the growth of the modern fashion system to make dress the predominant means of self-expression (J. Harris 12-13, Schneider and Weiner 11). Works such as Batchelor’s *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2005), Cynthia Kuhn’s *Style and Textile: The Performance of Dress in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction* (2001) and Rosy Aindow’s *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture 1870-1914* (2010) examine the role fashion plays in the construction and circulation of ideas about class and social and moral order. In its simplest form, dress defines social hierarchies. The rise of the new middle class, starting in the sixteenth century, created a new market for luxury goods, but also blurred traditional distinctions of rank and gender. Batchelor argues that dress is dependent on a series of complex and context-specific circumstances in which “the meanings of dress can never be controlled completely” (*Dress* 9). Many of the conceptions of virtuous femininity and appropriate female conduct circulating in the eighteenth century, she insists, were at odds with how dress really operated, and attempts to control how the semiotics of dress were interpreted through works of literature, sermons and magazines highlighted that gap. In a similar fashion, Aindow argues that
dress in nineteenth-century British literature was inextricable from new ideologies of gender and class, and central to anxieties about class mobility.

This area of inquiry is inextricably intertwined with the labour of making clothing and its relationship to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing, and many of the recent studies link the two. Batchelor examines the labour of milliners and dressmakers and what made that work symbolic to discussions of morality and women’s work in the eighteenth century. Christine Bayles Kortsch’s *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction* (2009) looks at the social and political implications of the relationship between dress, sewing and the New Woman novels of the late nineteenth century, while Lynn M. Alexander’s *Women, Work and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (2003) and Beth Harris’ *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (2005) examine the image of the seamstress in nineteenth-century art and literature. Amal Amireh’s *The Factory Girl and the Seamstress: Imagining Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* (2000) investigates fiction from popular authors such as Susan Warner and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and its role in portraying and defining working women in ante- and post-bellum America.

While all these works were influential on this thesis, none of them examines clothing sewn at home for domestic use in a sustained way. Neither do they treat domestically made textiles differently than those produced exclusively for trade within a home environment. Domestically made and consumed clothing tends to be subsumed into narratives about paid labour and dressmaking or piece work done for pay within the home. Additionally, while dress is inextricably linked with consumption, need, visibility and local and international exchanges of currency, consumption is only part of the story of
domestic textiles. A baby dress made during pregnancy for an infant stillborn, for example, might have been put away in a trunk, never to be put into circulation within the domestic sphere. Miller argues that “sewn cloth anticipates, acknowledges, constitutes, recalls and memorializes relationships; just as genealogy traces the threads of connection” (Küchler and Miller 15). While clothing, and by extension all textiles, appear to operate as semiotic signs that can be “read” and interpreted, in literature written by women these textiles cannot be divorced from the maker’s hand or the emotional and psychic life that inspires the maker in the first place. As M’Closkey insists, when textiles are decoded and reassembled into meaning as isolated symbols, the relationships behind and between them become meaningless (123). In Austen, Gaskell, Duncan, Chopin and Ostenso, an understanding of the visual power of clothing always seems to arise out of an instinctive understanding of textile in all the senses: touch, sound, smell, sight and taste, but also immersion in the act of making. There is a spiritual and kinetic element to the textiles in their work and the hand working behind the textile that bears further study.

To be clear, clothing and dress are also not the whole story of textile making. Women made many varied items throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from slippers to carpets to bell pulls and needle cushions and there is no end to the industriousness of women’s hands and the output of their fingers in literature written by women. There have been several studies over the last number of years that isolate particular kinds of domestic textile within these works. Parker’s 1984 *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Art of the Feminine* examines the relationship between art, craft and women’s embroidery (both paid and unpaid, and professional and amateur). Parker argues that embroidery was used from the Middle Ages on to inculcate a kind of
femininity that was so thoroughly learned and absorbed as to appear innate. At the same time, embroidered works that survive or appear in art and fiction seem to tell alternate stories of subversion, power and anger. In a similar vein, Talia Schaffer’s *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (2011), Ann Romines’ “Willa Cather: A Life with Quilts” (2005), Sharon R. Wilson’s “Quilting as Narrative Art: Metafictional Construction in *Alias Grace*” (2003), Victoria Coulson’s “Who Cares About Charlotte Wentworth? Fancy Work in Henry James” (2010), Sayaka Okumura’s “Women Knitting: Domestic Activity, Writing and Distance in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction” (2008) and Margaret P. Baker’s “‘Knits up the Ravelled Sleeve of Care’: Images of the Knitter in Literature” (1998) examine images of knitting, quilting and embroidery in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and argue that these activities constitute another way of “seeing” literary realism. As Schaffer insists, images of domestic handicrafts helped to circulate beliefs about thrift, domestic skills, appropriate female behaviour and class and became a site through which women writers contested, exposed and/or furthered domestic ideology (*Craft* 9-17). Yet of these studies, only Cecilia Macheski’s “Penelope’s Daughters: Images of Needlework in Eighteenth-Century Literature” and Laurie Lieb’s “The Works of Women are Symbolical: Needlework in the Eighteenth Century,” both written in 1986, make the argument that needlework needs to be looked at as a whole; that contemporary readers tend to overlook or dismiss the uniquely female language of domestic stitchery and its important function as subtext in women’s writing.

The issue with most of these studies is that they tend to focus on one particular area or period: quilting in Canadian or American literature, sewing and Victorian
literature, embroidery in English culture or domestic needlework in the eighteenth century. What they fail to take into account is the richness of the full relationship among women, writing and domestic textile that occurs over the course of Industrialization and across cultures. In the academy and in formal study, we tend to divide works into the centuries, countries or periods in which they were written. Austen is most often grouped with eighteenth-century novelists and Ostenso with modernist or realist American and Canadian writers of the early twentieth. It is the argument of this thesis, however, that their writing, and by extension their concerns with social, political and sexual issues, is linked through images of textile and domestic textile making. The language to which all women turned again and again, the language which cut across ethnic and class lines and which said all the things women could not or would not voice aloud in the dominant, patriarchal Western discourse, was textile, all textiles, not just clothing. Textiles are perishable: they disappear from the world through time and use. As Elizabeth Barber concludes in *Women’s Work*, “the pursuit of the perishable….requires careful attention to a variety of invisible factors as well, factors that most people forget to consider because in some sense they “aren’t”: the factors aren’t said or aren’t conscious, or aren’t seen. It is their absence that is the problem, precisely because they don’t obtrude on our attention” (297). The language of textile making has been equally perishable: we no longer have to make our own clothes or household goods, and consequently the making of those goods has largely disappeared from our daily lives and has been rendered all but invisible in texts.

Moreover, when studies of domestic textile making, like Lieb’s or Macheski’s, argue that we have to pay attention to domestic textile making, it is without explaining
how or why the metaphors of textiles and domestic textile making came to be so closely attached to women’s lives, characters, sexualities and identities. Though we rarely have to concern ourselves now with how or under what conditions our clothes or household goods are made, how we unconsciously label the women who sew, knit or crochet today has vestigial echoes of nineteenth-century attitudes about women and domestic textile making. Every time a newspaper writes “this is not your grandmother’s knitting,” or a stranger asks if the textile in progress in a woman’s hands is destined for a baby or a child, we have inherited a presupposition about a particularly white, middle-class femininity without being aware of its presence or significance. There is often a duality to textile work, and a gap between how it was rationalized as “women’s work” and how it really functioned in women’s lives. In order to really read and understand the significance of textiles and textile making in women’s texts, we need to unpack the fuller, more complex history behind them: we need to understand the history of textiles prior to the industrial era, the changes wrought by industrialization to family life, the rise of the middle class and the new pressures and constraints on women’s lives, and how women themselves both reiterated and questioned the role of domestic textile making in their lives.

Textiles in real life are objects: that is, they make up the material culture of a social group. Textiles in stories are also objects: they are the imagined material culture of a social group. The study of the material culture in fiction both is, and is not, a relatively new field within literary criticism. While the study of consumerism, consumption and the ways that “things” get assessed and subsequently enfolded into systems of exchange both in and between cultures has been a scholarly pursuit in economics and political theory since at least the nineteenth century, it has only been in the last twenty years that we have
started to look at the object matter of literature less as commodity and more as the expression of transient emotions, desires and concerns of its human subjects. As Bill Brown suggests in *A Sense of Things*, “These are texts that...ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies. They are texts that describe and enact an imaginative possession of things that amounts to the labor of infusing manufactured objects with a metaphysical dimension” (4). Brown insists that objects in literature are not just imagined representations of a culture, but imbued with emotional resonance that may be beyond language. Textiles, by extension, are encoded texts with metaphoric meanings that need to be understood in the context of how and why they were made and used. Yet object matter alone does not account for the images of women bending over textiles in works of fiction or the ways that images of textile making seem to bend or subvert some of the stories written by women. Textiles are bound to the act of making, to the act of rendering a fabric or yarn or thread into something else. Domestic textile making is a ritualized process, repeated over and over again.

At its foundation, a textile is both a marvellously simple object and hugely complex metaphor. Derived from the Latin verb *texere*, or “to weave,” a textile is simply the arrangement or interlacement of fibres into a fabric that is pliable within a three-dimensional plane. A textile has a myriad of uses, for a textile is, above all things, practical: it provides an insulating layer against the cold, and protection from the sun. It can be made to hold grains or liquids, or turned into rope to haul goods or animals. A textile keeps biting insects off a baby and warms the floors and beds of our homes.
Despite the many innovative processes that resulted from the Industrial Revolution, the steps for turning raw fibre into fabric remain essentially the same as they were four thousand years ago. In the simplest steps, the fibre must first be grown or produced, whether the resulting textile is made from animal protein fibres (wool, cashmere, silk), vegetal fibres (cotton, hemp, linen) or from artificial fibres (nylon, polyester). Then the fibre must be prepared for spinning, a process that can take several days to several weeks. Plant fibres like flax, hemp and nettles used to make linen and other fabrics, for example, must be “retted,” or rotted, to separate the tough stalk of the plant from the desired bast fibre. The fibre must then be cleaned and spun (or in the case of silk, “thrown” to create twist in the silk fibres) into thread. Some fibres are easier to spin than others: while sheep’s wool has microscopic barbs that allows it to hook onto itself easily (this property also makes it ideal for felt), flax is stiff and breaks easily. Some threads must be soaked in water to “set” the twist, before the resulting thread or yarn is woven, knit, crocheted, tatted or knotted to create a textile. The final step is to “set” the textile by finishing it with some form of wet process that is dependent on both the fibre and the kind of finish desired: fulled (lightly felted) wool, for example, needs to be soaked in hot water, dried, combed to raise the nap, then trimmed (Barber 29-70).

A textile is more than just practical. A three-dimensional and malleable piece of fabric, built on a pliable geometric plane, is ideal for decoration. It can be dyed, woven, knit, painted, beaded or embroidered; rendered rainbow-hued or sober black; cut and shaped, or sewn in intricate folds. The complexity of a textile arises from the host of processes that can be used singly or in combination to create the fabric. The textile that results from this process can be used as is or it can be remade into another, more involved
and complex finished item: a woven piece of bombazine (a twill fabric made of silk and wool popular in the nineteenth century), for example, becomes an embroidered and beaded woman’s jacket through an involved process of dyeing, cutting, piecing, sewing and embellishment. The process can be lengthy, and it takes a combination of artistry and hard work to see a collection of fibres through to a finished textile.

A textile, by virtue of its potential for artistry and creativity, can be valuable as a commodity. Lynne Milgram and Penny Van Esterik assert that “textiles are culturally expressive objects whose creation and use make visible relationships between people as well as between people and their environments....textiles are located in the most local and intimate sites of the family, yet participate in global economic and political exchanges” (1). Because they are easy to transport, textiles have often been used as a medium of exchange for trade. Humans have long exchanged textiles or given them as gifts in order to strengthen political or social relations and consolidate power (Harris 10). Certain textiles, prized for their rarity, the work that went into them or aesthetic value, become desirable in the marketplace, and are traded and exchanged for status or a sense of belonging and credibility. Because they are so desirable, some textiles, like silk, have become enfolded into national and international exchanges of wealth and power, and consequently intertwined with systems of exploitation and abuse. In Canada and the United States in the early twentieth century, for example, raw silk thread and fabric from Asia was loaded into trains in Vancouver and Seattle and sent across the continent to mills in Montreal, Boston and New York. So important were the cargoes on these trains that they stopped for no one: more than one presidential or royal train was forced to move aside for the “silkers,” which could carry as much as two million dollars of cargo per
train (Daniels 109). Some of this material would have ended up in the many sweatshops that populated the garment districts of those cities, however, and contributed to the abuse of the workers, often newly immigrant women and men (Blewett 51).

Unlike metal or pottery, textiles begin to degrade almost from the moment that they are first produced. UV light, oils from the body, bugs, dust and soap all contribute to deteriorating a fabric, even one that was not designed to be worn daily. Silk, which is made largely from the cocoons of the domesticated *Bombyx mori* moth, will shatter over time. Wool and cashmere are particularly subject to moth and caterpillar damage. It is rare for an item of clothing worn daily to survive past its maker’s lifetime, and rarer still for even a little-used decorative textile to survive more than half a millennia. Unlike bronze, copper or ceramic relics, generally only small shards of textiles from before the Common Era survive today in museums and special collections. Moreover, the textiles that survive a century or more tend to be the “special” ones: a fine, embroidered silk dress from the eighteenth century, or a wool and silk tapestry from the seventeenth century. The clothing and bedding of the labouring and middle classes, that worked hard for their keep and finally wore out, are less likely to survive multiple generations, often giving a skewed impression of what was important or beloved about these textiles, and how well or poorly they were made.

Miller explains that, more than any other art or craft form, textiles embody what we want to believe about ourselves: “the sensual and the aesthetic – what cloth feels and looks like – is the source of its capacity to objectify myth, cosmology and also morality, power and values” (1). Textiles cross material and social areas of knowledge: they are bound up in how people understand themselves and their relationship to their world.
Textiles can reveal or they can conceal; they can highlight or they can repress. Textiles can express finite boundaries, whether to a body or to a living space, or they can join bodies and spaces together, both physical and psychological. Textiles are often the objects that start the process of cathexis for infants and toddlers, for example. The adoption of a blanket or quilt becomes the mediator by which the child makes a link between itself and the outside world (Attfield 130-31). The disintegration of the blanket from constant use coincides with the child’s readiness to find new ways to negotiate the space between the interior self and the outside world (Attfield 132).

Because we wear them on our bodies, wrap them around our children and hang them in our windows and doorways, textiles are more than visual objects. Textiles appeal to all the senses. Cloth made from sheep’s wool has a particular smell of lanolin, grass and/or dirt when it gets wet. Knitters and the recipients of their work either love or hate that “sheepy” smell. Silk makes a distinctive rustling or crunching sound, called “scroop” (“Scroop” Fairchild 499). A heavy figured silk robe or dress feels smooth, luxurious and pliable against the skin, while a blouse made from a lighter (and less expensive) silk satin might catch on rough or chapped hands. David Howes argues that western cultures have tended to privilege the senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste and touch have been delegated subordinate senses and associated with subjugated groups – women, workers and non-Westerners (10). Yet textiles help to construct an individual’s identity, physically, morally and cosmologically, through their effect on all the wearer’s senses. These, in turn, help construct meaning for the social group as a whole. What textiles look like has been over-emphasized in Western culture, which tends to trivialize how an individual might wear or sleep with a lover’s clothing as long as it smells like him/her,
for example, or how a child might associate a parent’s love with the feel of a velour bathrobe worn habitually during nighttime cuddles. Howes argues that this transformation, of “class distinctions into physiological sensations,” is a powerful way to maintain social hierarchies (10).

The symbolic and practical aspects of textiles and textile-making, in all their inherent contradictions, render textiles “politically and socially salient” (Weiner and Schneider 3). They also ally textiles with the act of telling a story. In English, as in many other languages, we use the imagery of textiles and textile making as metaphors for storytelling. We “spin a yarn” or “weave a story together.” We “weave a spell” over an audience. We use the image of a cut thread or piece of fabric to explain connections between people or social groups: “the ties that bind” or “the thread of a story.” We use the image of deteriorating fabric to describe the fragile and inexplicable nature of our world: “the fabric of the universe” or “the fabric of our lives” or “his life is hanging on by a thread.” We see, experience and mediate the world through textiles, like a woolly mitten on the hand, a veil over the face, or a skirt that brushes against the ankles, and we derive meaning from it. As Miller points out, when humans have an intimate, daily connection with textiles and textile making, it makes them particularly aware of cloth as a vehicle for telling their stories:

What we do with materials such as fibre and cloth is often the means by which we come to ‘see’ the very nature of our relationships. This is a materiality that incorporates the process of production, shredding, and recombining fibres that reflects the composition and decomposition of states of being, and is very different from our usual conceptualization of clothing in terms of surface and depth. Textile is not here an appearance. It is the form of an everyday experience. In this constancy of shredding, sewing and altering, appearance becomes also tactile and auditory: how we use our hands, what material feels like, the constant soundscape around the house. So recomposition is felt to be in the nature of relationships. Textile is a medium through which people think
through their anticipation of new and withdrawal from older connections. It is these threads of connections that perform the relative density of cultural substance. (Küchler and Miller 14)

Because it disintegrates, cloth is able to communicate the central issue of human lives and relationships: that they are fragile in an impermanent world (Weiner and Schneider 36-37). Textile, like human life, has a finite span. Like the relationships between people, cloth must be mended and repaired, made and remade.

For the practitioners of textile making, as Miller insists, these metaphors have double meanings. The entire process of creating can be a sensuous experience: the feel of thread in a needle, the sound of scissors cutting through fabric, and the smell of the fabric all combine to make textile-making the experience of hands and mind and senses. Anyone who has spent time in a textile mill will know how the intense sound of the machinery will block out all other sensory perceptions, including touch, isolating workers within themselves. In a quiet domestic environment, on the other hand, the sound, smell and feel of fabric, yarn and tools seems particularly enhanced. Recent advances in neurological imaging suggest that the sensory experience and pleasure that comes from the practice of a craft can regulate strong emotions like anger or panic. This can lead to a state of gratification and elation similar to that of meditation that psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi termed “flow” in the late nineteen-eighties. He suggested that flow stems from activities that require disciplined practice over time, deep levels of concentration and an ability to screen extraneous stimulation (Gutman and Schindler 75-76). The reward of flow is an increase in blood flow and dopamine levels in the mesocorticolumbic system of the brain, which works to manage stress, anxiety and emotional reactivity in the body, and thereby optimizes physical and mental health. Neurological research suggests that embroidery, knitting, weaving or sewing, when
performed in a quiet environment where the practitioner can focus deeply and inwardly on the demands of the task, allows the practitioner to release the stresses of day-to-day life. Moreover, the intellectual and social stimulation of these activities may help to protect the brain against Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of age-related dementia (Gutman and Schindler 77-80).

Yet textile making by hand can also be physically demanding and even dangerous work, and cautionary tales about the process appear in myths and fairy tales in many cultures. In Grimm’s “The Three Spinners,” a subverted form of the “Rumplestiltskin” and “Sleeping Beauty” stories, a young woman is promised in marriage to the king under the false claim that she can spin straw into gold. When her future mother-in-law imprisons her with a mountain of straw (some versions suggest it is a mountain of flax, a fibre that requires experience and a fair amount of skill to spin, as well as more than a bit of imperviousness to pain), three magical old women appear and offer to help her with the spinning after extracting a promise that they can attend her wedding (Schneider 177-79). When the old women arrive at the wedding, they horrify the king with their spinning-induced deformities: one has an overgrown thumb from tending to the wheel and spindle, the second a club foot from pressing on the treadle, the third a swollen, pendulous lip from moistening the thread. The king immediately bars his new queen from having anything more to do with spinning.

While most contemporary readers are familiar with the ramifications of textile making as cheap, forced labour, from the 146 dead in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York in 1911 to the 117 deaths in the Dhaka factory fire in 2012, very few will be aware of physical effects on the body from domestic textile making, unless they
themselves also perform textile work. For daily practitioners these effects can be as relatively benign as pricked and bleeding fingers from applying a needle or spindle or painful calluses and blisters from holding knitting needles, sewing needles or thread. It can also lead to longer term pain, whether painful hands and fingers from repeatedly using scissors to cut fabric, elbow or shoulder strain and carpal tunnel syndrome from holding heavy knitting, or an aching back and hips from bending over a tapestry frame, a loom, or sewing machine. Though relatively benign on a small scale, textile making can also be onerous, repetitive and exhausting work. It can also be dangerous work. There are long-term and serious hazards that have been identified in both mill workers and home practitioners: arthritis and physical deformities from awkward postures held in extended periods during textile making; exposure to toxins from dyes or felting processes; exposure to bacterial diseases from plant and animal fibres; and asthma or other occupational lung diseases from handling raw fibres and fabrics (particularly hemp and flax).

In many cultures, however, textile makers also used what they made to tell the stories that they might not always have had the recourse to otherwise, particularly when they had limited access to formal education. In Hunan province in China somewhere from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, for example, women developed a private script based on the local Mandarin dialect and called Nüshu (Liu 241-47). Songs, prayers and stories in Nüshu were often embroidered or woven into garments, belts, fans and bedding, and given as gifts to other women. The sentiments contained therein ranged from hopes for a long and happy married life to narratives about the loneliness of a woman’s life in a highly segregated Chinese society, while at the same time ensuring a sense of continued
community between women (Liu 253). African slaves brought with them to the Americas a rich cultural history of textile making, and there is conjecture that they employed into North American quilting the techniques and thematic concerns of Central and Western African traditions (Shaw 187-91, Cash 34). Many slave women were expected to make their own clothing and bedding as well as that of the plantation owners, and they often used worn pieces of clothing, bedding and cast-offs to produce their bedcovers (Ferrero, Hedges and Silber 45). Though not many antebellum quilts survive, the diverse, non-repeating, asymmetrical patterns and improvised designs of later quilts, and the importance of quilting bees to African-American women both in the ante- and post-bellum periods suggest that quilts functioned as a means of establishing kinship networks and keeping family records – of births, deaths, marriages and geographical locations – when their families were constantly fractured and re-fractured by poverty and racism (Cash 30-36, Ferrero, Hedges and Silber 48).

Textile making by hand can be done alone, yet it also offers opportunities for social interactions. Putting a warp on a floor loom is easier with two pairs of hands, as is stitching a quilt top to its backing. It takes less time to baste, seam and stitch a quilt when more than one needle is applied. Every handwoven textile benefits from more than one set of hands to spin the yarn for it, while turning a hank of yarn or thread into a ball is easier with one person to hold the hank and one to wind the yarn. The work of textiles is made less burdensome with more hands to share the process. In the days before industrialization, the chores that tended to fall to women - the daily tasks of cooking, domestic textile making and child-raising – were made quicker and more efficient when the duties were shared, and women tended to share them with other women. In the
process of making women shared their knowledge with one another: how to care for a colicky baby, how to season a particular stew, how to best ret flax to make a strong and lustrous linen thread (Barber 87-91). That knowledge formed the basis for a kind of female “language” – a language that evolved through a particular shared work that was itself female.

However, knowledge, as Dorothy Washburn and Donald W. Crowe have shown, is not always transmitted through verbal or written forms. Textiles are sophisticated mathematical objects. Built in two pliable, right-angled axes, textiles allow for finite, one- and two-dimensional patterns, with combinations of four different motion classes: translation, rotation, mirror reflection and glide reflection (Washburn and Crowe 20). While western cultures have traditionally privileged verbal and written explanations of these mathematical properties, in weaving, knitting, sewing, quilting, embroidery and lacework the ability to perceive, interpret, accurately reproduce and then explore all the geometric variations of these patterns forms its own kind of grammar that is often transmitted non-verbally, through the hands rather than through formal, verbal language (Washburn and Crowe 31-41). The complex, non-repeating patterns of Congolese woven and embroidered Kuba cloth, for example, are never created from written patterns, nor do the Kuba people have words for the geometric progressions or symmetries formed in these patterns. Rather, the patterns are created on the loom and embroidered directly from the brain to the hands. If textile making was a “language,” it was a grammar of all the senses – sight, sound, touch, smell, taste and memory – that did not always find an outlet in written or spoken words.
Anthropologists argue that in cultures where women were the main producers of textiles for trade and controlled their distribution, they wielded considerable power in social and political life and were often assigned important spiritual tasks in the making and giving of textiles in birth, marriage and death ceremonies (Weiner and Schneider 25). Schneider and Weiner insist that this also allied textiles symbolically with women’s power in oral histories, myths and legends. After all, when textiles were valued as a primary medium of exchange, and a woman might spend months or even years preparing the textiles needed by her household as well as those for trade, the work of her hands added considerable value to the family’s status (Weiner and Schneider 20-25). In Europe by the Middle Ages, however, women’s power, particularly if the power came from communal female support like that of Procne and Philomela, or the women in the Grimm fairy tale, was often greeted with fear. Both Barber and Parker assert that behind this antagonism, in part, lay a dread of women’s sexual and reproductive power and the threat they posed to a patriarchal Christianity (Barber 245-51; Parker 46-59). This, Parker suggests, is a significant reason for how women’s lives came to be so circumscribed in western culture by the end of the Middle Ages:

A preoccupation with childbirth was shared by both the embroiderers and their ecclesiastical patrons. But their interests diverged significantly. The circumstances of mediaeval life – a labour-intensive economy with the household as major productive unit – gave central importance to fertility and childbirth. Because of the high rate of infant and maternal mortality, childbirth was regarded with considerable fear and apprehension by all craftworkers. To the church, however, childbirth was a sign of women’s sinfulness and the manifestation of the curse of Eve. (53)

Births were traditionally attended by women: midwives, friends and female relatives. All-female groupings were considered a threat to male supremacy and female sexuality a threat to the supremacy of Mary’s virgin birth. Textiles were also often made in all-
female groupings, where more hands made the work lighter. Reproduction, as Parker points out, could only be feted once it was divorced from sexuality. To circumscribe the power of women, the church needed to control reproduction and how it was portrayed and managed in the public sphere, and devalue women’s importance in church rituals and life-cycle ceremonies, thereby diminishing their involvement in social and political life.

In isolating women from the community of other women, it was thought, their power could be tempered and controlled. If textiles, and the communities of women producing textiles, were symbolic of women’s authority and financial power, then part of silencing women lay in directing how, why and in what circumstances they produced textiles. Domestic textile making, where women were more likely to work alone or in informal circumstances, was valorized as appropriately feminine and maternal work; professional and for-pay textile making in workshops and ateliers was demeaned as labour unfit for women.

Before industrialization, the divisions between amateur and professional and domestically-produced and trade-produced textiles were also not clearly delineated. The household was the centre of both domestic and mercantile production and all members of the household might be enfolded into varying areas of production, though women always assumed responsibility for babies and children too young to work and the management of items designated for household use. However, as systems of textile production for trade became more formalized, and western societies became larger and more stratified by class from the twelfth century on, women found themselves and the work they did for pay increasingly unacknowledged and devalued. For example, there were embroiderers of both genders working in medieval English religious and secular workshops and
embroidery and its workers were held in high esteem (Parker 46-48). As these workshops became more highly organized and capitalized from increased demand for embroidery in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, women’s names began to disappear from this work. More rigid regulations for entry and stricter hierarchies within the textile guilds limited women’s formal participation in textile work, while concurrently developing ownership rules over the work produced at home rendered much of women’s production anonymous. Women did not stop working for pay in embroidery, spinning, weaving, or sewing, but because “the household was the unit of production and the husband was its legal representative,” a husband or father’s name would be the name that appeared formally in legal and financial transactions (Parker 46). From the fifteenth century on, where men made the textiles, the labour tended to be more formal and more likely to be recorded; where innumerable women laboured over cloth-making for their families, for hired help or for barter, the work tended to be both informal and anonymous.

Why is this important to understanding nineteenth-century domestic textile making? Not only did it delegitimize the economic contributions made to family incomes by women’s labour, but more importantly, it fundamentally changed how needlework was conceptualized in the public sphere. Though historians Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall mark the eighteenth century as the period in which women became “socially and spatially separated from the site of work” in Britain (Capuano 235), in textile production this division began much earlier. Land and ownership of land was historically the province of the aristocratic classes. By the sixteenth century, a privately owned house that was separate from the place of work became a desirable symbol of success, and merchants’ wives and daughters were designated as keepers of this space
(Parker 67-77, Armstrong 69-71). Yet as Jane Schneider argues of linen production and manufacture in the early seventeenth century, new wealth and the money-making schemes that accompanied them undermined “earlier autonomy and earlier social ties” and dispelled prior users of the land (206). The ideal life of the aristocrat was one of “security and plenty, ease and social control” (Parker 112). To be aristocratic, therefore, was to be seen to be at leisure. A tradesman whose wife performed no visible part of her husband’s trade emulated the aristocratic classes by being seen to be at leisure. When the women in the family were leisured enough to practice fine textile making out of pleasure and skill rather than need (meaning that they could wear the evidence of that skill on their backs, put it in their homes or give it as gifts), they gave visible, tangible proof to the larger community of the family’s economic success. In addition, richly embroidered and trimmed silk clothing and household articles blurred the visible lines between the aristocratic classes and those of the well-to-do trades. So blurred did those lines become that Queen Elizabeth enacted new sumptuary laws in 1597 intended “to prevent wealth from obscuring kinship rules that maintained the social hierarchy” (Armstrong 70).

Though women were gradually excluded from positions of prestige and responsibility in the public sphere, the textiles women made for the home and the family ironically began to assume more social importance, particularly for the growing middle class. Needlework became a genteel pastime, suitable only for women.

The rise of Protestant Christianity, particularly the puritanical denominations, firmly entrenched the idea of women as symbols of both the home and social and financial success. Central to Calvinist theology was the idea of a “calling” to God, and that an individual only found salvation through hard work and submission to God.
Morality was not innate: it had to be learned. Success in work, even in secular labour, became proof of an individual’s inner moral regulation and fitness for God’s forgiveness, and female piety was to be found in the management of a household and the social and fiscal management of the poorer classes. Christina Hardyment argues that the pre-industrial landowner’s household was a “centre of production, not of consumption,” where all women were responsible for everything from baking to making soap and candles”. Textile work in all its forms was an intrinsic part of household management. Clothing, bedding and other items always needed to be repaired and/or remade, which also intertwined it with both the ethics and politics of Puritanism. Because it required a woman to sit absolutely still for long periods of time, domestic textile making was thought to inculcate a submissive and docile manner (Lieb 36). And while the ability to make fine textile goods might provide evidence of the family’s financial success, plying a needle was also thought to instill piety, morality, self-discipline and silence in women, keeping them firmly away from gossip, idleness and particularly the business of the world. Most middle- and upper-class girls and women were expected to master a needle and thread and practice this craft daily, to the exclusion of all other things, including study, for too much education distracted a woman from domesticity (Armstrong 80-81).

*What* women made at home, for themselves and their families, by the dawn of industrialization, was also important to determining their class, financial circumstance, fitness for salvation and personal chastity, often through multiple layers of complex and competing ideologies. The more manual labour a woman did, the more roughened, callused and warped were her fingers. Fine (or “fancy”) needlework required dextrous hands and good eyesight as much as a generous income with which to purchase the
supplies and the time to practise the craft. When women began to be excluded from the newly professionalised guilds, amateur fine embroidery, netting and lace making became exclusive crafts, associated with aristocratic class, since those women had the soft, supple hands with which to handle fine silks and delicate needles. However, to the largely puritanical merchant classes, embroidery also symbolized the debauched and empty values of the aristocracy because it served no practical purpose: it was a frivolous and decorous pastime designed only to fill time (Lieb 32-33, Parker 139-46). While the ability to embroider and net might allow a middle-class woman to “pass” for a station above her own, only when needlework was made for the benefit of someone else and not for the pleasure of the self, did it become an acceptable form of female labour to the middle classes. “Plain” needlework like sewing, knitting and weaving were more often viewed as symbols of women’s morality and chastity, while embroidery was often considered a duplicitous art that gave women only the appearance of virtue.

By the eighteenth century textile making had multiple, contradictory meanings for women on both sides of the Atlantic that were reflected in the literature written about women. On the one hand, textile work was thought to instill virtuous conduct and moral fortitude in its practitioners. On the other, it was associated with the image of women as cunning seductresses. As Macheski points out, many of the male-authored works of the eighteenth century feature female characters who deliberately use their needlework either to protect their chastity or to give the appearance of it (87-92). Defoe’s *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724), Pope’s translation of Homer’s *The Odyssey* (1726), Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) all feature women who seek to make needlework a barrier to, or invitation for, sexual intercourse. In these works, the stillness
of the sewer or embroiderer seems to invite attention and interruption, while the head bent productively over a piece of needlework is misunderstood, misinterpreted and sexualized. While domestic work was valorized as appropriate women’s work, it was also demeaned and trivialized in newspapers, journals, sermons and magazines by both women and men as the only work that women could do. For many women, however, textile making was their only means of creative and artistic expression, and the silent head bent over textile work was deep in its own thoughts not often shared in the public sphere. Parker suggests that because most women wielded a needle instead of a pen, they left no written records of their attitudes towards the textiles that they made, but coded their resentment, rebellion and appreciation into the textiles themselves: “We cannot claim them as proto-feminists who stitched their heroines in conscious opposition to their ordained role…embroiderers throughout history were rarely in the vanguard of the fight for women’s rights – but it is in their work that we can see reflected the constraints and contradictions that drove women to speak out” (102). Embroidery (and by extension all the textile arts), she argues, signified both self-containment and submission.

Domestic textile making could also not be completely removed from exploitation in the public sphere. As the nineteenth century progressed, increasingly women authors were drawn into public discussions of the plight of women working in textile manufacturing. As Lynn Alexander points out, the figure of the seamstress became popular in Victorian fiction, appearing as the heroine in no fewer than twenty popular English works from 1840-1850, and becoming a commonplace in British, Canadian and American popular fiction to the end of the century (8). Alexander insists that the seamstress became a popular aesthetic figure in part because she was someone to whom
readers could respond: she represented the fear of the breakdown of the family and at the same time represented the potential fate of any virtuous, middle-class woman in an uncertain economic climate (9-11). Yet the overwhelming importance given to domestic needlework did not abate with the increasing concern for women at work in the textile industry or the calls for political and social reforms that accompanied this concern.

Rather, as Alexander also points out, idealized domesticity became the foil for the “slavery” and helplessness of paid female labour, which helped to extend and popularize the role of the middle-class domestic woman in regulating and reforming the labouring class (216-20).

Textile making could signify both social engagement and social isolation. While popular images of the needleworker in Victorian art and fiction depicted a woman at work alone, for women in isolated communities, particularly in Canada and the United States, textile work was their only means of contact with other women, and a necessary form of social engagement in a life of sometimes back-breaking farm labour. For some, isolation from the society of other women led to psychological breakdowns (Prentice et al. 124-26). For others, social engagement through textile work led to political engagement.

In colonial America not all women spun or wove and not all women lived on farms or needed to make cloth to survive. Total self-sufficiency in colonial households was a myth perpetuated in the late nineteenth century and very few households would have been able to provide enough fibre or spun yarn to fulfill their own clothing needs without imported cloth as well (Hood 129). However, spinning and weaving took on particular political significance in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when settlers in the colonies began to boycott English goods to force a repeal of the parliamentary taxes being levied
on them. Suddenly women who had never had an interest in textiles or household production saw it as a public good and political necessity. Women organized themselves within their churches and congregations, held spinning competitions and demonstrations and spun and wove for their neighbours and ailing families in need. Allied with their ministers, they began to promote what Laurel Thatcher Ulrich calls “a form of political resistance built upon sacrifice, self-discipline, and personal piety” in opposition to what was portrayed as a male model of speeches, dining, alcohol consumption and general debauchery (*Homespun* 183). By preaching industriousness and self-sufficiency, with themselves as the models, colonial women gave themselves a new vocal and central role in the organization of their churches and in charity work, which were the precursors to the anti-slavery, temperance, suffrage and labour movements of the nineteenth century (Ulrich, *Homespun* 181).

Despite the advances in machinery designed to quicken the process of spinning, weaving and knitting, industrialization did not actually take women that far from the act of making a textile until at least the period in between the two World Wars, when women began to work outside the home in larger and larger numbers. While, as Kortsch points out, increasing availability of ready-made clothing in the late nineteenth century meant that fewer women had to sew for themselves or to have clothing made by a seamstress or dressmaker (35), in Britain, the United States and particularly in Canada, most women continued to make children’s clothing and household articles, embroider church vestments and knit, quilt and sew for charity until the middle of the twentieth century because they were expected to do so. Sermons, magazines, stories, political speeches and other forms of media perpetuated the idea that a woman’s place was in the home and that
the appropriate labour for women was domestic textile work. Throughout the nineteenth century, women of all classes except those of the very upper echelons made and remade items. A silk dress could be turned inside out and remade, then turned into a blouse and a dress for a child, then turned into patchwork pieces for a quilt. The wool of a shawl, torn and matted, could be used to stuff a child’s toy or a warm woollen quilt. More often than not, however, the work they produced was superfluous to day-to-day life. Whether fire screens, purses, chair seats, slippers or collars, women produced a huge array of domestic goods, often more than could be used by one family. Many were sold in charity bazaars and fairs, distributed to extended family or exchanges as tokens of friendship or courtship.

When a woman refused to practice embroidery or sewing or knitting, or rejected the art in favour of books and writing, as did many first-wave feminists like Canadians Nellie McClung and Duncan, for example, it necessitated explanation and exculpation even into the first quarter of the twentieth century. In her autobiography, *Clearing in the West*, McClung discusses at length her interest in books and sports as a girl, and makes light of her inability to learn crochet or to sew as well as her sister Hannah, but she also makes a point of relating an anecdote about her early days of teaching. One of her small students asked McClung to make her a dress, a venture from which McClung boasts that “my fame was established as a dress-maker” (237). McClung, like many other educated women, must first prove that she can sew before she can dismiss the craft as arbitrary and unnecessary. Until the Second World War, all women were expected to practice some form of textile making: those who did not were usually considered aggressive, ambitious, negligent mothers and ultimately unfeminine. Women who did not sew or embroider or
knit by choice, made a point of showing the world that they could, but had chosen a different and perhaps more enlightened path.

John Hull, a professor of religion who lost his eyesight when he was 48, wrote an account of his blindness and described his experience of rain in the following way:

(It) has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience...presents the fullness of an entire situation all at once...gives a sense of perspective and of the actual relationships of one part of the world to another. (Hull, quoted in Sacks, 27)

His description of experiencing rain as a sightless man is not unlike that of a domestic seamstress describing her world through textiles. Domestic textile making, which was so richly “of the senses,” and which was so fully and completely a metaphor for life and death, a source of comfort while at the same time a forced activity, and a source of resentment and competition while at the same time central to women’s friendships and social exchanges, lent contours, continuity and fullness to stories of women’s lives. Many women understood themselves and their world through the fabric that was so much a part of their every day. As they made children’s dresses and patchwork quilts, knitted shawls and slippers, and embroidered fireplace screens and cushions, domestic textile making, for better or worse, informed their daily lives, their relationships, and the stories they told about themselves and their place in that world. Textiles became a kind of language, a language not of concrete visual symbols, but of sound and touch and taste and experience: the rustle of stiff silk across the floor, the callus formed by repeated use of an embroidery needle, and the pieces picked up and put down to tend to small children. Even women who did not produce finished textiles themselves were immersed in this world. Both
before and after Industrialization, textiles gave women a means through which to tell the stories they might not be able to relate otherwise.

It is not the assertion of this thesis that we should be specifically hunting and pillaging through women’s texts for textile references and assigning deep thematic and psychological meanings to every stitch. Rather, it is my contention that seemingly insignificant details of domestic textile work and the women performing this work have meaning and weight when placed against the larger tapestry that was (and is) women’s lives in the post-Industrial age. When read deeply and thoughtfully, images of textile making colour and nuance our readings of women’s texts, and link them together into a larger pattern of women’s writing. The issues of burgeoning sexuality and fragmented relationships between mother and daughter that Austen explores in *Mansfield Park* are not really far removed from the issues that Ostenso explores in *Wild Geese*.

The first chapter will focus on financial dependence, emotional independence and embroidery in *Mansfield Park*. Much as she does in *Persuasion*, Austen creates a world that depends almost entirely on seeing and appearances, where characters are constrained by social mores to appear as more – or less – than they are, and where many of the misunderstandings and failed love affairs are brought about by false appearances. Like Anne Elliot, Fanny Price is observant and quick to notice what goes on around her. However, Fanny is unique in her position within the household: she is a female dependent, the lowest, poorest and most ignored member of the family. She is also the hardest working female member of the household, at a time when women’s “work” almost always indicated needlework and was a visual marker for a woman’s taste, education and marriageability. Where her cousins are able to rely on the appearance of
being well-trained in needlework, however, Fanny is constantly at the beck and call of her aunts in the doing of it. Fanny’s needlework functions on multiple levels: it is how she pays back her relatives for their financial care and the employment to which she turns for succour and peace away from their incessant demands. In needlework she quells her resentment of dependence and fear for the future, and at that same time observes the resentment, fear, jealousy and betrayals of the rest of the family. It allows her to sit quietly unobserved and renders her completely visible. Fanny’s needlework at once reinforces eighteenth-century tropes about women and domesticity and at the same time subverts them.

Lieb argues that needlework was both normative and automatic, and that needlework was considered a “reliable signal of moral worth” (30, 33). Yet needlework was also deceptive: it was a front behind which a woman could conceal her ambitions for marriage, her sexuality and her overwhelming emotions. It also allowed women to be completely misread, assigning a woman a manipulativeness and sexual cunning that she might not have had. Needlework was often also symbolic of a fractured relationship between mothers and daughters. As Parker asserts, in the inculcation of feminine obedience and submission through needlework, a mother was preparing her daughter to subordinate herself to father and husband (129-32). Fanny, whom both Marilyn Francus and Elvira Casal argue suffers the most from a lack of “proper” mothering, is both read and misread through her needlework by her aunts, uncle, cousins, and potential suitor, Henry Crawford. A close reading of the needlework in Mansfield Park allows us to see how women are forced to shift, manipulate and refocus perceptions in order to be
“successful” by making good marriages, at the cost, often, of their own happiness and their relationships with other women.

The second chapter will examine Cranford and the relationships among older women not often at the centre of a literary work. Cranford’s depth is in the ways that older, childless women sustain and support each other through financial and emotional difficulties and how through those activities we get insight into older women’s inner emotional lives, at a time when older, single women were expected to stay within the private sphere. Many of those conflicting emotions find their outlet in textile making, particularly knitting and crochet, two crafts that also mirror what Anna Lepine argues is the Victorian middle-class spinster’s social status: constantly “slipping” between leisured class and working class (121). Lepine insists that contrary to prevailing notions of the spinster’s “place” in Victorian society, she had an “uncanny” ability to appropriate liminal, peripheral spaces for herself (122).

Talia Schaffer insists that although the novel is narrated by a seemingly reliable narrator in Mary Smith, the outsider-insider who appears to love the village and its inhabitants, Mary does not always appear to see fully into the hearts and minds of the older women she professes to love: “She insists that Matty Jenkyns has a transparently simple emotional life, constructing Matty as an adorably dignified little companion who trots about busily” (224). While I agree that Mary’s narration is not always reliable, I will argue that it has an agenda. Mary’s intent is to prove the rights of the older, childless woman to both a purpose and place within Victorian society. Knitting and crochet were domestic, feminine and appropriately middle-class pursuits, yet they were also portable crafts that could be done at any time and any place, even in the semi-darkness. Where
knitting offers comforting stability to Miss Matty, to Mary and especially to Miss Pole, who knits and crochets around the periphery of Cranford, these crafts allow them to closely observe the village at large. This gives them each a latent power – that of village secrets – that redefines the rules of older woman visibility.

The third chapter will examine Sara Jeannette Duncan’s *A Social Departure* against Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* to look more closely at women’s complex and often ambiguous responses to domestic textile work, and the effects that these had on their relationships with one another. As the nineteenth century progressed, doctrines about women, class and domesticity became more and more ingrained, despite women’s changing roles both inside and outside the home. While Ann Romines argues that this period of “oppressively separate spheres” generated a tradition of literature by women consumed with the “home plot,” this chapter is going to closely examine two novels that attempt to break out of the domestic sphere (*Home* 292-93). If, as Romines insists, the woman reader encounters herself through written accounts of domestic ritual “staring back from a dangerous, complex female past which has become, by art, profoundly felt life,” how do we respond when domestic culture is removed to the periphery of the action (*Home* 16)? What happens when a woman refuses to perform to the norms of marriage and motherhood? What arises out of that refusal? What is the cost of female independence?

*A Social Departure* steps out of the domestic sphere through travel. Both the narrator, known only as S.J.D., and Orthodocia remain single throughout the voyage, although the more conventional Orthodocia becomes engaged to Jack Love by their arrival in England. With the exception of one occasion, S.J.D. and Orthodocia do no
sewing or needlework, though they betray an intimate knowledge of fabric, embroidery and the construction of clothes. S.J.D. uses her knowledge of textiles to prove, like Nellie McClung, her right to a middle-class respectability and moral authority, but she also disparages what she considers “empty” female lives consumed with needlework at the expense of larger social and political issues and the sanctimonious morality behind such causes as temperance and dress reform. Needlework becomes the basis for S.J.D.’s often stinging criticisms of other women, from Jack’s quilting chaperone to the nameless housewives who organize and supply craft bazaars, extending even to Orthodocia herself.

*The Awakening*, which begins and ends in a vacation setting on Grand Isle, also reshapes domestic space. The women who spend their summers on Grand Isle spend much of their time, both indoors and outdoors and in both public and private spaces, engaged in needlework. Edna is almost always surrounded by other Creole women who knit and sew for their children, particularly Adèle Ratignolle, Edna’s friend and confidante. Yet though she occasionally helps to cut out patterns, Edna never plans her sons’ wardrobes or worries about making them clothes. Her rejection of domestic textile making becomes symbolic of her rejection of motherhood, and at the same time a repudiation of the cloistered female world of Grand Isle and the social protection and emotional support that it has the potential to offer. Feeling perpetually an outsider to the domestic sphere and going so far as to move out of her husband’s house, Edna struggles to find an identity for herself outside of middle-class motherhood. Emily Blair argues that the nature of nineteenth-century concern with domesticity was double-edged: it associated the successful maintenance of the home with elevated spirituality, while at the same focusing on the untidy connections among women, literature, conduct and
housekeeping (5-12). Both *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening* question what it means to be a woman in a culture that sees marriage, motherhood and domestic femininity as the automatic culmination of a female life. They show how women absorb and reiterate what Joyce W. Warren calls the “discursive forces” that defined gender in the nineteenth century (146). More importantly they reveal the fissures and inconsistencies in how this plays out in women’s relationships to one another: in S.J.D. and Edna’s eagerness to disassociate themselves from the tyranny and boredom of domestic textile making, they sometimes miss the rich cooperative potential of female friendships *as well as* the isolation, naiveté and judgement of this female world.

The fourth chapter will examine Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* and female sexuality. Like *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening*, *Wild Geese* explores the corrosive yet ultimately redemptive nature of Barber’s “courtyard sisterhood,” this time from within the suffocating confines of a family farm. As almost every critic of the novel has noted, the Gares are isolated, both mentally and physically, and Ostenso’s descriptions of the physical landscape in (and with) which they interact are central to our understanding of their conflicting motivations and troubled relationships. Yet while many critics emphasize Ostenso’s rendering of physical *place*, that of the interlake district of Manitoba, they either ignore or downplay Ostenso’s sense of emotional *space* and her gendering of the hidden valleys and secretive fields around the farm. In *Wild Geese*, Ostenso’s “natural” world is intimate, tactile, sensual, powerful, and decidedly feminine. Her descriptions of the landscape are mediated through textile metaphors and images of women making that are equally intimate and sensual, and that in turn sew the landscape closely to the female characters, particularly Ostenso’s protagonist, Jude. While the few
critics who have taken on the novel focus on the conflict between Jude and her cruel, controlling father, I am going to argue that the power at the centre of the novel actually lies with Jude’s emotionally abused mother, Amelia.

The novel delves into the nascent sexuality of Jude and the frustrated middle-aged desires of her mother, Amelia, in a community where woman is pitted against woman. Amelia vacillates between her need to protect the first-born son she bore out of wedlock and the desire to protect her four children with Caleb. As Jude makes plans to leave the farm, Amelia allows Caleb to manipulate and control Jude’s future in a desperate attempt to keep Mark Jordan from learning the truth of his parentage. Parker argues that even into the twentieth century, needlework had two faces for women: confinement and comfort (3). Amelia pours into her quilting and knitting anxiety, guilt and loneliness, but refuses to share any of this with her daughters to bulwark herself against any sympathetic feelings for them. As in Mansfield Park, where women are read and misread through their appearance at needlework, in Wild Geese Amelia’s needlework represents the sensitivity and fineness of mind that Amelia shares in common with Jude, and the neglectful mothering that keeps Jude and her siblings physically and mentally yoked to the farm and emotionally divided from one another. It is only through cooperation and understanding that Jude and Amelia finally escape the confines of patriarchal authority.

It is tempting to want to see in these novels either submission or subversion to dominant discourses about women and domestic femininity, but women’s lives were always more complex than this. For generations of women textile-making was a language that spoke of artisanship, creativity and the pride of the maker and at the same time of isolated lives and frugal living, urban poverty, class, domesticity and motherhood, thrift
and “making do,” identity and belonging, community, and emigration and dispersal. For all five authors, images of textiles and textile making allow them to speak to issues that were usually only discussed within a community of women: sexuality, desire, aging, marriage, motherhood, women’s friendships, financial dependence and identity. In all five works, textile making forms a kind of subversive language and an essentially female counterdiscourse which “talks back” to the power structures that marginalize women, and which gives a compelling insight into the material and emotional circumstances of women’s lives. Yet in all five novels women are often complicit in the ways that their horizons, and those of other women, remain limited. This thesis will show not only how each author uses images of textile making, but how each work is linked back to the others.
Chapter 2 “The perfect model of a woman”: Embroidery, Appearance and Subterfuge in *Mansfield Park*

The third of the four novels published during Jane Austen’s lifetime, *Mansfield Park* deals the most intimately with female financial and psychological dependence and the tangled complexities of class and marriage. The protagonist, Fanny Price, is the oldest daughter of Frances (Ward) Price. Frances is the niece of a lawyer, but has married down and out of the class of her birth. Her sister, Lady Bertram, on the other hand, has married upwards, to a gentleman with a landed estate. With nine children to feed and an improvident spouse, Mrs. Price agrees to send Fanny to be raised by the Bertrams in the relative privilege of their country home. The Bertrams promise, at the same time, to support Fanny’s brother, William, through his early naval career. At Mansfield Park, however, though she is housed, fed and educated, Fanny is also never allowed to forget that she is a dependent. She works essentially as an unpaid servant and companion. She fetches and carries for the indolent Lady Bertram, and is scolded and used by her other aunt, Mrs. Norris. She has no choice. In Regency society, where unmarried women have no property rights and women are trapped by class status, she can neither recommend herself as a paid governess nor hire herself out even as a servant to another family without the permission or recommendation of her aunt and uncle. She is constantly reminded that she is not of the same class as her cousins, with the rights of neither daughter nor servant. As long as the Bertrams live a retired life, she has no way of meeting others, making her own female friends, or appearing to society without their support.
While as a female dependent she has few rights under English Common Law, Fanny’s thoughts and desires are her own. Though she runs errands and aids her aunts without complaint and is largely obedient and retiring, she refuses to yield when a request crosses her personal sense of right and wrong. Fanny steadfastly refuses to take part in performing the play, “The Lovers’ Vows,” in her uncle’s absence because she is certain that he would disapprove. Fanny, however, also disobeys her uncle when he all but orders her to marry Henry Crawford, in part because of her own undeclared love for her cousin, Edmund Bertram, but also because she is convinced of Henry’s previous improper advances to Maria Bertram and immoral lifestyle. Each of her refusals costs her in the short term. Refusing to take part in the play causes Mrs. Norris to castigate Fanny thoroughly and publicly and puts her in the painful position of having to watch Edmund rehearse love scenes with Mary Crawford. In declining Henry, Fanny gives up her first and possibly best chance for the financial security of marriage, and has to endure being thought ungrateful and disobedient to her uncle and aunt. Fanny is trapped by her utter dependence, with no hope of earning her way, as her brother does, or marrying without her uncle’s approval.

*Mansfield Park* is a contradictory novel, with a complex, self-conscious and sometimes ambiguous heroine whom many critics have found difficult to like. Marian Fowler goes so far as to call the novel the “ugly duckling” of Austen’s oeuvre and an embarrassment to Austen (153). Like Austen’s slightly older heroine, Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, Fanny is largely silent and nearly invisible in the presence of others, yet many of the reader’s insights into (and judgements of) the characters of the novel are mediated through Fanny’s astute and close observations of them. Like Anne, Fanny
moves in and out of the family circle without truly being a part of it, and because of this, is able to see emotions and exchanges among the others that are missed by the rest of the family. Both Fanny and Anne are disregarded, used indiscriminately by their families because of their complaisance, and appear submissive in the face of opposition. Unlike Anne, however, Fanny is sensitive, timorous and always fearful of being the centre of attention. While part of this appears to be a facet of her character, she has also endured years of being told in every possible way that she is not an equal and must be grateful for everything she is given. Fanny is fearful of her uncle and always quick to acknowledge the tremendous debt she owes the Bertrams for taking her in. Yet under the surface of Fanny’s reticence is also pent-up passion, resentment and even anger. She begrudges Mary’s presence in Edmund’s life and is inclined to an emotional, though silent, response whenever Edmund’s ambitions or interests appear to be insulted or questioned, or when Edmund appears taken in by Henry or Mary. Though she loves him, Fanny herself often appears blind to Edmund’s faults and a little hypocritical in her judgement of others. As many critics have noted, although Mansfield Park deals directly with the themes of female rebellion and independence, Fanny’s ultimate marriage to Edmund and Maria and Mrs. Norris’ banishment from Mansfield Park appear to reinforce traditional images of female subservience to male authority and punishment for improper behaviour (Gordon 90-94, Stewart 132-33, Francus).

Because of these contradictions, Mansfield Park and Fanny Price are the source of much argument within Austen criticism. Is Mansfield Park a reiteration of the conservative and traditional understanding of women’s lives or a criticism of it? Is Fanny parroting conventional female morality or does she subvert it? Most critics tend to view
Fanny’s silence and submissiveness as alternately sly and manipulative or naïve and sheltered; rarely is she given credit for her own thoughts and feelings. Janet Todd has argued that “Fanny Price has been revered and hated by critics; for some she is the arch prig-pharisee, for others the truly Christian heroine” (246). Todd is in the former camp: for her, Fanny often “appears viciously mean-spirited; emotionally powerful, she frequently thrives on weakness” (247). Other critics praise Fanny as the moral centre of *Mansfield Park* but note that she is hypocritical in some of her moral judgements (Savage, Beard). Mary Chan argues that Fanny, unlike other Austen heroines, “does not experience a major epiphany that significantly alters her character,” nor does she mature emotionally in the course of the novel (Chan). Recent feminist criticism tends to label Fanny the product of a patriarchal and imperialist society without insight into herself or agency of her own (Choi 110, Sturrock 176, Edelman 50). Nora Nachumi argues that Fanny’s limited perspective makes her blind to her own motivations: “Fanny…cannot distinguish between her own sense of self and her role as Sir Thomas’s best daughter” (170). Nachumi, like many contemporary critics, believes that Fanny internalizes the very system of values that the novel appears to condemn.

What is remarkable about *Mansfield Park*, however, is that the central heroine is an unmarried female and indigent family dependent, the character most often abused in literature as silly, helpless or interfering. The reader is given access into the conflicted desires of a woman who is at the very bottom of a familial and social hierarchy, and who occupies a grey area somewhere between family and servant, without any of the privileges of either camp. Most critics forget that Fanny has no rights at all. Her emotional and physical needs will always come last to both her aunts, who are both
supremely selfish. Neither can she depend on Edmund, who tends to forget her existence when in the throes of his first real love affair. Fanny neither earns a wage, nor is she a “Miss Bertram,” as Sir Thomas insists at the beginning of the novel (7). She has no money of her own and is entirely dependent on the goodwill of Sir Thomas or Edmund for everything from a frank for letters to her brother to the clothing on her back. Without Sir Thomas’ introduction into society, Fanny’s future would likely be one of retired subservience at the beck and call of her relatives, with the constant threat that she will be sent away. She has not even the money to return home to the family of her birth without financial help. Austen’s focus on the most invisible and silent member of a household is remarkable for its time and place.

The most significant instances of the reader’s access into Fanny’s heart and mind occur when Fanny is bent over her work, the textile-making activities of embroidery, sewing and netting that form the major portion of her day and are also the product of her position as a dependent female. In a novel that is concerned with appearances and observation, visibility and invisibility, Fanny’s hands form a unique counterpoint to much of the story. Fanny’s work is her refuge from emotion, a regulator and tranquilizer for her mind and heart. It is where she hides to avoid emotional scenes with others, particularly Edmund and Mary. It is where she thinks over her observations and organizes her mind. It is where she goes to hide her dislike of the unwanted attentions of Mary, Henry, and even her own birth family. Yet the image of Fanny’s hands and head bent productively over her embroidery (or more often, the work of Lady Bertram) is also where she becomes most visible, and where her feelings and intentions are most likely to be misread. To them she appears silent, pliable and obedient, yet it sometimes takes all the
concentration of her needlework to make her so. Though Fanny often meditates over her needlework, sometimes she is forced to leave off and seek physical activity in order to calm her emotions. Fanny’s appearance at her needlework reinforces eighteenth-century tropes about women and domesticity, but her hands also subvert many of these same ideas. Though Austen seems to create in Fanny a morally superior woman and an ideal against which to place the faults of the other women, Fanny is more like Maria Bertram, Mary Crawford and her aunt Norris in both circumstance and appearances than is evident on the surface. All four women are forced to hide their true natures behind a mask of domestic femininity. All have their intentions, needs and emotions misread by the men in their lives, to their own cost. For all four women, needlework creates an image of conventional womanhood that is at odds with the complexities of their lives and relationships to one another.

As Clair Hughes points out in her treatment of dress in Northanger Abbey, there are few precise descriptions of textile in Austen’s novels and only very small references to women’s needlework with almost no specifics (Dressed 24). Yet needlework formed a significant part of Austen’s world and the work of women’s hands informs much of the backdrop to her novels. Women were expected to supplement their wardrobes and household necessities with the products of their fingers and women of the middle and upper-middle classes, whether of the gentry or merchant stock, all sewed, embroidered, made lace and crocheted. In the Regency period, though dresses, coats and some millinery would have been made by a local dressmaker, men’s shirts and cravats, children’s garments and any number of accessories would have been made at home, by the women of the family (Byrde 14, Wass). Austen’s surviving correspondence with her
sister, Cassandra, is littered with an abundance of information about dresses, sewing, embroidery and netting, with close attention paid to the gap between the need for garments and the expense of buying and keeping them (Byrde 12-30, Ford 218, Lieb 31). This work, the constant making, remaking and refashioning of textile items, occupies much of Austen’s correspondence and would have been a daily, if not hourly, part of Austen’s life, as it is for her female characters. While there have been several studies of textile in the workplace and the role of clothing in Austen’s world, the domestic textile work that pervades Austen’s fiction has been given almost no attention by critics apart from Laurie Lieb’s and Cecilia Macheski’s 1986 treatments of needle imagery and conceptions of virtue in eighteenth-century women’s writing.

As Lieb points out, the word “work” would have held a number of contradictory meanings for a girl of Fanny’s status. In a text today, the word “work” would usually suggest the expenditure of effort or exertion to a purpose, usually for some form of payment (OED). As a verb, “to work” most often denotes the engagement in bodily or mental work or to make efforts for a cause (OED). Yet “work” and “employment” meant very different occupations for men and women in the early nineteenth century. Men of all social positions worked for some form of payment, whether a wage or the maintenance of an estate. They were expected to do so, for they were expected to support, not only their wives and children, but also unmarried sisters, parents and any other vulnerable female member of the extended family. However, labour was primarily associated with the manual or lower middle classes and work for a man of the upper classes was not considered or spoken of in the same terms. In Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas Bertram is a landed gentleman and a baronet (although there are some critics who argue that he is a
member of the “pseudo-gentry,” David Spring’s name for the group of clergymen, upper professionals, army officers and great merchants living in the country, with social or kinship connections to the landed classes and aspirations to the style of life enjoyed by the landed classes (59-63)). While his financial concerns are not as large as the estates of Mr. Rushworth, in addition to managing the family’s English property Sir Thomas also receives an income from a plantation in the West Indies, one which requires him, early in the novel, to voyage there to address some pressing concerns. As a landed gentleman, Sir Thomas would probably deny that this is labour in the same manner as his uncle-in-law’s law profession. It is more likely that he would term what he does as employment: it gives his life purpose, accomplishment and usefulness, while protecting the interests of his family, servants, and any labourers or residents on his estates. Yet much of his life revolves around his business. Moreover, when at last he gets to know his prospective son-in-law, Mr. Rushworth, Sir Thomas’ disappointment stems as much from Mr. Rushworth’s lack of business sense as from his lack of book learning (160).

For women “work” was fraught with social, moral and financial tensions, both seen and unseen. Both Lieb and Macheski insist that the word “work” (both as noun and verb) was always a short form for “needlework.” Needlework is a very general term for any operation performed with a needle, such as embroidery, knitting, crochet, some lace work, or sewing and was often divided into subcategories of “plain work” or “fancy work” (“needlework” Fairchild 382). The kind of needlework performed by a woman varied according to her station and social and financial circumstances. Plain work was practical and everyday sewing, like the shirts and collars Fanny and Susan sew for their brother, Sam, or the clothing that Fanny and Mrs. Norris sew for the village poor box. It
was the work that almost every woman except those of the very upper echelons had in her hands from toddlerhood. As Ann Buermann Wass points out, shirts, shifts, nightdresses and petticoats were relatively loose in fit, and geometric in shape. They could be quickly and easily made by women working at home. In contrast, fancy work was the work that women aspired to. It denoted leisure and fine materials, and the time, taste and education to create elegant finished embroideries, purses or fire screens. “Work” in both senses of the term, however, was thought of as a passive activity that was the opposite of “employment.” Needlework was meant to pass the time and fill space, keep women passive and silently occupied, prove their moral superiority and display their femininity and virtue (Lieb 36-37). “Employment” was considered the more active word; it required one to go and seek it, and required robustness and direct mental and emotional engagement.

By 1800 needlework was the most frequent form of paid employment for women outside of domestic service (Wilson 165-67; Parker 15). A woman who sought paid employment, however, whether as a domestic servant, governess, companion, seamstress or milliner, was vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse, particularly if she was single. She was also vulnerable to the suggestion that she was sexual: the very act of working for pay called her morality into question. Chloe Wigston Smith argues that the act of purchasing, selling or producing clothes was tinged with sexual implications, and milliners and dressmakers were often the targets of upper-class men looking for sexual partners (162). At the same time, a woman without family, and particularly without male protection, had few choices available to her and almost all of them unpalatable: she could take in sewing or laundry at home; she could work as a servant; she could work in one of
the many textile-making factories of the Industrial Revolution; or she could sell her body. As Smith points out, eighteenth-century literature is filled with examples of sexuality that are closely intertwined with textile production, where millinery shops serve as fronts for brothels and dressmakers as courtesans (162-63).

While women and girls of the labouring classes could and did work extensively for pay in the textile trades as producers of wool and flax, hand and machine spinners, weavers, milliners and dressmakers, for a girl born to the middle classes, like Fanny, to number among their ranks would have been considered the worst kind of degradation, and it would indicate that her family had fallen far down the social ladder. Fanny would have been trapped, as Copeland suggests, “between the demands of genteel station and the demands of economic survival” (167). The irony, however, is that while Fanny cannot legitimately go out to seek employment like her brother, William, without bringing criticism upon herself and shame on her family, she ends up labouring as an unpaid servant to her two aunts (Stewart 122-27; Copeland 167-71). Fanny’s needlework is part and parcel of that labour.

The work performed by the women in Mansfield Park is not exchanged for payment, nor is it considered serious employment in the more active sense of the word. Yet for each of them, and especially for Fanny, Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram, this textile work has a function within the hierarchy of the family and the larger society outside their walls. Needlework was considered an important female accomplishment, and girls of the middle and upper classes were expected to embroider and sew from an early age, as well as paint, draw, sing and play an instrument, as Charles Bingley suggests in Pride and Prejudice: “They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I
scarcely know any one who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time without being informed that she was very accomplished” (PP 28). Needlework advertised a young woman’s marriageability and proved a married woman’s ability to manage a household. As Lieb points out, the frequent use of the word “work” for needlework shows how pervasive and normative was the expectation that women would perform needlework as a part of their daily activities (30). From the 1780s on, there was an exponential increase in the publication of books and magazines that laid out sewing and fine embroidery patterns and instructions and reiterated how those skills developed female respectability and moral character (Burman 37). Women exchanged patterns, kits and finished needlework as gifts and were expected to bring their work to social visits between women. At Mansfield Park, Lady Bertram, like her neighbour, Mrs. Grant, embroiders and makes yards of fringe, Mrs. Norris sews clothing for charity and makes her own household goods, while Fanny aids her aunts with their work in addition to her own “works of charity and ingenuity” (123). Mary Crawford, Maria Bertram and Julia Bertram, on the other hand, are not described as doing any textile work at all, although Mary does comment at one point on the fineness of Fanny’s work and begs for the pattern (120), and there is at least one poor example of Julia’s work at Mansfield Park (124).

What each woman does or does not do is pertinent to our understanding of her character and habits and indicates her social and financial position within the hierarchy of both family and community. Moreover, what each one does (or, significantly, does not do) shows her moral standing as well. Needlework was the subject of much public argument toward the end of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, Parker argues, habits of
industry had always been thought to give women a strength and dignity of character and
giving oneself airs was considered a cardinal sin within the middle classes (153). Plain
sewing was taught to all young women and girls at almost all levels of society, in schools,
in parish-run activities, by mothers and by governesses. It was considered good, honest
“work” that created humble, pious and calm women (Lieb 32-33).

At the same time, fancy work was often derided as an empty and sedentary pleasure, designed to enhance the embroiderer’s appearance to others while also often compromising women’s physical health. Women themselves were often divided as to how needlework should fit into a woman’s life, especially in terms of class. To be feminine was to be seen to be leisured, to emulate the aristocratic ideal and to show off the familial position in society (Parker 113). It offered, as Lieb points out, an opportunity for women to explore creative expression and immerse themselves in an art form (36).

Yet fancy work was always tainted by an aristocratic immorality. Where Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, argued that fancy work made women of the upper classes “insipid,” she insisted at the same time that plain work done for the family’s needs rendered women of the labouring classes virtuous and dutiful (Wollstonecraft 125). Hannah More insisted, in contrast, that fancy work was an acceptable pastime for middle-class women when it was done in the right spirit. When it was designed to enhance the home and made to benefit the family, textile work in all its forms had the potential to reveal a woman’s inner moral regulation, an opinion that Parker argues became ingrained in society by the time of Wollstonecraft’s death:

Wollstonecraft was defeated on her own ground. She argued that the middle class should abandon embroidery for it made them sickly and self-absorbed, and thus unfit for motherhood. More and Edgeworth claimed that embroidery practised in the right spirit made women into
selfless, domestic beings and thus ideal mothers. The great upsurge of embroidery in the nineteenth century performed in the name of love (of home and husband) reveal whose arguments carried the day. (143)

Where women had originally stitched to assert their own virtue and worth to society, by the early nineteenth century needlework was entrenched in the argument that femininity had the power to evoke virtue, morality and spirituality in others (Parker 144).

Increasingly, there was pressure for needlework to reflect those external values, and performing needlework, particularly fancy work, simply for the pleasure of making, was considered selfish, immoral and impious. Above all, the middle-class woman was expected to be a domestic manager, in charge of the house, raising and educating dutiful children, employing her servants and clothing her household (Burman and White 42).

Fancy needlework could only be enfolded into this image of femininity when it was done for someone else’s benefit: a pair of slippers for a husband, an embroidered scene for the family parlour, or a hanging for the church. Needlework was supposed to be “a reliable signal of moral worth,” where women were characterized by the type of needlework they did and for whom they did it (Lieb 33).

Needlework, both the finished product and the action of making it, was designed to be seen. What women made, how it was made and for whom governed how a woman was to be observed, categorized and judged by society at large. It covered deficiencies of character and gave to the undiscerning the appearance of substantiveness. It proved social worth where a family’s social position was unstable, and proved one’s femininity at a time where correct female behaviour cemented a family’s place within the social hierarchy. Yet to a close female observer, needlework also revealed as much as it concealed.
Lady Bertram is described as knotting fringe and doing “carpet work,” which Byrde describes as “silk or wool embroidery on a canvas ground,” popular in this time period for household furnishings such as hangings, coverings and valances (MP 144; Byrde 30). Like knotting fringe, which was a popular pastime in the early nineteenth century, carpet work was considered relatively simple work, often bought in kits (Lieb 34). Lady Bertram embroiders throughout the novel, but frequently requires Fanny to do the boring, preparatory work in “tacking on” the pattern, which was to transfer the embroidery design onto the canvas, using tissue paper and tacking stitches (18). She also needs Fanny to untangle her silk embroidery threads and fix her mistakes (102, 103, 177, 240). Moreover, she is often content to let Fanny do most of the work, while she takes the credit for its completion (103).

Lady Bertram’s needlework reveals much about her status and character. Lady Bertram, though her own fortune is small, has married very “well.” She is financially secure, has servants to take care of her own needs and those of the family, and she has provided two sons to inherit her husband’s estate (an heir and a “spare” in the event of the eldest son’s death). That heir will also, conceivably, take care of her financial needs in the event of her husband’s death. Indeed, Lady Bertram considers the real “work” of her life (marrying well and producing a son) to be done and her needlework is all for show rather than out of necessity or inner morality, as the narrator implies: “She was a woman who spent her days sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children” (14-15). Lady Bertram’s natural inclination is to selfish indolence and her embroidery is what she does to fill her time. She does not apply herself particularly hard to it, and the
finished product is neither attractive nor useful, epithets that can be applied to Lady Bertram’s inner worth as well. Though in and of themselves harmless amusements, Lady Bertram’s carpet work and fringe betray both the class of her birth and her own moral character: it is simple work designed to cement her place as the “lady of the manor” without the upper-class education, breeding or taste to aspire to finer embroidery or the middle-class value in hard work and domestic management. The link between Lady Bertram’s embroidery with her interest in her dress and lack of interest in her children suggests that she likes to appear to do the right thing, while seldom concerning herself with the actual work of doing it.

Mrs. Norris, in contrast, has all the energy her sister lacks, but no fortune. The eldest of the three sisters and the last to be married, she is subsequently dependent on her sister’s husband for a family living during her husband’s lifetime and remains dependent on Sir Thomas after her husband’s death for her accommodation (1, 17). She has no children, and there is no indication that she has any relationship with her husband’s family, and because of this, her future is not as financially secure as her sister’s is. However, whether Mrs. Norris is by temperament naturally thrifty or whether it was simply thrust on her by circumstance, she is also frugal almost to extremes:

As far as walking, talking and contriving reached, she was thoroughly benevolent, and nobody knew better how to dictate liberality to others; but her love of money was equal to her love of directing, and she knew quite as well how to save her own as to spend that of her friends. Having married on a narrower income than she had been used to look forward to, she had, from the first, fancied a very strict line of economy necessary; and what was begun as a matter of prudence, soon grew into a matter of choice. (5)

Like her sister, Mrs. Norris likes to give the appearance of doing the right thing, and likes to be thought generous, but her appearance is at odds with what she actually does.
Mrs. Norris boasts of her hard work repeatedly: clothing for the poor-basket (the basket of fabric supplied by wealthier patrons like the Bertrams for the district’s poorer inhabitants and sewn by the women of the household, often the servants) (57-58), the curtain for the ill-omened play (106) and Mr. Rushworth’s costume cloak (135). The results of that work tend to reveal the impulse behind it as both selfish and self-aggrandizing, however. When the baize (a loosely woven cotton or wool, closely resembling felt) curtain remains unused for the theatrical performance, Mrs. Norris rescues it for her own house: “The curtain over which she had presided with such talent and such success, went off with her to her cottage, where she happened to be particularly in want of green baize” (157). That she chooses this particular fabric and colour deliberately so that she can inherit it when it is no longer needed for the theatre, while passing the expense to one of her nieces or nephews, is very likely. Mrs. Norris is always concerned with economy, even when she sews, and her greatest pride is when she can save inches in the cutting out of her fabric (106). Moreover, though Mrs. Norris boasts of her work, she is never actually described as sewing. The housemaids sew the curtain and Mrs. Norris directs Fanny reproachfully to sew both the clothing for the poor basket and Mr. Rushworth’s cloak:

“Come Fanny,” she cried, “these are fine times for you, but you must not be always walking from one room to the other and doing the lookings on, at your ease, in this way, - I want you here. - I have been slaving myself till I can hardly stand, to contrive Mr. Rushworth’s cloak without sending for any more satin; and now I think you may give me your help in putting it together. – There are but three seams, you may do them in a trice. – It would be lucky for me if I had nothing but the executive part to do. – You are the best off, I can tell you; but if nobody did more than you, we should not get one very fast.” (MP 135)
Here, though she boasts of all her “slaving” to cut out the fabric, she leaves the drudgery of the sewing to Fanny. Though Mrs. Norris is vocal in her assertions of virtuous labour for the benefit of others, the reality is quite the opposite. Mrs. Norris, like her sisters, works only for her own benefit.

Mrs. Norris, however, though opinionated, quarrelsome and cheap, is at least industrious where both her sisters incline to inactivity. Mrs. Price, like Lady Bertram, makes herself busy without any regard to the results of that busyness:

Of her two sisters, Mrs. Price very much more resembled Lady Bertram than Mrs. Norris. She was a manager by necessity, without any of Mrs. Norris’s inclination for it, or any of her activity. Her disposition was naturally easy and indolent, like Lady Bertram’s; and a situation of similar affluence and do-nothing-ness would have been much more suited to her capacity, than the exertions and self-denials of the one, which her imprudent marriage had placed her in. She might have made just as good a woman of consequence as Lady Bertram, but Mrs. Norris would have been a more respectable mother of nine children, on a small income. (MP 317)

Mrs. Norris, by personality and necessity, is an organized and efficient manager where her two sisters are not. At the same time, there is the suggestion that Mrs. Norris’ skills have not been put to the use that would have rendered them palatable and even admirable to her family and to the larger society. As simply a wife and widow, her emphasis on thrift and making-do renders her miserly and selfish; as a mother, that same talent would have appeared respectable and even admirable (Ford 218, Parker 8-9). Conduct books of the eighteenth and nineteenth century often chastised women of the poorer classes for their want of economic management and economy, and insisted it was the work of middle-class women to show them how to cultivate a “thrifty disposition” (The Workwoman’s Guide v). By the same token, Lady Bertram’s indolence and lack of concern for her children only appear respectable because of her fortune: without it, she
would be castigated by society for her lack of housewifely skill and husbandry (as her sister, Mrs Price, is).

Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Norris’ successor as minister’s wife, appears to be more akin to Lady Bertram than Mrs. Norris both in terms of financial status and activity. On the day that Mary’s harp is first brought out and played, she is described as doing tambour embroidery, a form of fine stitchery popular in the Georgian period (Potter 36-7). Done with a small hook onto cotton or silk fabric, tambour was relatively easy to learn. It required only one stitch, did not require much concentration, and it was possible to achieve elaborate shading and imagery with it quite quickly. Like Lady Bertram, Mrs. Grant relies on servants for her housekeeping and keeps a cook, a circumstance that makes Mrs. Norris judge her to be a social climber, since she does not appear to run her household to its best economic advantage (24). Unlike both Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, however, Mrs. Grant is genuinely kind, albeit with a caveat. She has “pleasant manners and cheerful conformity,” “a temper to love and be loved” and “happiness of disposition” and she genuinely cares about her half-sister (139, 383). Yet Mrs. Grant is almost too compliant: she does not see the need to temper her half-sister’s self-interest, does not distinguish in Henry’s appearance of good manners his selfishness, nor does she demur out of moral objection when asked to take part in the play. The needlework of Mrs. Grant suggests that she likes to do the right thing, likes her life easy and pleasant, and is also not inclined to think terribly deeply on serious subjects or push herself creatively.

Much of Mansfield Park rests on appearances: how we govern those appearances for the public eye, and particularly on how women must rely on those appearances in pursuit of an eligible marriage. Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, Mrs. Grant and even Mrs.
Price are aware of the role of needlework in the projection of feminine virtue, and the male members of their families, not acquainted with the finer details of needlework, tend to read their behaviour and inner characters by what they see that aligns with public discourses about needlework. Sir Thomas, for example, ascribes to Mrs. Norris a finer understanding and stronger sense of right and wrong in part because of her officious busywork. Mrs. Norris is absolutely aware of this, and uses it to her benefit. When Fanny’s brother William arrives for a visit midway through the novel and settles in at his uncle’s behest to relate his experiences at sea, Mrs. Norris tries to control the evening’s discourse through her machinations with needle and thread: “With such means in his power he had a right to be listened to; and though Mrs. Norris could fidget about the room, and disturb every body in quest of two needlefulls of thread or a second hand shirt button in the midst of her nephew’s account of a shipwreck or an engagement, every body else was attentive…” (190). Mrs. Norris tries to dominate the room by actively employing sewing as a weapon. A woman who sews is *supposed* to be morally superior to a woman who does nothing but embroider. In this instance, however, the work that is supposed to keep her silently occupied becomes an aggressive act. Needlework becomes a means through which Mrs. Norris asserts her power, to say in gesture what she knows she cannot say openly.

Yet how Mrs. Norris proceeds and what she does *not* do also says much about her morality, femininity and particularly her limitations as a mother figure. Parker argues that needlework practised “in the right spirit” was supposed to turn women into selfless mothers who valued hard work and piety and who in turn taught those skills to their daughters (143). Burman likewise insists that “women were expected to develop and
reproduce themselves as managers of their domestic economies” (43). Mrs. Norris, who has not had her own children, is jealous of any attention paid to Fanny, believing it always at the expense of her favourite niece, Maria. Yet that jealousy also prevents her from transmitting her own sense of work to Maria or Julia, and her favouritism blinds her to the faults in Maria’s character. The failure of the mothers becomes a prevailing theme in *Mansfield Park*: Lady Bertram’s indolence fails to check Maria’s sense of consequence and Julia’s jealous capriciousness, Mrs. Price is blind to her youngest daughter’s wildness and Mrs. Grant does not find fault with Mary’s social ambitions. As Francus points out, everyone feels the effects of bad or negligent mothering, not just Fanny. The failure to mould and nurture the younger women in the novel has potentially tragic consequences that ultimately lead to Maria’s failed marriage and social ostracism. It also raises the question of needlework’s ambiguous and contradictory role in both determining and representing a woman’s moral character when it can at the same time be wielded as feminine subterfuge.

Maria and Julia, like their mother, spend much of their time at home on popular pastimes. When they are younger, this amounts to “making artificial flowers or wasting gold paper” when they are not learning music, drawing, French or geography (MP 10, 13-15). Though they would have been taught needlework, both plain and fancy, by their governess, Miss Lee, and are described as both accomplished and beautiful (27, 378, 380), the only physical evidence of their individual “work” is “a faded footstool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing-room” that lives in the old school-room now appropriated for Fanny’s use (124). While conceivably there must be examples of both Maria and Julia’s needlework in the drawing room, they are never depicted as actually working. Similarly,
while Mary Crawford does, at one point, try to protect Fanny from Mrs. Norris’ reproaches by “taking notice of her work and wishing she could work as well,” the emphasis is on the desire and not on the active verb (120). Mary is an accomplished and well-trained young woman who plays the harp, and so presumably can do needlework like her sister. Maria and Julia are accomplished and well-trained young women schooled by their governess, Miss Lee, in all the female accomplishments. And yet they do not work anywhere in the novel.

Maria, Julia and Mary all employ themselves, in the active sense of the verb, in the most important job of being a young woman in their social echelon: in seeking a financially and socially beneficial marriage. For much of the first half of the story, Maria Bertram divides her time between maintaining her engagement (and subsequent marriage) to the wealthy but vapid Mr. Rushworth and indulging her attraction for Mr. Crawford. Maria is well aware that an advantageous marriage will both give her a legitimate position in the social sphere and provide her with a comfortable life: “being now in her twenty-first year, Maria Bertram was beginning to think matrimony a duty; and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became, by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could” (30). Maria has been trained to see marriage (and sons) as the proper culmination to her young life, but she also chafes in the retired life that suits her parents. Marriage will allow her to legitimately escape her father’s house, and so marriage quickly becomes her first object. Julia, although less volatile and less ambitious than her sister, follows where Maria leads.
Mary Crawford is more ambivalent about marriage, but she also has some advantages that Maria and Julia do not. Made fairly independent by the death of both her parents and the aunt who raised her, Mary has already succeeded to a large inheritance which allows her some freedom of movement. Unlike Maria, Mary does not feel the pressure to marry as part of her filial duty, yet even Mary realizes that marriage will lend her protection and respectability that she will not have as a single woman. She cannot live on her own and since she cannot persuade her brother to settle permanently on his own estate with her, a “good” marriage becomes her ultimate object. Mary, like Maria, is also socially ambitious. Denied legitimate active employment by her gender and social status, an advantageous marriage is her chance to lead society and make a name for herself.

All three young women, because of their accomplishments and education, give the appearance of virtuous femininity in mixed company that is often at odds with their behaviour when they are solely in the company of other women. Yet all the men, and Edmund, in particular, ascribe to them inner feelings and appropriate morals based on those appearances. When Miss Crawford criticizes her brother-in-law, Mr. Grant, on the evening when Fanny and Edmund plan to star-gaze, Edmund praises her good temper, her willingness to please and her kindness, while ascribing her bluntly negative opinions of the church and clergymen to the influence of her uncle (92). When Fanny ventures to hint that Henry’s attentions to Maria are becoming particular, Edmund credits Maria with more scruples and less feeling than she has: “‘Which is, perhaps, more in favour of his liking Julia best, than you, Fanny, may be aware; for I believe it often happens that a man, before he has quite made up his own mind, will distinguish the sister or intimate friend of the woman he is really thinking of….and I am not at all afraid for (Maria), after such a
proof as she has given, that her feelings are not strong” (95). Edmund believes that his observations and experience of the world make him a better interpreter of his sisters’ reactions than Fanny. Mary is quick to exploit this limited understanding of inner female lives. When Mary takes Fanny’s part against Mrs. Norris, by noticing her work and begging for the pattern, it is right after a quarrel with Edmund over his refusal to take the part of Anhalt (118-20). She knows Edmund’s partiality for Fanny and that taking Fanny’s side can only raise her in Edmund’s eyes, and the result of her assiduous employment is that Edmund does finally decide to act in the play (126). Mary’s ruse of “sisterly” and feminine concern with Fanny’s needlework results in Edmund seeing only Mary’s kindness and not her manipulation of feminine discourse for his benefit. Maria, Julia and Mary have been taught by Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, Mrs. Grant and other older women to hide their true selves in order to achieve a respectable marriage and regard this as the true employment behind needlework.

Fanny, on the other hand, has made a vocation of her needlework that cannot have been taught to her by any of the older women in her life. In her industry, she is more like Mrs. Norris than Lady Bertram, but there is a strong distinction between Fanny and her aunt in that Fanny is always silently doing while Mrs. Norris is always talking about doing. Where Casal notes the similarities between Fanny and Mrs. Norris, the difference between them is always in their hands. Fanny’s hands, like those of her aunt Norris, are constantly full of textile work, whether mending, sewing, embroidery or simply helping to sort her aunt Bertram’s embroidery silks. Fanny arrives at Mansfield Park at the age of ten knowing how to “read, work and write” (MP 13, my italics), and she is put to work immediately after she arrives (15). She is required to run errands for one aunt or the other
(and on more than one occasion for Tom), and she is always at their beck and call. Fanny is rarely not working, and her hands are always full of either sewing, embroidery or netting. More often than not, this work is not of her own choosing, and is imposed on her by Lady Bertram or Mrs. Norris, and Fanny is unable to refuse these requests because of her uncertain status within the household. Edward Copeland points out that the position of companion (whether paid or unpaid) was particularly open to exploitation and misery, since it could slide so easily into the role of personal servant (167). Moreover, for an unpaid companion there would be no alternatives, since Fanny cannot simply leave the Bertrams and go home. Her place at Mansfield is tied to her brother’s financial support in his naval career, and she will not risk his future as well as her own.

Fanny has been raised from childhood to believe that she should be grateful to the Bertrams for the education, lifestyle and space they have accorded her, even though many of her possessions have been given to her because they are old, broken or unused by the rest of the family (MP 10, 13, 122-25). Mrs. Norris reminds her of her obligations at every opportunity and Fanny receives even the smallest attention with meek gratitude, at least outwardly. Fanny has been taught that she does not have the same rights or expectations as her cousins, and that her primary role is as companion to her aunt Bertram. Over the first Christmas that her uncle is away in the West Indies, Fanny’s duties do not allow her time to socialize: “Fanny had no share in the festivities of the season; but she enjoyed being avowedly useful as her aunt’s companion, when they called away the rest of the family….she naturally became every thing to Lady Bertram during the night of a ball or a party. She talked to her, listened to her, read to her” (27). While Maria and Julia are still unmarried, Fanny is kept at home, with no expectation of
marriage for herself in the present, and perhaps not even in the future, since her introduction to a wider social life rests with an uncle absent from family life for the first half of the novel and neither of her aunts is motivated to see her married. Most critics seem to have missed that Fanny’s low opinion of her own worth is neither stratagem nor weakness. It is simply what she has been socialized to believe from a young age. Fanny’s textile work and the textile-related tasks she performs for Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris are part of a largely unspoken exchange between Fanny and her aunts, with which Fanny “pays” for her room and board and William’s financial support. Fanny’s usefulness as a companion precludes the expense of bringing her out into society and onto the marriage market, for Lady Bertram because she is selfish, and for Mrs. Norris because she is jealous of any status that might be attached to Mrs. Price’s family.

Fanny herself is cognizant of the place she has at Mansfield Park, the complicated ties of kinship and social status she shares with the family, and how her obligations to them are often in contradiction to her own inclinations and beliefs. She is reminded of it daily both in the work she does with her hands and in the tools she uses to do that work. The description of Fanny’s workroom, in the moment where Fanny debates with herself whether she was right in refusing to take part in the play, reveals the complexities of these relationships through the objects that surround Fanny in her daily life:

Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for?….It would be so horrible to her to act, that she was inclined to suspect the truth and purity of her own scruples, and as she looked around her, the claims of her cousins to being obliged, were strengthened by the sight of present upon present that she had received from them. The table between the windows was covered with work-boxes and netting-boxes, which had been given her at different times, principally by Tom; and she grew bewildered as to the amount of the debt which all these kind remembrances produced. (124-25)
If the gifts from her cousins remind her of the debt she owes the family, then the material content of those gifts doubly reasserts both the debt and her unceasing dependence. A work-box or basket, according to the author of *The Workwoman’s Guide*, was designed to be large enough to hold “a moderate supply of work” and portable enough to carry from room to room (15). It would hold sewing and embroidery tools, scissors and a current project or two, while a netting-box held all the tools for netting, a lace-making pastime closely related to knitting and crochet and popular among women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Work-boxes could be finely made, elegant baskets destined to carried on morning visits between women, but they were also generic items provided to a female servant by her mistress (*The Workwoman’s Guide* 15). Fanny’s work-boxes are gifts mostly from Tom, the oldest son and heir of the Bertram family who will have the responsibility of her keep when his father dies, and it is Tom’s wish that Fanny has just refused in participating in the play. Tom has given Fanny more than one box and clearly more than she needs, since one box of netting tools, for example, was as much as one woman needed for a lifetime of netting purses. Tom has not thought about the recipient, her interests or her needs, except to notice that she “works.” The boxes are impersonal and careless gifts from a cousin who pays attention to her at his own convenience, and through these gifts he feels he has absolved himself of any responsibility for knowing Fanny or caring for her better. Fanny’s indecision over the theatrical episode has an edge, for she adheres to her personal moral ethical code possibly at the cost of a future that might be governed by Tom when Sir Thomas dies. These “gifts,” however kindly meant, are physical reminders of the degradations of her daily life and the near-constant fetching, carrying and sewing or mending that fill her time. She owes a duty to Tom, Edmund and
their sisters for feeding, clothing and housing her and their demands may always come at a personal expense.

In this Fanny is not dissimilar to her Aunt Norris. Although her six hundred pounds is enough for one widow to live on, and would provide a “comfortable, if restricted life,” Mrs. Norris often appears insecure about her place in the Bertrams’ life and fearful of losing the financial support and social status Mansfield Park lends her (Copeland 30). This has largely gone unnoticed by most critics of Mansfield Park. Jan B. Goode, for example, argues that though Mrs. Norris acts as a surrogate authority for Sir Thomas, her real purpose is to undermine and subvert his authority (Goode 93). Yet many of Mrs. Norris’ negative comments to Fanny seem designed to remind the family that Fanny is at the bottom of the family hierarchy, while at the same time making Mrs. Norris appear both indispensable and necessary to the daily life at Mansfield Park. Mrs. Norris often seems to want to assure herself of a permanent place in Sir Thomas’ household and a more active role in the family that has been denied to her by her own childlessness. When Fanny has a headache and is resting on the sofa, for example, her aunt Norris scolds her for leaving her work:

“That is a very foolish trick, Fanny, to be idling away all the evening upon a sofa. Why cannot you come and sit here, and employ yourself as we do? ---If you have no work of your own, I can supply you from the poor basket. There is all the new calico that was bought last week, not touched yet. I am sure I almost broke my back by cutting it out. You should learn to think of other people; and take my word for it, it is a shocking trick for a young person to be always lolling upon a sofa.” (57-58)

While Maaja A. Stewart has argued that this comment is derivative of Mrs. Norris’ (failed) attempt to usurp Sir Thomas’ place as the head of the household while he is in Antigua, Mrs. Norris’ criticisms seem as driven by her need to prove her own worth to
the Bertrams as by her need to oversee and direct Fanny’s life (Stewart 130). As both Casal and Francus point out, Mrs. Norris has taken control of the poor basket, a responsibility which should lie with Lady Bertram. She directs the clothing and set design for the play, which should also be within Lady Bertram’s sphere of control. Yet I would argue that all Mrs. Norris’ restless busyness is to cement her permanence over Fanny’s impermanence. Even her assertion of power through buttons and thread on the night of William’s arrival appears less designed to usurp control from Sir Thomas than to silently register her resentment of William’s assumption of it. When Edmund confronts Mrs. Norris on Fanny’s behalf over her taking part in the theatrical, his aunt reminds him that Fanny does not have any right of choice: “I shall think her a very obstinate, ungrateful girl, if she does not do what her aunt and cousins wish her – very ungrateful indeed, considering who and what she is” (120). One has to remember that Mrs. Norris accepted her husband to escape being Fanny: if she had not married Mr. Norris, she would have been the dependent female. As a childless widow, Mrs. Norris works to stay relevant and needed in a society that would relegate her to the background.

Yet needlework is not entirely drudgery to Fanny. In the converted schoolroom are Fanny’s plants, her books, and her “works of charity and ingenuity,” that all give her employment and suggest that some of this needlework is her own and made of her own volition (123). As Susan E. Jones has noted of Mrs. Smith’s “work” in Persuasion, it is differentiated from that of her nurse or the other women who care for her by the emphasis on charity: Mrs. Smith maintains a slim hold on her class status by not selling her work for her own benefit, but to the benefit of others (157-60). Fanny’s work is here distinguished from that of her aunt Bertram and aunt Norris by its generosity, imagination
and thoughtfulness, and from her cousins’ lack of output by its diligent skill.

Overwhelmingly, by the early nineteenth century, the virtuous and moral needleworker was expected to make for others. Next to Lady Bertram, Maria, Mary and Julia, Fanny appears, by her silent work with her needle and retired manner to be the idealized picture of early nineteenth-century womanhood described in ladies’ manuals and guides:

> The orderly house but reflects the orderly mind; the humble wife and mother, whose active indefatigable hand, silently executing her careful ingenious thought, improves the comforts, the visible respectability, and real condition of her husband and children, is mistress of a secret for blending her best and tenderest affections with the employment of the every day: she contrives judiciously what she constantly and earnestly meditates, and finds no weariness in the labour to which strength continually flows from a deep fountain of the heart. (The Workwoman’s Guide v)

Fanny is tender, affectionate and giving, and her converted schoolroom, with its quiet pursuits and obvious organization, appears as visual evidence of her inner moral regulation. This would invest Fanny with a moral authority lacking in the other women, and it might be easy from this to characterize Fanny, as many critics have, as the “too-good” fairy tale child, Mrs. Norris as the wicked stepmother and Maria, Julia and even Mary as Fanny’s wicked stepsisters of the Cinderella story (Gordon 90, Simpson 25, Hoberg 137-41). Stewart argues that “the moral experience of the domestic woman is constructed out of a limitation of desire and out of an acceptance, even a celebration, of a restricted life” (Stewart 12) and suggests that Fanny’s wish to please Sir Thomas and Edmund reiterates Fanny’s internalization of conventional discourses about women and sexuality (Stewart 127-32). Yet the work of Fanny’s hands conveys two very distinct and related ideas that both reinforce and refute Stewart’s argument.

> Needlework was supposed to teach women to be better mothers, and it was a skill that was supposed to be passed from mother to daughter along with life lessons about
morality, virtue and piety. From where, then, did Fanny learn both her generosity and instinctive good judgement? Fanny has no reliable mother figure in her aunts, and on her return to Portsmouth, instead of becoming closer to her mother, Fanny herself becomes a substitute mother for her sister Susan. As Francus insists, some of Fanny’s strongest criticism is reserved for her mother, in whose house Fanny wishes to feel comfort. This, Francus argues, “is a fantasy of validation; Fanny has been marginalized and abused at Mansfield for years, and she wants to be central, significant, loved.” I argue, though that what Francus calls Fanny’s “petulance” at this rejection is quickly turned to positive account: Fanny finds a comfort in her sister. Susan has a naturally moral and organized mind, and the sisters, after some initial reservations, begin to spend much of their time together, upstairs in the quietest part of the house, occupied in “working and talking” (323). Fanny eventually imparts to Susan her own inclination for biographies and poetry and takes responsibility for cultivating Susan’s mind and principles. Though she has learned to love reading from Edmund, there is no corresponding female teacher in Fanny’s life. The implication in Fanny’s needlework and Susan’s attempts at household organization is that their respective moral compasses are innate, rather than learned.

Work, as indicated earlier, is the more passive verb/noun that requires women to sit still, within doors, with eyes cast down only to their needlework and distracted from social and political causes (Lieb 34-35). To all intents and purposes, this is the work that Lady Bertram does on a daily basis. However, to Fanny, needlework is also employment. It is what she actively seeks when she needs to think over issues, hide from others and calm her emotions. It is a form of self-discipline as much as it is discipline imposed from without. Lieb argues, like Macheski, that in eighteenth-century novels, “a needleworker
often uses the physical activity of needlework to hide her feelings, to shield her vulnerable heart from exposure, to conceal smiles, tears or blushes by bending over some convenient bit of stitchery” (38). Fanny’s needlework often acts as a cover for her real feelings, but it is also what she instinctively turns to in order to govern those same feelings.

Fanny’s employment at her needlework gives her self-control and discipline that at the same time provide her with comfort and room to dream and think, not unlike Mrs. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse* (1927), who a century later finds herself with her knitting, “sitting and looking, sitting and looking…until she became the thing she looked at” (Woolf 63). This sense of discipline in and of itself would *appear* to reiterate, as Halperin argues, the conservatism of *Mansfield Park* (8). Fanny is able to find peace and quiet enjoyment in her work, while Maria, Julia and Mary are stifled and bored by country life when the external diversions of visitors or play-acting are gone. Their inability to find active occupation for themselves, moreover, makes them vulnerable to gossip, idleness and excess: Mary cannot reconcile herself to a life in the country or a future with a country parson, which is the source of most of her disagreements with Edmund; Maria dallies with Henry; and Julia elopes with Yates. Without an occupation beyond marriage, all three women end up unhappy to varying degrees. Fanny, by her needlework alone, appears the superior woman. Yet Fanny’s fate is more closely linked to that of her cousins and aunts than at first appears.

Needlework was a social pastime. It was what women did on social calls, during morning visits and at home in the evenings in the company of their families. The *work* of sewing and embroidery created the impetus for which women could meet to exchange
patterns or work together, gave women a common interest through which to further relationships and formed a substantive part of their social exchanges. *Mansfield Park* is particularly notable, then, for its profound lack of female friendship and support. Unlike *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*, which feature close relationships between sisters, what passes for a relationship between Maria and Julia is permanently fractured by the attentions of Henry. Mrs. Grant cares for Mary, but seems unable to influence her in any way. Lady Bertram appears to need no female friendship beyond those of the unpaid companion she has in Fanny. Mrs. Norris alienates every woman with her officiousness. Fanny is forced into intimacy with Mary, but is alienated from Mary by Fanny’s feelings for Edmund and her aversion to Mary’s ambition and worldliness. Though Susan and Fanny develop a closeness through their shared needlework, everywhere else there are broken friendships and connections. Needlework is a pastime at odds with itself: needlework fails to bridge the divide among women when they are forced to machinate and maneuver to achieve legitimacy through marriage, and needlework becomes a stratagem for this purpose. Domestic needlework becomes one more divisive and poisonous form of competition between women when it is assigned extraordinary substance and meaning in determining a woman’s class and morality. It is partially for this reason that Fanny finds needlework to be the most emotionally satisfying when she practices it away from the prying eyes of other women.

Though many critics argue that Fanny’s thoughts have been moulded by Edmund and are consequently collusive with Edmund’s conservative and traditional view of English society, Fanny is also an individual with a life and thoughts totally outside of the Bertrams, and often at variance with Edmund. The mental and emotional space lent to her
by her busy hands – the very space forced on her by the helplessness and dependence
often described by critics – is at the same time her space. The fine, repetitive work of
sewing and embroidery occupies the maker’s hands, but only part of her brain, for daily
practice also makes the action of the hands second-nature. While a needleworker’s hands
are occupied, her mind is free. When Fanny’s head is bent over her textile work, the
reader receives the most insight into her most private feelings and desires, desires that she
almost cannot acknowledge to herself and actively seeks to conquer.

The first example of this can be seen when Edmund decides to participate in his
brother’s theatrical, against his own first inclination and against Fanny’s better judgement.
Fanny, having read the play through several times, is conscious that Edmund and Mary
will have a love scene that she is both dreading and desiring to see. She has already had
several distressing opportunities to see Edmund’s growing partiality for Mary, first at
Sotherton and then in his daily rides with Mary at Fanny’s expense. Fanny has feelings of
love and gratitude for Edmund, but this is the first instance in which the depth of Fanny’s
love is made apparent:

The morrow came, the plan for the evening continued, and Fanny’s
consideration of it did not become less agitated. She worked very
diligently under her aunt’s directions, but her diligence and her silence
concealed a very absent, anxious mind; and about noon she made her
escape with her work to the East room that she might have no concern
in another, and, as she deemed it, most unnecessary rehearsal of the
first act, which Henry Crawford was just proposing, desirous at once
of having her time to herself, and of avoiding Mr. Rushworth. A
glimpse, as she passed through the hall, of the two ladies walking up
from the parsonage, made no change in her wish of retreat, and she
worked and meditated in the East room, undisturbed, for a quarter of
an hour, when a gentle tap at the door was followed by the entrance of
Miss Crawford. (136)

Fanny is both interested in, and repulsed by, the thought of Edmund speaking a lover’s
lines, and frightened by the evidence of Edmund’s deepening feelings and Mary’s
response to them that might be revealed by the scene: “the whole subject of it was love – a marriage of love was to be described by the gentleman and very little short of a declaration of love be made by the lady” (136). Her response is both excitation and anxiety. While Fanny is in public, working on the curtain at her aunt Norris’ behest, surrounded by talk of the play, with her real opinion neither solicited nor valued and only “occasionally useful,” she uses her “work” to cover her real feelings, a stratagem used, as both Lieb and Macheski point out, by a number of Austen characters, including Emma Woodhouse and Elinor Dashwood (Macheski 90). However, when Fanny finally escapes all the demands of the various actors and her aunts, she also chooses to go to her private space with this same work. In the sanctity of her own room, with no one to watch her, sewing the curtain gives her active employment in thinking through and calming her conflicted feelings. Despite the seeming drudgery of her work, the repeated and familiar action of the needle becomes a soothing and contemplative activity – an employment of the mind and the spirit as much as the fingers.

Fanny is in a position different to that of Austen’s other characters. Fanny’s constant anxiety, emotion and silence when Edmund talks about Mary all suggest that Fanny’s feelings are deep and long-standing (125-27, 129). Fanny knows that her love for Edmund is unreturned and that she is well below him in social station. In this she is very like Elinor Dashwood, forced into an intimacy with Lucy Steele against her will. Yet her interest in the outcome of Edmund’s relationship is as much about her own economic and emotional survival as it is about love. The masking of her feelings in public is necessary, for Fanny cannot and must not show anything of her true feelings for Edmund. She would be sent away from the home that she has grown to love and would risk losing the
necessary financial support for her brother’s career in the process. But if Edmund marries Mary (or any other woman for that matter), it also means losing the one person who acts as a buffer between Fanny and the rest of Mansfield Park. He is the only person who has made her life there physically tolerable and he is the only one of the family to interfere when Mrs. Norris’ or Lady Bertram’s demands on her become too much. Fanny’s interest in Edmund’s future is as conflicted as her feelings for him. When she considers her concerns about performing, she wonders if it is “selfishness – and a fear of exposing herself” (124). Exposure here is a double risk: it means alternately the submission to an unwelcome influence and the subjection of her secrets to the light. While Mary Chan calls Fanny’s reactions “melodramatic,” I would argue that they stem less from hysteria than from the knowledge that emotions are luxuries not generally granted to dependent females and that she must sublimate all her strongest feelings in order to keep her place in the family. Fanny feels so deeply that she has no words for what she feels, but she knows enough to be sure of what she risks by revealing her love in public. She is agitated and anxious, with no one to whom she can unburden these feelings.

Fanny is interrupted in this meditation first by Mary and then by Edmund, and she is finally forced to watch the very scene she has been both dreading and wanting: “She was invested, indeed, with the office of judge and critic, and earnestly desired to exercise it and tell them all their faults; but from doing so every feeling within her shrank, she could not, would not, dared not attempt it…She believed herself to feel too much of it in the aggregate for honesty or safety in particulars” (138). Fanny recognizes that she feels too much to be able to speak. Mary’s intrusion into Fanny’s private space is both physical and metaphoric: all Fanny’s meditation over and active employment at her work cannot
turn Fanny into a disinterested observer, but at the same time her silent occupation successfully governs the appearance of those feelings. The appearance of disinterest is enough to make Mary treat Fanny as a close confidante. At the same time, Edmund’s “increasing spirit” is enough to destroy Fanny’s unfounded hopes. If this is, as Stewart suggests, Fanny’s acceptance and internalization of conventional discourses about women, sexuality and a woman’s place in society, she would not need quite so actively to suppress her feelings of resentment, anger and hurt. Sarah Emsley has argued that to do justice to Mansfield Park, it must be viewed, like Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure, as a tragedy with a forced comic ending. The tragedy here is that Fanny cannot and must not speak out loud, so her work becomes a kind of substitute voice: she puts into her hands all the anxiety and grief that she is not allowed to articulate verbally. Fanny’s hands offer an alternate point of view to all the moments of seeing.

Ironically, though she cannot voice her own feelings, Fanny’s silent needlework, the result of her restricted life as a female dependent, also allows her to observe the conflicted feelings of others more closely than anyone else at Mansfield Park. As Fanny works during the rehearsals for the theatricals, she is able to see the things that Edmund has missed: Maria’s overt flirtation and sexual passion for Henry Crawford, Julia’s jealousy and broken heart, Mr. Rushworth’s confusion over Maria and his rivalry with Henry, and, of course, the growing intimacy between Edmund and Mary. However, though Fanny is able to closely observe the others, she is not as invisible as she would like to think herself. Fanny’s observations and the misreading of Fanny’s intentions by Henry, Edmund, Mary and Sir Thomas inform the second example of the reader’s insight
into Fanny’s true feelings, on the evening when Henry reads Shakespeare to the family after his first, refused proposal to Fanny.

Sir Thomas has returned from the West Indies and Maria has married Mr. Rushworth, with only Fanny to observe how deep are her feelings for Henry and how much she has been hurt by his rejection. With William’s visit to Mansfield Park, Fanny’s status within the household begins to change and she becomes, however unexpectedly to her, the centre of attention. Against Lady Bertram’s wishes and Mrs. Norris’ desires, her uncle chooses to bring Fanny “out” on to the marriage market just as Henry Crawford returns to Mansfield Park and decides, on meeting her again, to woo her. Needlework, as I indicated earlier, was often used as a way of hiding emotion in public. It was also, as Macheski and Smith attest, used as a stratagem to both invite and evade sexual advances, part of a set of courtship rituals through which a woman signified her availability to men. Embroidery, as Parker insists, while it was equated with feminine dependence, could also be synonymous with seductiveness (119).

However, unlike Maria, Julia and Mary, Fanny has not been taught the rules of courtship or coquetry, and has no expectations of marriage or even an equal place in family life. On the contrary, Fanny seems resigned to being her aunt’s companion for life. On the evening that her uncle hosts a ball for her, it becomes evident how little Fanny understands of the machinations behind coming out or the intentions that her uncle has in making her do so: “Miss Price, known only by name to half the people invited, was now to make her first appearance, and must be regarded as the Queen of the evening. But Miss Price had not been brought up to the trade of coming out; and had she known in what light this ball was, in general, considered respecting her, it would very much have
lessened her comfort by increasing the fears she already had, of doing wrong and being looked at” (215). The coming-out ball is to signify a young woman’s availability in marriage and to attract potential suitors and/or their parents. Fanny’s shyness, her withdrawal, and above all, her tendency to retreat into the silence of embroidery in order to calm and cover her emotions, leads Henry, Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris and even Edmund to misinterpret her intentions, by sexualizing her innocence, ascribing her reticence to secrecy and mistaking her calm exterior for invitation. They each believe her, to varying degrees, to be desirous of a good marriage and cognizant and grateful (or not grateful enough) for the attention she has been given, particularly when Henry intercedes with his uncle, the Admiral, to gain William’s naval promotion.

On the evening in question, Fanny has refused both Henry’s offer of marriage and Sir Thomas’ earnest and sometimes angry exhortations for her to consider the proposal in a more submissive manner. Henry has dined with the family and returns to the ladies with Edmund to find them silently at work: “When he and Craw ford walked into the drawing-room, his mother and Fanny were sitting as intently and silently at work as if there were nothing else to care for. Edmund could not help noticing their apparently deep tranquility” (271). When Henry picks up the volume of Shakespeare which Fanny has just dropped and begins to read, Fanny at first refuses to acknowledge his presence. All her attention is on her work. Yet the repeated emphasis of “intently,” “silently” and “apparently” insists that Fanny is, in fact, not tranquil at all and that it takes all her powers of concentration to appear disinterested and calm. It is not the first time that she has had to do so. On the day that she is first invited to dine at the Grants, she has to await permission from her uncle, and, fearing the attention on herself that the discussion
between her aunt and uncle will give, leaves the room because she doubts her ability to appear “properly submissive and indifferent” to whether she will be allowed to go out (175). At that dinner, she has to hide her intense dislike of Henry and pretend that she does not know his meaning when he talks of Maria, Mr. Rushworth and the day at Sotherton (180-82). When Henry proposes to her, too, she cannot show her anger as she might, because Henry is also the man who has secured her brother’s promotion (264). In this case, the regulation of her mind through close attention to her needlework is not to school feelings of love or sexual desire but sentiments of resentment, guilt and confusion. Fanny, both as a “daughter” of the house and a female dependent, must appear grateful where she least feels gratitude and submissive where she finds the most offense.

Yet Fanny’s ability to hide her feelings in her stitches has been almost too successful. Fanny’s ill opinion of Henry has been formed on close observations that she will not share with her uncle or even with Edmund, since they reflect badly on both Maria and Julia. Like Elinor Dashwood, Fanny’s inner moral strength and self-control ensure that her pain, resentment and anger remain invisible to the outside world, but also to the people who should be closest to her. This stoicism ensures that Henry sees in Fanny what he wants to see: a reflection of his own sexual desires. When Henry confesses to his sister that he has fallen in love with Fanny, he uses the appearance of Fanny at her needlework to describe his feelings for her:

“Had you seen her this morning, Mary,” he continued, “attending with such ineffable sweetness and patience, to all the demands of her aunt’s stupidity, working with her, and for her, her colour beautifully heightened as she leant over the work, then returning to her seat to finish a note which she was previously engaged in writing for that stupid woman’s service, and all this with such unpretending gentleness, so much as if it were a matter of course that she was not to have a moment at her own command, her hair arranged as neatly as it always
is, and one little curl falling forward as she wrote, which she now and then shook back, and in the midst of all this, still speaking at intervals to me, or listening, and as if she liked to listen to what I said. Had you seen her so, Mary, you would not have implied the possibility of her power over my heart ever ceasing.” (240)

Henry appreciates in Fanny the values that needlework is supposed to teach: domesticized femininity, morality, self-denial and virtue. But he also sees a sexual response to his presence. He believes her blushes are for him, the curl in her hair shaken out for him, her quiet listening for him, and the setting of her stitches a signal of her desire for him. This is the social code in which he has been trained, a code within which women must operate and maneuver in order to achieve marriage, and one which he has learned to exploit for his own benefit. He is inclined to see Fanny as passive, accepting and in need of rescuing, and it leads him to assume that she would welcome, if not expect, his addresses. He believes that she is his already, as the “my” in his next comments suggest: “‘Yes, Mary, my Fanny will feel a difference indeed, a daily, hourly difference, in the behaviour of every being who approaches her; and it will be the completion of my happiness to know that I am the doer of it, that I am the person to give the consequence so justly her due. Now she is dependent, helpless, friendless, neglected, forgotten’” (240-41). Like Tom and even Edmund, Henry’s self-interest and masculine self-importance do not allow him to penetrate any further into Fanny’s real feelings than the appearance of her work. He sees only the self-abnegation and submission of Fanny’s needlework and not the self-sufficiency of it.

Moreover, Henry believes that it is Fanny’s place to teach him to appreciate her values. Parker insists public discourses about needlework asserted the primacy of the domestic sphere and insisted on a woman’s moral and emotional governance over that sphere. A woman was expected to teach the values of virtue, piety and morality (143-46).
As Henry falls in love with Fanny, he assumes that it is her duty and responsibility to teach him to appreciate the domestic life and to love her sphere of influence. He believes that as long he plays his part, and insists that he “worships” her merit and loves her devotedly as an angel set above him in virtue, he will win her heart (278). Yet part of Fanny’s disgust of Henry is that he does not come to the relationship with those moral values already in place. When he proposes to her, she feels anger and resentment as well as gratitude: “Here was again a want of delicacy and regard for others which had formerly so struck and disgusted her. […] How evidently was there a gross want of feeling and humanity where his own pleasure was concerned” (265). There is a duality to the work of Fanny’s hands: though Fanny is morally superior to the other women at Mansfield Park, she does not want the responsibility for Henry’s morality as well as her own. She wants to be approached as an equal, not an angel.

Edmund, Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris reach similar, and equally false, conclusions about Fanny’s feelings and motivations, based largely on a visual reading of her needlework. When he and Henry return to the drawing room after dinner, Edmund observes Fanny as Henry begins to read from Henry VIII:

Edmund watched the progress of her attention, and was amused and gratified by seeing how she gradually slackened in the needle-work, which, at the beginning, seemed to occupy her totally; how it fell from her hand while she sat motionless over it – and at last, how the eyes which had appeared so studiously to avoid him throughout the day, were turned and fixed on Crawford, fixed on him for minutes, fixed on him in short till the attraction drew Crawford’s upon her, and the book was closed, and the charm was broken. Then, she was shrinking again into herself, and blushing and working as hard as ever; but it had been enough to give Edmund encouragement for his friend, and as he cordially thanked him, he hoped to be expressing Fanny’s secret feelings too. (272)
While Edmund has noticed that Fanny’s intense attention on her needlework is a means of avoiding eye contact or interaction with Henry, he also believes that the turning of her attention from her needlework to Henry, and the blush when she becomes aware of Henry’s attention for her, indicate Fanny’s changing sentiments towards his friend. Moreover he, like Henry, believes that Fanny will be the just reward for Henry Crawford’s patience, that her morality will teach him to be moral, and her virtue will teach him to be serious on serious subjects. Edmund tells Fanny the next day that she could be the “perfect model of a woman” to him: upright and disinterested, with the ability to be both grateful and tender-hearted (281). He insists that Henry will be made a better man by Fanny, that though Henry will make Fanny happy, it is Fanny who will make Henry “every thing” (284). Setting aside for the moment Fanny’s feelings for Edmund, Edmund’s misreading of Fanny in this instance is similar to his misreading of Mary. Edmund’s expectations for the perfect woman have no relationship to the real women in his life. He assigns more chastity to Mary and finer feelings than she has, and to Fanny he assigns less. Fanny is supposed to feel gratitude and affection for the advances of a man she believes to be a hardened flirt and libertine. As Parker argues, “in women’s novels the crucial interview between lovers is invariably marked by the moment when the woman drops her work – with her embroidery inevitably goes her self-containment and she surrenders to her lover” (166). This is how both Henry and Edmund read Fanny’s interest in Henry’s reading. Yet Fanny is not succumbing to Henry, she is arming herself against his advances. His reading gives her pleasure, but the memory of his dalliance with Maria’s feelings is still uppermost in her mind (272). Fanny’s embroidery does not cover embarrassment and self-consciousness at Henry’s attentions;
it signals her desire for liberty from Henry’s unsought ardour and need for invisibility outside of the immediate family circle.

Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris read Fanny in much the same way as does Edmund. Sir Thomas watches Fanny after Henry leaves and looks for a sign that Henry is missed: “He hardly knew whether there was a difference in her spirits or not. She was always so gentle and retiring, that her emotions were beyond his discrimination. He did not understand her” (296). Sir Thomas assigns secrecy and ingratitude to Fanny’s behaviour because he is unable to see beyond Fanny’s stoic front. Mrs. Norris, who has long been jealous of any attention given to Fanny, has also remarked earlier on the same propensities to Sir Thomas, though she is unaware at the time that Fanny has been the object of Henry’s proposal of marriage: “but there is something about Fanny, I have often observed it before, she likes to go her own way to work; she does not like to be dictated to; she takes her own independent walk whenever she can; she certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and independence, and nonsense, about her, which I would advise her to get the better of” (261, my italics). Mrs. Norris probably reads Fanny better than anyone else in her recognition that Fanny’s thoughts and observations are independent of her low position within the family, but Mrs. Norris also assigns wilful deception and manipulation to that independence. Yet they all misread what is in Fanny’s heart and mind. Mrs. Norris, Sir Thomas, Henry and even Edmund fail to see the passion and strong conviction that lie under the surface of Fanny’s calm exterior.

Fanny risks not just happiness or unhappiness in refusing to marry Henry Crawford. As Emsley insists, Mansfield Park can be read as “an imitation of a morally serious action—that is, of a tragic heroine’s resistance to the attempts of authority figures
to persuade her to marry a man she believes to be immoral.” In real life, it would have been very unlikely that Fanny found her happy ending any more than her cousin, Maria, does. The strict moral code that makes her reject Henry, that Mrs. Norris identifies as “a little spirit of secrecy” and Sir Thomas as “wilfulness,” would have come at the same cost as Mrs. Rushworth’s clandestine love affair: it would have meant permanent banishment from Mansfield Park and social ostracism from the family and home that she has known since childhood. Yet had she gone against her convictions and married Henry, she might have been made unhappy and humiliated by repeated infidelities. Though different in social station and temperament, Maria and Fanny are forced to conceal their true characters and feelings, and then are punished for having them at all.

Moreover, in the moments when Fanny needs all the meditation that her needlework can offer, it fails to provide her with succour. When Fanny is sent to Plymouth, she and Susan become members of a circulating library. For Fanny, reading will hopefully do what needlework cannot: “In this occupation she hoped, moreover, to bury some of the recollections of Mansfield which were too apt to seize her mind if her fingers only were busy; and especially at this time, hoped it might be useful in diverting her thoughts from pursuing Edmund to London” (324). Fanny is waiting for the news that Edmund and Mary are engaged, and needlework cannot employ her sufficiently to keep her mind from that subject. It becomes apparent that even reading is insufficient to this task, as she worries over Edmund and Mary and the lack of a letter from Edmund every day (324). When Fanny learns of Maria’s flight with Henry, there is no mention of needlework: “There was no possibility of rest. The evening passed, without a pause of misery, the night was totally sleepless. She passed only from feelings of sickness to
shudderings of horror…” (359). Needlework helps to organize Fanny’s mind, but it is not sufficient employment to help her to weather all of her conflicting emotions.

Francus argues that there are no easy answers to the early faults of neglectful or uninformed mothering in *Mansfield Park*, and that even as Mrs. Norris’ evil is contained through banishment with Maria, there is no movement forward for the other “mothers”: Mrs. Bertram and Mrs. Price remain free in their selfishness to order their children as they please, and Fanny, “sedentary, reactive, and deferential to male authority,” is poised to become another Lady Bertram. I argue, however, that Austen is less concerned with male authority, than how women operate within it for their own purposes. Fanny’s needlework both reinforces and subverts these ideas. Needlework does not automatically produce ideal femininity. It is the shield behind which Fanny hides, and is at the same time her gift of love and attention to her family. Yet needlework is also a front: it allows Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris, Maria and Mary to exploit their femininity to achieve power in a world skewed to male authority. Moreover, Fanny is almost too controlled behind her needlework. Like Elinor Dashwood, Fanny has had to wear a public face for so long that she offers other women no opportunity to be empathetic. The pressure to *perform* a domesticized femininity puts inordinate pressure on the relationships between women and, in the end, fractures what could have been productive, supportive friendships.

The machinations of the various women come to naught. Maria is banished, to live in unhappy intimacy with Mrs. Norris. Mary, too, is banished from Mansfield Park by her relationship to Henry. She ends up living with Mrs. Grant, albeit more happily than Maria with Mrs. Norris. Julia elopes with Mr. Yates, but is “saved” from permanent banishment by her easier temper and less ambitious nature (380). The men face far fewer
consequences: Henry, Edmund, Mr. Yates and Mr. Rushworth all end free to love and marry as they please. While Fanny enjoys her “happy” ending, Sir Thomas takes the credit for it: “Sir Thomas saw repeated, and for ever repeated reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all, and acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure” (386). Sir Thomas believes that it is early hardship that makes Fanny what she is. Yet the work of Fanny’s hands suggests otherwise. Fanny’s generosity and kind heart are innate. Needlework does not make the woman: the woman makes the needlework.
Chapter 3  *Cranford*: Knitting, Crochet and the Construction of the Middle-Class Spinster

Like *Mansfield Park*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* is filled with small textile references that are often invisible to a twenty-first century reader. The women of the little village of Cranford, most of whom are older spinsters or childless widows, spend hours at their work or are surrounded by the evidence of it. Mary Smith, the narrator, sews her father’s shirts in the afternoon light or by candlelight in the evenings. Jessie Brown can “sew neatly” and thinks of this as a possible occupation after the deaths of her father and sister (27). Mrs. Forrester surprises Mary and Miss Matty in their “darned caps and patched collars” (137). The Misses Barker are retired milliners who wear the relics of their trade (74-75). Yet unlike the needlework practiced by Lady Bertram, Fanny and Mrs. Grant, there is no embroidery practiced anywhere in *Cranford*. The only exception is a “worsted-worked rug” at Mrs. Jamieson’s house, a small, embroidered wool carpet likely the output of her work, perhaps in her youth, and currently used by Carlo the dog (91).

More often than not, the women in *Cranford* are knitting or crocheting. Miss Mattie knits for two or three hours a day (at least) and is so proficient that she can knit in the dark, a skill that causes frustration to Mary Smith, for sewing needs more light than knitting (52).

Miss Pole and Jessie Brown bond over their love of Shetland wool and “the new knitting stitches” (17). Mary Smith knits while she waits to go to the Assembly Room for Signor Brunoni’s magic show (103). Miss Pole goes with Lady Glenmire to find “some old woman who was famous in the neighbourhood for her skill in knitting woollen stockings” (121). Miss Pole’s love of knitting eventually gives way to crochet, which she takes up during a visit to Mr. Holbrook (45).
The older woman who knits or crochets is a familiar supporting character in nineteenth-century English literature. Often she is a widow, like Mrs. Bates in Austen’s *Emma* (1815), who knits small items for charity and plays quadrille with Mr. Woodhouse, or Mrs. Irwine, the rector’s widow in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), who lays aside her knitting to play chess with her son. She might be a spinster, like Clara Peggotty in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* (1850), the benevolent housekeeper who loves to knit and who eventually marries the carrier, Mr. Barkis. Sometimes she is self-effacing and hard-working, like Adam’s widowed mother, Lisbeth Bede, who knits as she worries about (and cries over) her son’s attraction to Hetty Sorrel, or Mrs. Poyser, the farmer’s wife, also in *Adam Bede*, who knits because it is the work she likes best, since “she could carry it on automatically as she walked to and fro” (70). Sometimes she is not old at all but a figure of satire, aged by life and circumstance into vacuous industry, like Lady Rose Crawley of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1848), the ironmonger’s daughter who betrays her lower-class birth by knitting garish worsted counterpanes for every bed at Crawley.

Just as often, however, the older woman who knits in a nineteenth-century story is a figure of foreboding and moral and psychological danger, a holder of secret knowledge and powerful observer of what goes on around her. Most famous and malevolent of these, of course, is Madame Defarge of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), who knits the names of potential victims of the guillotine into her work. Equally sinister is the pair of knitting women in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), one old and one young, who knit silently in black in the office that sends Marlow to the Congo. Reminiscent of the Greek *Moirae*, who hold the fates of the world in their endlessly crafting hands, but missing Atropos, the Fate who cuts the thread of life, the two women foreshadow the fear, menace and death
that Marlow will witness in the Congo. Less baleful but just as disquieting is Nelly Dean, the housekeeper and servant who proves to be an unreliable narrator in *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Nelly knits as she relates the tragic tale of Cathy and Heathcliff to Lockwood, while simultaneously betraying her own biased role in the story’s outcome. Of all the characters in *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly Dean alone can combine, as Armstrong puts it, “the knowledge contained in the ‘master’s library’ with lore garnered from ‘country folk,’ with the gossip relayed between various households, and with a memory that has recorded events in terms of the emotions they generate,” as well as her own passionate interest in the history of the two lovers (43). Knitting, like embroidery in *Mansfield Park*, is often a social activity, and Nelly’s story is knitted together from disparate threads that only find its culmination – its “fabric” – in Nelly’s hands. It is not a stretch to conclude that her powerful, secret knowledge is intermingled with the history of her knitting.

The old woman of popular culture, as Sally Chivers has pointed out, is a socially constructed phenomenon, a figure created out of anxiety and fear about aging and women’s power (xxii-xxxi). Women are perceived to experience a twofold cultural loss in the aging process, both in their utility and their femininity, and old bodies often function as “a repository for cultural fears of inadequacy” and as a stand-in for societal misconceptions of vulnerability and dependence (xv, xix). For Victorians, as Armstrong has insisted, many of the discourses about the female body were waged in terms of sexuality and reproduction, where “gender assumed priority over the signs of one’s region, religious sect, and political faction….and worked to suppress other notions of sexuality….that did not adhere to the ideal of legitimate monogamy” (Armstrong 253).
Equally importantly, the female body became a receptacle and a stand-in for anxieties about Britain’s colonial and economic supremacy and for anxieties about class and industrial capitalism’s new place in traditional social structures (Langland 290-92, Armstrong 4-5, Parker 151).

Ariel Beujot has argued that class is not a given, it is rather “a social position that (is) “made real” through actions and relationships” (4). She suggests that Victorians performed their class roles based on what they imagined and desired them to be, whether that role was aristocratic, middle or working class. The “new” middle class created by industrialism out of the Calvinist revival of the late eighteenth century, she suggests, took symbols originally associated either with the aristocracy or the working class and modified them to help make their own class position appear stable, permanent and morally superior to both the labouring and aristocratic classes (4-5). Middle-class Victorian women were indoctrinated from birth to fulfil their duties as wives and mothers, thereby ensuring a continuing supply of bodies for Britain’s economic and political engines and for “the staging of a family’s social position,” while at the same time securing social and political control over the labouring classes (Langland 291).

What made the aging and childless middle-class female body a figure to fear and revile in Victorian Britain was the way that it spoke back to ingrained conceptions about women, domestic space and femininity. Motherhood was considered a “personal, moral duty,” and femininity was defined through child bearing and a woman’s ability to successfully run a household (Parker 129). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, a woman’s power came from providing comfort to her family and by her ability to influence and evoke morality and virtue in others, particularly her husband and children.
In *Mansfield Park* Lady Bertram’s overwhelming fault is her lazy mothering and her lack of concern for others, but Mrs. Norris’ is her parsimony – a double standard, since if she had raised a house full of children on a narrow income, she would have been praised and respected for this “fault.” Because she does not have children, this trait is considered selfish, for a woman who did not reproduce could not be considered feminine. A woman who did not bear children was thought to be the opposite of everything domestic femininity was supposed to be: selfish, immoral and immodest.

As well, as Anna Lepine points out, a spinster, in particular, had a paradoxical relationship to domestic space, “at once alienated from the domestic home and cast as a born homemaker” (122). A spinster’s duty was to care for her aging parents and her siblings’ children, yet she was not given the same respect as a married mother in the same position. Public perception was that older women, particularly those of “gentle” birth, faced difficulties in earning their own income and were therefore dependent on fathers and husbands, rendering them a societal burden on the very engines women were supposed to protect and reinforce. The older, childless female body signified a breakdown in family structure and the ideology of separate spheres. Spinsters (and all older women who remained childless or whose children were past the age of marriage), then, were supposed to alleviate these public anxieties by “going in” to the private sphere and effacing themselves from the social world by what Lepine calls “a process of studied obliteration” (124).

The older or elderly knitting woman who knits or crochets unobserved in the semi-darkness at the margins of literary texts and Victorian society appears on the surface to be dependent and docile. She often knits within the confines of the home, largely
invisible both to the reader and to the world at large, except perhaps as an object of gentle
cynicism about the infirmity or irascibility of female old age. She has sometimes, like
Lisbeth Bede or Mrs. Poyser, fulfilled her duties as wife and mother and has obliterated
herself from the visibility of the public sphere. Yet the seemingly benign old knitting
woman, particularly if she is also childless, wields a subtle influence, one that writers like
Dickens and Conrad exploit in their explorations of power and class. Knitting and crochet,
unlike embroidery or sewing, are highly mobile crafts that Alison Lurie calls “nomadic”
skills: they do not require the maker to stay in one place while she works (“Supernatural”
177). Knitting and crochet, like all textile crafts, are also social activities, with patterns
and yarns, as well as the work itself, exchanged between women over formal and
informal visits. Moreover, both knitting and crochet are skills that cross classes from the
eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, becoming, instead of practical working-class skill
(knitting) or upper-class frivolity (crochet), socially-sanctioned middle-class activities
that reiterate middle-class values of charity, thrift, ingenuity and piety.

When a knitter or crocheter is mobile, she is not confined within the domestic
sphere or even within the sphere of her class. Mrs. Poyser can knit while supervising the
milking of the cows; Madame Defarge can knit in a rowdy crowd as the guillotine falls;
the malevolent women of Heart of Darkness can transpose their knitting from private
home to public place of business, all while maintaining virtuous, pious and charitable
appearances. The maker can, like Rose Crawley, move out of the class of her birth or she
can, like Madame Defarge, affect profoundly the lives of those whose station is above her
own. Moreover, her mobility and invisibility give the old woman knitter a power equal to
that of money: she traffics in information. Like Nellie Dean, the older, childless woman
who knits also circulates neighbourhood stories and gossip through the circulation of her own body in and out of the domestic sphere. She is able to repeatedly reinvent herself and her role in the engines of information, both creating and reinforcing doctrines of appropriate behaviour and negative consequences for those who do not adhere to these values. For Victorian writers, the older, knitting female body becomes a repository for anxieties about class mobility and female power, both exposing and at the same time reiterating public narratives of power, class, economics, surveillance, and definitions of private and public space.

Unlike the Dickens, Thackeray or Eliot examples above, Cranford is unique in that its middle-class population is made up almost entirely of older spinsters and widows. Middle-aged and old women are both at the centre of the action and around the periphery of the text. Perhaps the only novella or novel of the Victorian era to focus so completely on aging, “invisible” women, Cranford underscores Victorian anxieties about female power and the middle class. Though these women appear to be both powerless and harmless, through the interactions of Miss Matty Jenkyns, who knits politely in the domestic space at the centre of the novella, Miss Pole, the busybody who knits and crochets between and around the margins of the story, and Mary Smith, the knitting narrator of Cranford’s history, whose insider-outsider status often allies her with Miss Pole, Gaskell both exposes class as an ideological construction and reproduces class as a necessary construct for authority and control over a vast working poor. Miss Pole, in particular, who remains ageless, classless (she is the only character whose circumstances and/or family history are never named) and without a first name throughout the novella, also moves the most freely through the stratified layers of Cranford society, inserting
herself into the various classes and spreading information and stories in the process. While some of what she says is speculative or erroneous, Miss Pole wields power through information, particularly through the many secrets that she carries. At once a central and a marginalized character, whose name appears at all of Cranford’s most significant events but whose background and identity are obscured, Miss Pole, and by extension her shadow, Mary Smith, represent a frightening new breed of woman to a Britain in the throes of a sea change: one who can circulate freely and largely invisibly through class, gender and the public and private spheres both despite and because of her status as aging, childless woman.

*Cranford* was the second of Gaskell’s five novels, serialized in its first run in Dickens’ *Household Words* in 1851. Since its original publication *Cranford* has been Gaskell’s most popular novel, yet it has had a more conflicted history with critics. While initially not taken particularly seriously, perhaps in part because of the novel’s humour and cast of twittering elderly women, late twentieth-century criticism of *Cranford* began to focus more particularly on the satirical elements and utopian ingenuousness of Cranford against the modern financial machinery of neighbouring Drumble (considered a stand-in for Manchester), and by extension, against Gaskell’s other, more “industrial” novels. As Jill Rappaport has illustrated, most of this criticism highlighted those differences by delineating Cranford as feminine and domestic utopian space, and *Cranford* as a domestic novel, isolated and cut off from sites of social, economic and political power, and separate from the political and social concerns expounded in Gaskell’s other novels, like *Ruth* (1853) or *North and South* (1854-5) (95).
This stream of criticism has continued into the twenty-first century. Though it is often at pains to call Gaskell a novelist of both social and political conscience, it tends to mark Cranford and its inhabitants as quaint female relics of an English provincial past “who resist the social and cultural encroachments of the outside world,” and assesses the novel according to the success or failure of this all-female enclave (Cass 419). When critics argue that Cranford values “win” over Drumble’s, as Nina Auerbach did in her 1978 study of the novel, they do so from a particular set of assumptions: that Cranford operates as a subversive and separate female culture, isolated and homogeneous in its division from masculine financial and political order. Joseph Allen Boone reads in Cranford society a celebration of “communal interdependence and the saving economy of elegant, individual fortitude” and positive escape from heterosexual marriage (298). Jenny Uglow insists that the closed female space of Cranford ultimately helps to shape and transform the outside world of Drumble through the men who enter into the life of Cranford, arguing that they have a beneficial effect on the women’s lives in “prompting the women to modify those rules which have bound as well as supported them” (288). While Rappoport, in a more recent critique, argues that insularity should not be confused with stasis, she still suggests that Gaskell’s Cranford is a “world under glass,” a closed system that operates as a site of alternative economic power both adjacent to, and in defiance of, Drumble’s industry, through the female tradition of gift-giving. Contrary to conventional views of female Victorian gift-giving as selfless acts of charity or sacrifice, with marriage as the desired outcome, the women of Cranford take control of gift-giving to forge their own diverse alliances, and Rappaport suggests that, “lacking factory
engines but not nearly as old-fashioned as most accounts describe it to be, the female and feminized Cranford community is itself a tightly knit system of sympathetic energy” (69).

While Rappoport argues that Cranford society brings together contemporary theories on the circulation of capital and scientific theories on the conversion and conservation of energy, rendering Cranford more progressive and less backward-looking than other critics have suggested, her view of Cranford as an isolated experiment in female society is not radically different than that of the critics who argue that Drumble ultimately “wins” over Cranford. Cass suggests that Cranford’s story is one of loss and displacement, and that the women’s communal society and scruples will be erased by the invasive, masculinist values of neighbouring Drumble and all its attendant social and political machinery. It is a view echoed by Olivia Malfait, who argues that the story’s comedy functions as a means to negotiate the essential tragedy of Cranford’s female lives. Malfait suggests that the single women of Cranford are all ‘surplus’ women, viewed with suspicion by a Victorian society that places value only on women who reproduce or who are useful in the chain of production. As widows and spinsters, she asserts, Cranfordians replace marriage with housekeeping and attach disproportionate significance to it because it is their only alternative in the private sphere and the one part of their lives over which they can assert control. Domesticity and “elegant economy” become a shared theatrical exercise in hiding financial and social penury in a “static bubble of pre-industrialism” (73).

Whether one delineates Cranford as regenerative or degenerative society, however, the issue with this stream of criticism is that it predicates its argument on a clear division between domestic and public spaces, between female and male worlds, between
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century values and even between Cranford and Gaskell’s other novels. As Deirdre D’Albertis insists, just as Gaskell’s “industrial” novels expose and belie the myth of the separate spheres, so, too, does Cranford: “When we have privileged the separation of men’s and women’s cultures, Cranford has seemed to offer us a vision of how that division could be meaningful as well as realistic, poignant as well as productive. We have gone to Cranford to find a representation of this distinctive women’s culture, bypassing other novels by Gaskell that make such readings difficult, if not impossible” (173). These readings of Cranford also de-privilege class as a major concern of the novella. In her treatment of domestic ideology and the middle-class woman, Elizabeth Langland argues that in Victorian society, the middle-class wife, in contrast to prevailing social myths of a passive and helpless “angel of the house,” had a significant political and economic role both inside and outside the home in acquiring and maintaining social status for the family as a whole (291). Through prescribed practices of household management and social visits (including visits to the poor), middle-class women became responsible for establishing a model of Victorian class relations that placed the middle class at the top of a moral hierarchy, separate from a debauched aristocracy, and in charge of the wellbeing of the working class. Though in terms of gendered politics of power women might have been subservient to men, Langland insists, in terms of class, “they cooperated and participated with men in achieving middle-class control through the management of the lower classes” (294).

What critics have almost universally ignored, however, is that in Cranford, the assertion of class and class status is almost universally accompanied by anxiety, particularly after the death of Deborah Jenkyns, the most archetypal representative of
eighteenth-century class sensibilities. Though the women often appear homogeneous and seem to cooperate towards a common end, under the surface of the text are troubling relationships marked by tension and disconnection. When Miss Matty is to have cousins to stay with her on their way home from India, all her anxieties about the impending visit are framed in terms of the etiquette of the social code. When should she get up from the table? When should she leave him to masculine pursuits? Should she serve coffee? Underlying these questions is the fear that her cousins will mark and judge her for her fall in status, since Miss Matty has been reduced to one servant and a small house. Miss Matty feels she must prove her right to retain a middle-class status and these same anxieties are repeated at intervals throughout: should Miss Matty go to visit Mr. Holbrook at his home (40)? Should Betty Barker, whose early life was as a servant, have social precedence over Mrs. Fitz-Adam, whose father was a successful farmer (75-77)? How should one address Lady Glenmire (84-85)? How does one address Mr. Mulliner, Mrs. Jamieson’s butler (90-91)? Should one acknowledge Lady Jamieson publicly after she becomes Mrs. Hoggins?

In part what drives this almost constant anxiety is the necessity of at least maintaining the appearance of “gentility” despite the fall in social and economic status that accompanies remaining single and/or childless in Victorian society. So important is the ideal of “genteel” to the ladies of Cranford that the word is repeated at intervals, often as a form of protestation against, or insistence for, each woman’s right to a particular status within the community. Miss Matty laments to Mary Smith that after the death of her father she and her sister went from keeping three maids and a man to keeping only one servant-of-all-work, but suggests that their more straitened means does not exclude
her now from her inherited class status: “as Deborah used to say, we have always lived genteel, even if circumstances have compelled us to simplicity” (72). The ladies ponder how to receive Mrs. Fitz-Adam, whose birth and maiden name are “coarse” but whose widowhood allows her residence in “a large rambling house, which had been usually considered to confer a patent of gentility upon its tenant” (77-78). Miss Matty insists to Miss Pole and Mrs. Forrester, when Mary fails to bring her a turban from Drumble, that nothing “genteel” can be purchased out of the Drumble shops, an argument both in favour of Miss Matty’s retention of class status and against Mary’s ability (thanks to her industrialist-class father and Drumble residence) to distinguish true gentility. Miss Pole refers to the “genteel competency” with which each lady has been endowed when she, Mrs. Forrester, Mrs. Fitz-Adam and Mary meet secretly to discuss what they can do for Miss Matty (160). Even Mary Smith, through her accounting and recounting of the Cranford ladies’ preoccupation with gentility, becomes caught up in the performance of it when she and Miss Matty are surprised with an early call by Miss Pole: “So we threw our gentility with double force into our manners, and very genteel we were for two minutes while Miss Pole recovered breath, and excited our curiosity strongly by lifting up her hands in amazement, and bringing them down in silence, as if what she had to say was too big for words, and could only be expressed by pantomime” (135). In a society that does not value the older, childless female body, each of the characters in Cranford must anxiously and repeatedly prove her worth through her morality, her knowledge of the social code, and her ability to contribute to the hegemony of the middle-class, because she is afraid that she no longer belongs to it.
In her analysis of the public and private spaces of *Cranford*, Lepine argues that Gaskell “translated her culture’s understanding of women’s innate domesticity into a source of portable strength” (123). Rather than seeing success or failure in this all-female community solely in opposition to the patriarchal, masculine power represented by Drumble, she argues that the women of Cranford simply manipulate social rules to fit their circumstances. They adapt their restricted lives and limited means to make a home for themselves – and by extension a social and political role for themselves – where they happen to be. In *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Norris manipulates the symbol of female morality, plain sewing, to wield power within Sir Thomas’ drawing room. By getting up and searching for needles, buttons and thread, she seeks to establish her moral superiority and right to control the domestic space. In *Cranford* Miss Pole and Mary Smith take Mrs. Norris’ defiant act one step further, by seeking to establish a position and role for themselves within the spaces delineated as public: the walkways, roads, meeting houses, pubs and shops. In this way *Cranford* both exposes and reiterates a growing Victorian ethos in which middle-class women become responsible not just for the morality, virtue and comfort of their own families, but also the larger working world of seamstresses, factory girls and labouring-class wives and children. The extreme social anxiety experienced by Miss Matty, Mrs. Forrester, and even Miss Pole on occasion, is that of a society on the edge of change. As the villagers cope with the changes in wealth and status that make Mrs. Forrester poverty-stricken and Mrs. Fitz-Adam well-off, this potential quagmire at the same time allows women like Miss Pole and Mary Smith to redefine femininity, gentility, class and singlehood in their own image and on their own terms. As Parker insists, needlework had an important role in exploring and defining what it meant
to be a woman in the middle class, at a time when industrial capitalism was continually disrupting and changing the parameters of those roles (151-53). Knitting and crochet demonstrate the single woman’s respectability, virtue and moral right to instruct others, and by its portability also gives her permission to recreate in the community outside her walls the family which she has been denied. In other words, needlework ensures that these women become wives and mothers –become feminine – on a grander scale than simply that of a nuclear family.

Cranford is neither as backward nor as mired in a pre-Industrial past as many critics have argued. The textiles that fill the background of the novella all suggest a close physical and economic relationship with neighbouring Drumble. When Mary Smith asserts that “if we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material,” she is speaking of printed cambric and lawn, rendered commonplace and affordable by weaving machines and new dying processes invented in industrial towns like Manchester, and marketed as alternatives to more expensive silks and silk blends for all classes (J. Harris 229). When Miss Matty meets Mr. Holbrook at Mr. Johnson’s shop, she and Mary are in the process of buying fabric to match a “grey and black mousseline-de-laine” dress belonging to Miss Matty (38). Mousseline-de-laine is a fine woollen dress fabric constructed on a cotton warp that was invented in France in the 1830s (“mousseline de laine” Fairchild 371). It has a hand and weight similar to pure wool fabric, but was less expensive and more adept at taking dye in the printing process, particularly in steam printing, also popularized in the nineteenth century. In the same encounter, Miss Matty asks for “black sarsenet,” a soft silk fabric in plain or twill (raised) weave dating back to the fifteenth century, but popularized in the late eighteenth century,
when it was often used in linings and underdresses (Fairchild 490). Though silk was still comparatively expensive compared to its wool and cotton counterparts in the first half of the nineteenth century, the repeal of a law against the importation of foreign-made silk goods in 1826 and the development of the power loom in the 1830s led to a wider distribution of Manchester-, Macclesfield- and Spitalfields-produced goods. This in return helped create more demand for silk clothing, particularly among the newly wealthy to whom these silk fabrics were marketed. At two shillings and two pence a yard, Miss Matty’s sarsenet is still expensive (a farm labourer in 1860 might earn fourteen shillings a week, for example), but it is relatively affordable for the industrialized middle classes of Manchester, and would lend an impoverished country spinster the appearance of a status belied by her actual financial circumstances (B. Harris 255).

Even the humble wool flannel worn by Betty Barker’s prized cow benefits from the mills in Manchester. Flannel is a soft-woven fabric made from loosely spun yarns (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mostly from short staple wools) that often has a nap, or raised surface, given to the fabric by mechanically combing the fabric after weaving to loosen the fibres (“flannel” Fairchild 222-23). The rapid expansion of wool production in West Yorkshire in the early nineteenth century was tied closely to the invention of mechanical spinning, carding and fulling, and to the ready acceptance of these inventions by Yorkshire textile workers (Gunn 15). Wool flannel, just one of many fabrics that benefited from the West Yorkshire textile mills, was readily affordable and popularly used for working-class garments throughout the Victorian era, particularly those for children. In each of these examples, the textiles provide clues to the
contradictory economic and social status of the widows and spinsters of the village: silk for appearances and cotton lawn and wool flannel for practicality.

As critics such as Langland and Lepine demonstrate, the village of Cranford is also not as universally feminine as many critics have made it out to be, and neither are the single women of the village as powerless as they might seem to outside eyes. Cranford, they argue, is a world of women complicit in a larger societal effort to render invisible the architecture of the working class world that supports it. The women do this by first redefining the limits of the domestic sphere. As Lepine insists, the women of Cranford treat the whole of the village as a domestic space, rewriting the rules of middle-aged visibility as they go. Second, the women control how interactions between the classes are prescribed and iterated. The labouring-class world of shop-keepers, joiners, farmers and shoemakers exists around the margins of the novella: it is made up of the men who hide in the corners of Matilda Jenkyns’ kitchen (33), dress up in faded old livery to carry a sedan chair in the evening (83), and come to buy Miss Matilda’s tea when she is left destitute by the failure of her bank (171). Together, these men make up a significant portion of village life, and many of them have fairly prosperous or at least successful lives. Yet it is the older, single women who control the dissemination of knowledge: they decide what constitutes “class,” who belongs and who does not, and how and under what circumstances their intercourse should proceed. They are the ones who insist that while Deborah and Matty’s brother, Peter, was a “very gentlemanly boy in many things,” Mr. Holbrook is not gentlemanly enough (63, 38). Instead of the women making themselves invisible by “going in,” they render the labouring classes invisible in the ordering of their world. As Langland points out, they are “adept at manipulating cultural codes and
controlling the discursive practices that signal class – dress, lodging, and the rules of etiquette encompassing calls and cuts” (299). More importantly, the largely invisible population of working-class men is complicit in this ordering of the village.

Yet the women, particularly Miss Pole and Mary Smith, do more than render the working class invisible. They make themselves responsible for its proper function, by holding themselves accountable for its spiritual, moral, and philanthropic values. They give themselves the role of “mother” to the whole community. Simon Gunn argues that culture (in the form of clubs, theatre, exhibitions and shopping) was a crucial site for the articulation of class and power in northern British industrial cities in the Victorian era. He posits that in the early Victorian era (pre-1840), elite culture was confined and exclusive and centred on private life. It was directed by self-selecting urban elites and based out of the home or small clubs and societies, not unlike the social culture of the Cranford ladies. After 1840, he argues, industrial elite culture changed with the rise of the civic. The growth of town halls and programs of urban improvement as well as the proliferation of men’s clubs changed the rules of engagement and belonging. Rather than self-selection, it was proper knowledge of etiquette and form that gave entrance to elite social life, with an emphasis on public visibility and display and ritualised forms for public behaviour (27-35). With its close ties to the industrial culture of Drumble/Manchester, the village of Cranford is poised at the juncture of this shift in cultural and social power. While Mrs. Jamieson and the Jenkyns sisters represent the old conceptualizations of elite culture in the village, there is a shifting balance of power and a new definition of gentility happening at the periphery of the novella.
Where once Deborah Jenkyns and her mother taught the village girls to read and do plain sewing, the tradesmen now send their daughters to a Ladies’ Seminary, where young women learn fancy work as well as painting, singing and other accomplishments considered appropriate for the new middle-class woman’s life: accomplishments meant to teach them the proper etiquette and form for entry into elite social culture. When Mrs. Fitz-Adam returns to the village after the death of her tradesman husband, she takes up residence in a large house that once belonged to the daughter of an earl and wears a “rustling black silk” instead of the more class-appropriate silk and worsted blend bombazine (76). Sound here is as an important indicator of class as the fabric choice: pure silk makes a distinctive noise when it rubs against itself, while the addition of worsted wool deadens the sound of the fabric. In a society where middle-class widows were enjoined to be silent above all things, by wearing pure silk Mrs. Fitz-Adam literally announces both her presence and her class aspirations, characterizing herself as *nouveau-riche* against Mrs. Forrester’s impoverished gentility. When Miss Matty takes to selling tea, the “well-to-do tradespeople and rich farmers’ wives” come to her, not for the Congou and Souchong of the gentry, but for the showier and more expensive Gunpowder and Pekoe varieties (170). It becomes apparent that the old rules of belonging and inclusion no longer function in keeping the classes separate.

The anxiety with which the central characters treat each social occasion suggests that the old, assumed rules of class no longer completely apply. Though the older women – Miss Matty, Miss Pole, Mrs. Forrester – turn instinctively to Mrs. Jamieson, as a representative of the upper class, for advice on how to behave and whom to recognize, they (and Miss Pole in particular) end up ignoring much of what she says. When Mrs.
Jamieson refuses to recognize the new Mrs. Hoggins, for example, it does not stop the rest of the women from continuing to see her. Yet whether Mrs. Jamieson is even as “genteel” as she likes to think herself is questionable as she betrays a less-than-perfect sense of etiquette by drawing down the blinds of her windows as if for a death, a superstitious tradition that was largely practiced by the working-class in Britain (168). The social world around them is changing and what now constitutes “genteel” is changing as well. Cranford is far from isolated: it is at a turning point in the social contract.

Textiles and textile-making were a significant part of this reorganization of the social code. Textiles had traditionally been a female inheritance, along with china, silver, furniture and other “moveable” goods. These items were normally received as a dowry at a woman’s marriage, in contrast to a man’s inheritance, which was received upon the death of his parents, although this was not always the case. In Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), for example, the Dashwoods take their inheritance (china, furniture and textile goods) with them upon the death of Mr. Dashwood, since his son is to inherit the estate. In a pre-Victorian society, a girl of the aspiring classes was encouraged to make fine textiles, such as tablecloths, sheets, underclothes and embroidered household articles, to take with her into marriage. These goods formed her worldly wealth and contributed to showing the social world the taste, class and talent of their maker (Barber 148-150). For Victorians in an industrialized Britain, the symbolic value of moveables became even more important than their physical intent, for it was *things*, especially fine, handmade things, that advertised the wealth and taste of the family that owned them. Middle-class girls and women were exhorted to produce, make and exchange hand-made
textiles as tangible proof of their economic value to society, despite the irony that the things they made were no longer necessary to household management. As Christine Bayles Kortsch points out, handmade textiles marked a Victorian woman’s power and creativity as much as her subjection, for they reinforced a family’s social position. Girls were taught early to carefully “read” textiles for their social and cultural significance (8-14). Knitting and crochet become an important way for some of the women, particularly Miss Pole and Mary Smith, to compensate for their lack of husband or child by proving their worth in the new social hierarchy and asserting their own fitness for what Langland terms the work of achieving middle-class control (291).

Unlike weaving, which relies on the interlacement of multiple threads in a right-angled plane, both knitting and crochet are created through the manipulation of single long threads with either a crochet hook or a pair of knitting needles, so that all the courses (or rounds) of knitting or crochet lie parallel and in one plane (Rutt 7). Each course is secured to the previous course through the loops of that previous round, building a fabric that is made of interlocking loops, secured only on the last course through a singular (in the case of crocheting) loop or series (knitting) of lateral loops. The resulting fabric is both pliable and stretchy, allowing it to be molded or draped to the human body, making knitted goods ideal for hands, feet and heads in particular. Unlike any other form of textile-making, both knitting and crocheting are very portable, in that they can be brought to new locations with ease, and mobile, meaning that their manufacture does not require the maker to remain stationary. A knitter or crocheter can walk, stand, carry on a conversation, and attend to other tasks, such as minding children or tending to sheep or other livestock.
As with other forms of textile-making, the origins and history of knitting and crochet are not entirely known, in part because these textiles were made to be used and so few of them survive intact. In addition, there are few written histories of knitting from prior to the nineteenth century, and none of crochet, as many of the techniques and histories of these crafts were passed through oral traditions, or, as in the case of crochet, the techniques were an amalgam of other textile traditions that evolved loosely over the course of several centuries until its origins were obscured. The oldest fragments left of what contemporary scholars define strictly as “knitting” date largely to the twelfth to fifteenth century CE, including a small number of knitted caps of fifteenth-century Welsh origin, but there is speculation on the part of several historians that some form of the craft may even pre-date weaving (Rutt 58-59).

Certainly the best and most complete evidence of the rise and expansion of British hand knitting comes from the sixteenth century, during Elizabeth I’s reign. Though expensive imported silk stockings and locally made woollen knits are listed in the household inventories of Henry VII and Edward VI, knitted garments only became high fashion in England at the end of the sixteenth century. While Rutt speculates that this was because of the mechanization through waterpower of the draw plates needed to make fine steel knitting needles, the increasing costs of imported silk and the new Elizabethan fashion for short trunks may also have led to the development of finer woollen knitting than had hitherto been possible (Rutt 68-69, O’Connell Edwards 70-73). This also led to a rapid diffusion of knitting skills throughout the middle and lower levels of society. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the rage for knitted stockings had created both a cottage knitting industry in the manufacture of fine jersey stockings in such centres as
Richmond, Doncaster, Norwich and Leicester (among others), and the domestic practice of knitting more durable woollen or worsted stockings for use within the immediate family (Rutt 75). It is estimated that by early 1600, England and Wales had two hundred thousand knitters, both male and female, producing over twenty million pairs of stockings a year for both the home market and export abroad (Thirsk 50).

After the seventeenth-century invention of mechanized framework knitting, however, there began to be a distinctive differentiation between the production of stockings for the upper classes and those of the lower. The fine wool and silk stockings worn by the gentry tended to be made by professionalized male framework knitters, with seams cut and sewn to fit. The dark and durable woollen stockings worn by the working classes became overwhelmingly the occupation of women and child hand-knitters working for a pittance, many of whom also worked as servants and labourers, a history to which Gaskell refers when she describes Lady Glenmire and Miss Pole setting out on a long walk “to find some old woman who was famous for her skill in knitting woollen stockings” (Gaskell 121, Rutt 75–79). While all classes used knitted garments, the upper classes were more likely to buy than make their own, while the lower classes were more likely to employ family members or female neighbours to produce what they needed. In addition, though fine stocking and garment knitting might have started as the occupation of master craftsmen, its portability and the ease with which one could learn the basic skills rendered knitting a choice occupation for families needing additional income, and knitting in Britain after the seventeenth century belonged generally to the most impoverished classes (O’Connell Edwards 70). For many rural families into the nineteenth century, hand knitting was a sideline to regular farming, fishing and other
duties, most likely to be practiced by the women, children and elderly of the family than by able-bodied men able to find seasonal employment in factories or mills, or on fishing or transport ships. Although men did knit for pay, the occupation was always something with which to occupy hands (and bring in a few much needed shillings) during the fallow winter months and it was considered a part-time occupation rather than a trade (O’Connell Edwards 70). It must be noted as well that the economic value of hand knitting was of varying importance to different knitters, even as late as the nineteenth century. For some, it was a vital contribution to the household income, and for others it was a pastime that earned a little spending money (Rutt 89). Long hours were needed, even for a modest return, and while knitting with better and finer yarn could put a premium on wages, access to this yarn was often difficult for the poorest classes (O’Connell Edwards 73-75).

The initial rage for knitted stockings led to the development of specialized “schools” across Britain designed to instruct itinerant and poor children in the skills of hand knitting and spinning during the second half of Elizabeth’s reign, a tradition that was continued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through parish-run schools, orphanages and workhouses. In many cases these “schools,” as closely tied to Quaker, Methodist and other evangelical churches as to the Church of England, were also considered a form of poor relief while keeping children out of mischief and earning money for their keep (Rutt 76). The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor, founded in the late eighteenth century as an offshoot of the Church of England, promoted knitting as part of a Christian work ethic. “Schools of industry,” which were parish-run schools for poor children, taught knitting and rewarded children for their
knitting skills, while the London Foundling Hospital, like other institutions of its kind, taught knitting and sold the finished items to help defray the costs of a child’s keep (O’Connell Edwards 76-79). Knitting was a standard part of workhouse life by the early eighteenth century, both as a benefit to the inmates’ souls and as a means of reducing the financial burdens on the parish (O’Connell Edwards 79). Knitting was also prescribed as a treatment for women with mental disorders at The Retreat in York, built in 1792, the first hospital in England for this purpose (Rutt 109). As Rutt insists, hand knitting, in Britain in the late eighteenth century, was inextricable from working class life: it was largely practical and done by those “without social pretensions” (97).

By the early nineteenth century, when Cranford is supposed to take place, there were many fewer cottage hand knitters producing stockings for pay than there had been even fifty years previous. Hosiery, particularly silk and wool stockings, was now being produced by commercial mills, although there were pockets of working hand knitters in such rural areas as Scotland, Wales and the Yorkshire Dales, directly north of Manchester. However, as knitting had become associated with working-class culture and frugal living over the course of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, it had also become enmeshed in moral dictums about poverty and gentility, particularly among the laity of the evangelical Protestant churches that would go on to form the backbone of the industrialist elite. Both at home and at charity schools in the eighteenth century, children of the working classes were taught to knit at a very early age. Knitting was impressed upon them as a Christian virtue, invested with piety, industry and frugality, and inculcating in the practitioner patience and moral character. Knitting was a way to keep hands busy, even at night or by candlelight, when all other forms of textile work would be impossible,
and knitting made a virtue of thrift, as Esther Benzeville insists in 1825: “It may be done at any light or with a child in the arms; and when you are tired of stirring work, knitting serves very well for a rest….A thrifty cottager’s wife has no stockings for her husband or herself but what she knits, at least until she has children old enough to do them for her” (Qtd in Rutt 102-3). Benzeville’s pious admonition to the working-class woman, and her insistence that knitting “serves very well” as a rest from labour, reveal the schism in how knitting was portrayed to middle-class women. Both Miss Matty and Miss Pole would have been of the generation of women taught to knit as young girls to ingrain into them the Christian values of modesty, humility, thrift and hard work. Miss Matty is, after all, the daughter of a somewhat improvident rector, and has very little by way of a jointure or inheritance after his death. Miss Matty’s mother, too, whose early letters about dress and finery become more concerned with the management of the poor through the course of her marriage, teaches Deborah and Miss Matty to sew, read and keep house, and would have taught them the value of domestic economy (56-57). As it is with Mrs. Bates and Lisbeth Bede, knitting would not have been as “genteel” a pastime as embroidery or fancy work, but it would have been practical and a useful form of economy for the financial circumstances that would require Miss Matty to live more “simply” once she reached adulthood (72). Moreover, it would have given her the right to concern herself with how women below her in class also spent their time. About Miss Pole we know much less, as her financial circumstances are never described in detail, but as she is always described as Miss Matty’s contemporary and a friend of her youth, we are led to assume that she might also have learned to knit at the same time.
The first physical evidence of knitting in *Cranford*, however, marks the immense change in the image and popularity of knitting in the first half of the nineteenth century. Towards the beginning of the novella, Miss Pole and Jessie Brown bond over their love of knitting, “on the strength of the Shetland wool and the new knitting stitches” (17). Deborah Jenkyns is mortified, however, to hear Jessie talk about her uncle, a shopkeeper in Edinburgh who “has the best assortment of Shetland goods of any in Edinbro,” “for the Honourable Mrs. Jamieson was sitting at the card-table nearest Miss Jessie, and what would she say or think, if she found out that she was in the same room with a shopkeeper’s niece!” (12-13). Jessie’s mention of her shopkeeper uncle, though her father is a retired officer (and therefore a gentleman), has the taint of commerce, which makes her Mrs. Jamieson’s social inferior. Yet under the surface of their relationship, Jessie Brown’s knitting speaks to a changing social dynamic.

Around the time that Victoria ascended to the throne, knitting exploded in popularity in Britain. Rutt insists that there were compelling reasons for the knitting craze. Mechanized spinning made fine, long staple yarn for knitting readily available. The fall of Napoleon in 1815 opened British trade with the continent, particularly with Germany and the merino wool dealers of the Saxony region. The fine wool of merino sheep took dye very well, offering a larger colour range than had hitherto been seen in Britain and stimulating the popularity of both tapestry embroidery (commonly called ‘Berlin work’) and knitting (111-12). Knitting traditions in continental Europe had also been more exclusively confined to the upper classes than they had in Britain, particularly in France and Germany, with an emphasis on fine stitches and detailed colour work. Additionally, new routes opened up trade with islands like the Azores, the Shetlands and Iceland, while
new printing processes and the expansion of publishing houses made printed knitting instructions, guides and patterns affordable and available. This allowed lace and other specialty knitting stitches formerly limited to these isolated areas to circulate freely (O’Connell Edwards 79-82).

Whether its popularity spawned the proliferation of knitting books or whether knitting books themselves helped to turn a practical activity into a national pastime, there was a staggering number of books, written patterns and magazines devoted to knitting in the 1840s and 50s. One of the most popular of these early authors was Jane Gauguin, whose first book, *Small Work on Fancy Knitting*, appeared in 1837 and whose 1840 *The Lady’s Assistant* went through twenty-two printings (Lycan 28). Knitting historian Mary Lycan has speculated that the uncle who has “the best assortment of Shetland goods of anyone in Edinbro’” may, in fact, have been based on Gauguin’s husband, John James Gauguin, a successful bookseller and, together with his wife, proprietor of materials for “ladies’ fancy works” in Edinburgh (Lycan 28-29, Sowerby 13). The “new” stitches that Miss Pole and Jessie Brown love so much are likely those of Gauguin’s *The Ladies’ Assistant*, Miss Watts’ *The Ladies’ Knitting and Netting Book* (1837), or Frances Lambert’s *My Knitting Book* (1842), which introduced many of the stitches used in fine Shetland lace, like slanted increases and decreases, eyelets and faggoting.

Regardless of which came first, books and periodicals of knitting, crochet and embroidery changed how knitting was perceived in Victorian culture. Though the new industrialist class might have sprung from humble roots, it placed a tremendous value on educating its children. Where knitting patterns had previously been exchanged and transmitted orally, the “receipts” contained within the new knitting books put knitting on
a par with embroidery and other fancy work: they assumed a literate, educated reader. Instructions were written out, not charted as they are today, and necessitated long instructions that left much to the interpretation (and understanding!) of the knitter. Many of the authors also allied themselves and their readers with the upper classes. Gaugain’s The Lady’s Assistant listed an impressive number of patronesses and subscribers of the Scottish landed classes, including Queen Adelaide. Frances Lambert described herself in her books as “Embroideress to the Queen” and her patterns employed fine cottons, silk and Berlin wool, all expensive yarns available only to wealthier readers.

Knitting became enfolded into new rhetoric about class. Gunn argues that the middle ranks of British society had always existed, but what made the “new” middle class so pervasive and so powerful starting in the late eighteenth century was that the rhetoric of class construction began to be defined in moral and political terms (20-27). Hand knitting, like other domestic housekeeping skills, was ascribed an extraordinary moral value in the publications of the 1840s and 50s. Clarke and Company’s anonymously published 1842/1843 The Ladies’ Handbook of Knitting, Netting and Crochet, though an extreme example, piously admonishes the young woman knitter, “as she plies her needle or exercises her judgment or ingenuity in the choice of colours or materials, or in the invention of new developments of creative genius, ever to remember to exercise those powers as a Christian…and let her be careful to make all she does a sacrifice acceptable to her God” (qtd. in Rutt 116). This extended to both sides of the Atlantic. The Workwoman’s Guide (1837) published anonymously by “A Lady” in the United States for the benefit of “Clergymen’s Wives, Young Married Women, School-
mistresses and Ladies’ Maids,” and which also had a chapter devoted to knitting, insisted that upper-class readers would also benefit from the instructions contained therein:

A woman, who in the upper classes of society, has taken her place at the head of a family, has undertaken a high and responsible situation; but one, in which, by daily attention to certain humble details, she can essentially serve the welfare of some who are dear to her, and of many who are dependent on her…(The author) believes that very many of them are further qualified, as far as good will and natural intelligence can go, to discharge those humbler, but not less honourable, parts of their calling, to which she has alluded, but are deterred from applying to them (or much embarrassed if they do), from finding that, whilst they are proficient in many beautiful accomplishments, and not without cultivation in the more solid parts of information, they are yet mere novices in other unostentatious attainments, that have become indispensable to their domestic efficiency. (iv)

The emphasis in *The Workwoman’s Guide* on the superiority of middle-class knowledge and morality through the act of keeping house also permeates every knitting book published in the middle of the nineteenth century. Gunn argues, using Bourdieu’s conception of cultural hierarchies and the definitions of “taste” as markers in delineating and maintaining social boundaries between status groups, that culture was a crucial domain for the articulation of class in the Victorian industrial city. I am going to argue that knitting, as a form of cultural expression, was part of this domain. Knitting was a “humble” art, steeped in a history of thrift and lack of pretension, which rendered knitting the moral opposite of the fine embroidery of the upper classes. Craft work was thought to bring order and comfort to the middle-class home, prevent idle gossip and keep women from engrossing themselves in political and social issues outside the home. By couching knitting within the language of housekeeping, the middle-class woman who knit was invested with a moral and physical authority over the labouring classes and the upper classes. In Cranford, however, it is the middle-aged spinsters who give themselves that authority.
Kay Helen Heath argues that age was a relatively new concept in Western culture, and that for centuries aging had been identified with stages of life rather than biological age. In the eighteenth century new emphases on science and aging as a “scientific problem with a technical solution,” led to age being measured chronologically, against both youthfulness and productivity (8). Whereas age had previously been marked by changes in family and community status, by the mid-nineteenth century age was measured by a number: fifteen to thirty marked the marriageable age for women (child-bearing years), and thirty marked a woman’s entrance into spinsterhood (28-30). Spinsterhood was characterized by limited social and financial opportunities for women, particularly those above the middle class, who could not take on menial labour to support themselves and still maintain their class status, and Heath insists that old age, particularly in women, was associated with passivity.

In the opening chapter there are six spinsters and two near-spinsters in Cranford who appear to share more or less the same financial position: Miss Jenkyns, Miss Matty, Miss Pole, Miss Betty and her sister, and Captain Brown’s ailing elder daughter. Miss Jessie is a little more than ten years younger than her sister, which makes her close to thirty and at the cusp of spinsterhood (29). Mary Smith must be similar in age to Miss Jessie, since her father appears to be well-known to the Jenkyns but not a contemporary (27, 165), and Mary does at one point self-identify as a “well-to-do and happy young woman” (105). At first the system of etiquette that guides the village appears stable and unchanging. Acting as a narrator outside of Cranford, but with inside knowledge of its customs, Mary describes the habits of the villagers in universal terms, much like one of the many handbooks to social conduct published in the Victorian era (Meir 3-5). For
example, Mary asserts that “the inhabitants of Cranford kept early hours, and clattered home in their pattens, under the guidance of a lantern-bearer, about nine o’clock at night; and the whole town was abed and asleep by half-past ten” (7-8). By not anchoring her description to an individual person or scenery, argues Meir, Mary’s narration “suggests that the ‘rules and regulations’ are perennial, passed down from one generation to the next,” and circulated from upper class to lower class (4). Cranford life, with its systems of class delineation and “appropriate” behaviour, appears natural.

However, much of the code of conduct in the opening chapters is a fiction maintained by Miss Jenkyns. It is Miss Jenkyns who does not wish Mrs. Jamieson to hear of Miss Jessie’s connections to the shop. It is Miss Jenkyns who insists that Samuel Johnson is more moral than Charles Dickens (13), and Miss Jenkyns who insinuates that Miss Jessie’s dimples make her appear too childlike for a woman on the brink of spinsterhood (10). Moreover, Miss Jenkyns does not practice any form of textile-making. She reads, she writes letters and directs others: it is Miss Matty and Mary, for example, who follow Miss Jenkyns’ directions in spreading out newspapers, cutting them out and stitching them together to protect the carpet (20). Miss Jenkyns, whom Mary describes as “stately and grand,” assumes the role of the family patriarch of this unusual “family” of women, by ordering their days and making the social rules for belonging and exclusion. When Miss Jenkyns dies, it creates a vacuum in the social and political leadership of the village, with no one person at first appearing either ready or interested in filling that role.

Of the remaining women, four are described as knitting: Miss Matty, Miss Pole, Jessie and Mary. Miss Matty knits “two to three hours” a day in the winter months (52). Usually she knits garters “in a variety of dainty stitches” (tied just below the knee and
designed to hold up a lady’s stockings) that she gives to dear friends as a token of her esteem and affection (155). While she is often described as knitting, it is always confined within the domestic space of her own home (52, 134, 155, 172-73). Miss Matty’s knitting is so beautiful that Mary makes a clumsy joke about dropping a garter in the street “in order to have it admired,” a joke that alarms Miss Matty’s delicate sense of propriety because of its association with the intimate parts of the body that lie hidden by petticoats and a skirt (155). Miss Matty also sings out of key as she knits, as Mary points out: “I found out from the words, far more than the attempt at the tune, that it was the Old Hundredth” (173). “The Old Hundredth,” whose tune is also used to sing the doxology “Praise God from Whom all blessings flow,” emphasizes Miss Matty’s simple faith and innocence. Miss Matty, while born to an earlier generation, is the Victorian ideal: humble, patient, sweet and accepting of all the vagaries of fate that have left her destitute.

Miss Pole and Jessie Brown are of differing ages, yet they are both quick to catch on to the power of the “new knitting stitches” and bond over their enthusiasm for the craft. In the paragraph immediately following the narrator’s discussion of the knitting intimacy between Miss Pole and Jessie Brown, Mary explains that Jessie and her father are obliged to pinch and save because of the illness of Jessie’s older sister. Mary’s initial negative assessment of Jessie’s character is revised because of Jessie’s dedicated and patient nursing skills: “All this was borne by Miss Jessie and her father with more than placidity – with absolute tenderness. I forgave Miss Jessie her singing out of tune, and her juvenility of dress, when I saw her at home” (17). In this light, Jessie’s knitting is invested with the same virtuous self-denial as Miss Mattie’s, even though the details of
what Jessie knits are not given and Jessie is not described as knitting at any point beyond this first description of her intimacy with Miss Pole.

Jessie and Miss Matty are each described in terms of “patience, her humility, her sweetness” and quiet acceptance of the vagaries of fate that leaves each woman poverty-stricken (155, 27). Miss Mattie and Jessie are linked by their knitting as well as their interests, when, in emotional confusion, Jessie picks up Miss Matty’s knitting and works at it on the return of Major Gordon (28). Because of her modesty, charity and patience – the virtues of the new middle-class woman – Jessie, though socially and financially not Mrs. Jamieson’s equal, is invested with a moral authority greater than that of the well-born but indolent Mrs. Jamieson, and her future as the wife of a well-placed officer assures her place in reiterating and teaching those values to a larger public sphere.

Moreover, Jessie is the younger sister given the happy fate that Miss Matty might have had: after the death of her sister, Jessie marries a newly returned and still single Major Gordon, and becomes the mother of two children. Mary’s inept joke about dropping a garter in the street becomes a metaphor for the nascent sexuality that will not come to fruition in either herself or Miss Matty: that of sexual intercourse and creating children. Miss Matty, who was born in the eighteenth century, would have grown up in a time when women wore no underwear – or at least nothing that resembles modern underthings. Women of all classes wore layers of petticoats and/or a chemise under their dresses, but bloomers only became popularized (if more than marginally scandalous) around 1810 (Falluel et al. 45). Falluel and others assert that the garter marked the line beyond which a woman was naked, and the removing of a garter was a symbolic and highly sexualized act, since a woman was only expected to sleep naked once in her life,
on her wedding night. In the eighteenth century garters were often embroidered with amorous phrases, and Miss Mattie’s “delicately knitted” garters are somewhat ironic references to a deflowering that she will never experience (Falluel et al. 45-46).

Miss Pole, based on her knitting knowledge and practice, is, in theory, Miss Jessie’s equal both in thrift and morality. However, Miss Pole’s love of knitting is quickly succeeded by a love of crochet; a love which, incidentally, also drives her to send Mary Smith on many sundry missions in Drumble to acquire yarn and patterns (18). Crochet, unlike knitting, has a more recent history and a mixed class pedigree. Despite the relative simplicity of the craft, which utilizes one hooked needle and a long length of string, there is currently no convincing evidence to suggest how old crochet is or where it came from beyond its appearance in the early nineteenth century. While several historians speculate that the craft might have developed concurrently within a northern European tradition of “shepherd’s knitting” (often now known as “Tunisian crochet” or “afghan stitch”) in which hooked implements were used to create garments that were then felted to protect the wearer from the cold and wind, fine crochet, at least as the inhabitants of Cranford would know it, more likely originated from European tambour embroidery in the eighteenth century (Potter 11-15). Tambour, which came to Europe from Asia and the Middle East, and which was practiced in drawing rooms all over Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth century and very early nineteenth century, was a technique in which a fine hooked needle was used to create chained stitches on a background fabric that had been pulled taut over a drum or frame, as Mrs. Grant does in Mansfield Park. When the background fabric was removed and tambour was practiced “in the air,” the resulting stitches became modern crochet lace.
Where knitting was almost exclusively a labouring-class or practical occupation before the nineteenth century, tambour embroidery was practiced by both the leisured classes at a hobbyist level and by professional, working-class embroiderers, most of them women, who decorated fabric for the clothing of the upper classes (Potter 20). Tambour was often embroidered on muslin and gauze, and popularly used to trim gowns, shawls, reticules and men’s waistcoats, particularly in the late eighteenth century. Though the finished appearance of tambour work was quite delicate, because the thread was continuous it required less concentration than other forms of embroidery popular in the eighteenth century. This rendered tambour a popular pastime for social calls between women: it made the maker appear industrious while still giving the maker time to visit. It was quite easy to learn, which also made tambour work a viable trade for young women who had learned both plain sewing and some of the basics of embroidery at parish schools and benefit societies much like the one started by Deborah Jenkyns and her mother, and recalled by Miss Matty many years later (49).

Not invested with knitting’s more practical history, crochet, in the nineteenth century, was always considered knitting’s showier and more frivolous cousin, since it was most often used for the making of lace trim, baby clothing and decorative items for the home. Crochet was not included in The Workwoman’s Guide, or in other mid-nineteenth century guides dedicated to textile work as a form of governance over the home, servants and by extension the labouring classes as a whole. The Ladies’ Handbook of Knitting, Netting and Crochet, however, ponderously insists that crochet, like knitting, can lead to “moral excellence” in the maker when it is practiced with humility and faith in God: “These works may be conducive, in a high degree, to the development of family
affection, and the promotion, to a vast extent, of the purposes of genuine charity, benevolence and friendship…her work, and the power and skill to plan and execute it, is an emanation of the immortal mind” (50). Unlike knitting, which was appropriated from the labouring class to serve as a middle-class marker of humility and piety, crochet was appropriated, like embroidery, from the upper classes to serve as a marker of taste and education as well as charity.

What does this say about Miss Pole? Miss Pole knits and she crochets. She loves crochet enough to take her work to dinner at her cousin’s, a solecism that speaks to Miss Pole’s obsession with the craft. Though a woman might carry her textile work with her for daytime visits between women, the only time she practiced textile work in mixed company was at home, during informal gatherings, much as Fanny Price does after the family dinner in Mansfield Park while Crawford reads aloud to them from Shakespeare’s Henry VIII (271-2). When Mr. Holbrook proposes to read to them, she assents so that she can “count her stitches without having to talk” (45). In her discussion of the caps that the Cranford women wear, Lepine comments on the way they wear indoor caps, rather than outdoor hats or bonnets (128). When they go to visit Mr. Holbrook, they simply wear calashes, a hood popularized in the eighteenth century, over their caps to transport themselves from space to space. Lepine argues the calash amounts to little more than a roof over their heads, like a snail with its shell, and that by “carrying the private sphere with them wherever they go,” they are able to expand the boundaries of their own domestic spaces (128). Knitting and crochet also allow Miss Pole to do the same: in her industrious crocheting Miss Pole treats Mr. Holbrook’s home as her own.
Additionally, while there is a considerable moral value in being *busy*, Miss Pole’s interest in the craft borders on mania. In her correspondence with Mary, every letter is accompanied by multiple enjoinders and requests, “for at the end of every sentence of news, came a fresh direction as to some crochet commission of which I was to execute for her” (18). Unlike Miss Matty’s beautifully knitted garters, there is also no evidence that Miss Pole gives the results of her work away, either in friendship or charity. Nor is there any evidence that her knitting and crochet render her, like Jessie Brown, a more patient or humble woman, for her knitting and crochet are not accompanied or followed by any virtuous act.

Miss Pole’s position within the original social hierarchy of the village is somewhat obscured. Although we learn immediately that Jessie and her sister are the daughters of a “half-pay” officer related through birth or marriage to a tradesman in Edinburgh, we are never given the same information about Miss Pole’s family. The Jenkyns sisters are the daughters of a clergyman, Mrs. Forrester was “born a Tyrrell,” Mrs. Fitz-Adam is the daughter of a successful farmer, Betty Barker, the daughter of a clerk, and Mary Smith, the daughter of a village elite turned minor industrialist in the cotton trade: in a town where “an unmarried woman retains the station her father occupied,” (168) it is somewhat surprising that Miss Pole’s father’s occupation is never named. While it is clear from her reminiscences about the Assembly Room that Miss Pole was a childhood friend of Miss Matty’s (99) and that Miss Pole used to visit at her home (49), it is not completely clear where Miss Pole fits in the social hierarchy. We learn that Miss Pole has yeoman farming connections in the form of her second or third cousin, Thomas Holbrook, who also occasionally visited the Jenkyns home, but that he
was also not considered close enough in rank to be a suitable spouse for Miss Matty (68, 38). Is Miss Pole the social equal of Miss Matty in terms of birth? Or is she, like Betty Barker, adept at insinuating herself into the social fabric of the village? Gaskell leaves this question deliberately unanswered.

Though Miss Pole is apparently productive with her knitting and her crochet, we are also never told what it is that she makes as we are with Miss Matty. Is Miss Pole’s work for a charity bazaar? Or does she sell it on the side? By the early nineteenth century, the middle classes could also make money from knitting, albeit privately, since earning money was not considered “genteel.” The beginning of this movement appears in Austen’s *Persuasion*, where knitting becomes a form of therapy for the ailing but gently-born Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith is taught to knit by her lower-class nurse and uses her newfound skill for small and frivolous works that she sells, discretely, and for charity, with the help of Nurse Rooke. Besides a well-placed intermediary who had access to purchasers with discretionary spending ability, as O’Connell Edwards points out, there began to be at least a few places where middle-class women could sell their hand-made articles, including the Newcastle Repository, set up in 1825 for “industrious females to dispose of their work, including knitting, in a discrete manner” (76).

Mary, in contrast to the others, is described as knitting only once, while she waits to go to Signor Brunoni’s magic show (102). She is more often doing plain sewing and spends much of her visits to Cranford working on her father’s shirts (32, 52, 74, 149). As it happens, she finds it a “capital time” to get through her work, since they do not read or walk much in Cranford (32). Mary’s sewing also causes friction with Miss Matty. Always chary with the expense of candles, Miss Matty has learned to knit in the semi-
darkness in the late afternoons and evenings, which makes Mary’s sewing problematic, since sewing requires more light than knitting (52). Mary, as a guest in Miss Matty’s home and as a younger woman, must work around Miss Matty by sewing by firelight, sometimes while Miss Matty is sleeping. She cannot “keep a blind man’s holiday,” as Miss Matty instructs her, since her work is necessary to her father’s appearance of success. Mary’s sewing reveals both her financial position and her marriage prospects.

By the mid-nineteenth century men’s shirts had become more fitted to the body and the sleeves tighter, with a more pronounced armscye than had been popular during the Regency period, and they were most often made in white, since this colour was the hardest to maintain and keep clean. Making and maintaining such a shirt was time-consuming and a successful man generally had his shirts made for him by a tailor. That Mary is constantly at work on her father’s shirts suggests that he is not as successful as Mary would like to portray him. It also suggests, albeit more obliquely, that she is without immediate marriage prospects, since fancy work was one of the accomplishments practiced on every social occasion by young marriageable women of the middle and upper classes (Kortsch 25).

Because Mary spends all her holidays in Cranford, in the society of elderly women, there is some question as to whether her father has the business connections to put Mary in the way of meeting eligible men of the right class and background for marriage. It also leaves in doubt her social station in the village, a doubt of which Mary is very much aware, though she pretends not to notice. While Mary Smith is an old acquaintance of both the Jenkyns sister and Miss Pole, Mary sees Betty Barker wondering if, in fact, Mary is still of the same class: “I could see she had a little fear lest,
since my father had gone to live in Drumble, he might have engaged in that ‘horrid cotton trade,’ and so dragged his family down out of ‘aristocratic society’ (75)”. Mary’s certainty as to what Betty is thinking means that it is what she herself has wondered and/or experienced in Drumble. Mary is, like Miss Matty, not sure to what class she now belongs.

By knitting, however, on the night of the magic show, Mary becomes a mirror of, and successor to, Miss Pole, whose constant crochet and knitting is also knit into the secrets kept by the various women of the village. Between commissions for crochet-related purchases, Miss Pole relays to Mary the details of Lord Mauleverer’s visit to Captain Brown (18-19). It is over her knitting that Miss Pole extends to Mary the history of the love affair between Miss Matty and Mr. Holbrook (32). When she sets out with Lady Glenmire to find the old lady famous for knitting stockings, Miss Pole discovers the ailing Samuel Brown/Signor Brunoni (121-22). When Miss Pole is not knitting or crocheting, she makes it her habit to prowl the village shops under the guise of making a textile related purchase:

Miss Pole was always the person, in the trio of Cranford ladies now assembled, to have had adventures. She was in the habit of spending the morning in rambling from shop to shop; not to purchase anything (except an occasional reel of cotton, or a piece of tape), but to see the new articles and report upon them, and to collect all the stray pieces of intelligence in the town. She had a way, too, of demurely popping hither and thither into all sorts of places to gratify her curiosity on any point; a way which, if she had not looked so very genteel and prim, might have been considered impertinent. (99)

Miss Pole, unlike any of the other single women in the village, adapts and uses her needlework as an excuse to circulate herself through the village, observing exchanges and acquiring intimate knowledge of its inhabitants. Much of this knowledge and intercourse is not kept to her own class or station, if we are even certain of her station at all. Though
she appears “genteel,” Miss Pole moves in and out of all the women’s houses, through the public house outside Cranford (121), in the shops (without feeling the need to purchase anything) (99), into and out of the George hotel and the Assembly Room (99), always taking it upon herself to “collect and arrange” what is being said in the village (107). Moreover she initiates Mary into the same work by her constant requests for crochet supplies.

Gunn argues that the English middle class was made of property-owning groups which engaged in active occupations, usually connected with manufacturing, trade and the professions, and distinguished from the aristocracy and the gentry by active participation in the productive economy and from the working class by abstention from manual wage labour (14-15). Armstrong argues that conduct books insisted on much the same thing, but from a feminine perspective: they “took labor and leisure off their separate conceptual planes and placed them in a moral continuum,” where the domestic woman was always placed in opposition to women at both extremes of the social and financial scale (75). Without fathers, husbands or sons, and not active in the productive economy, the women of Cranford struggle to define class in ways that do not exclude them. Miss Matty, Betty Barker and Miss Pole each retain a single servant so as to appear at leisure. They exchange daily social calls. Miss Matty plans to buy a silk dress. Mrs. Forrester, determined not to lose a piece of fine, antique lace, gives her cat an emetic to make him vomit it up (94). As Rappaport points out, Mary’s communal “we” requires tacit agreement and a “collective pretense” on the part of all the ladies to ignore private knowledge: that Betty Barker has made much of the items served at her tea party; that Miss Matty has had to scrimp to have enough money for a silk dress; that Mrs.
Forrester’s lace collar is one of the only relics of her more affluent past (78-80). Yet the fiction of class is predicated on more than a drive to preserve the private spaces of Cranford or to preserve for themselves the right of belonging to the middle class. They turn Victorian conceptions of space to their own purpose, and use them to improve and discipline the social hierarchy.

Though she is not described as knitting or crocheting past the initial third of the novella, it is clear that Miss Pole is highly mobile. Moreover she begins to accrue a particular kind of power within the village. It is Miss Pole who begins to take control of social dynamics for the group. Miss Pole insists that they should include Mrs. Fitz-Adam, arguing that if they do not become less exclusive, “by-and-by we should have no society at all” (78). Miss Pole corrects Mary’s behaviour at Signor Brunoni’s magic show by refusing to let her turn around and look behind her (103). Miss Pole’s reasoning, that it would be vulgar to make noise in a public place, is a precursor to the ritualised and performative public behaviour that would govern middle-class public behaviour in the latter half of the Victorian era. Miss Pole’s (mis)information determines the panic over robbers in the village and gives Samuel Brown his initial outsider status. Miss Pole likewise gives Brown his redemption in the village. Ultimately it is also Miss Pole who organizes the ladies to aid Miss Matty (160).

Miss Pole’s rise in power coincides with her increasing ability to circulate freely through the village. That circulation – her “adventures,” as Mary describes them – is always closely linked with her performance of textile making. She is consciously aware of both knitting/crocheting and class as a performance and she is the only one of her generation of women to make the Victorian transition from “maker” to “consumer” of
goods. Miss Pole window shops for the purpose of watching and judging the world outside her home. Gunn argues that the physical spaces of the Victorian city, in particular how that space was constructed and used, in turn defined individual and collective behaviour. Cultural projects, like art and literary societies, were designed to “improve, discipline and reform elements within the social hierarchy” (27). Smith similarly insists that by the nineteenth century, textile making had become the site through which women both justified their morality and proved their fitness for public life and proved their inner regulation and fitness for domestic life (20-24). Here Miss Pole simultaneously defines and is defined by her appropriation of the space of the village, through her ritualised performance of “shopping” for supplies for her knitting and crochet.

Mary takes Miss Pole’s role in safeguarding the morals of the village one step further. When Miss Matty’s bank fails, she is left destitute. As Mary ponders the limited options Miss Matty will have for supporting herself, most of Miss Matty’s accomplishments and interests encompass some form of needlework, now outmoded, like tracing out patterns for muslin embroidery and knitting garters (154-55). Mary surmises that Miss Matty will not have the wide range of skills needed to able to teach the more fashionable forms of fancy needlework now popular amongst the newly wealthy at the local Ladies’ Seminary (154). Yet it is Mary who determines what work is “inappropriate” for Miss Matty. Her friend’s attitude about working for a living, as Schaffer points out, is one of practicality rather than concern for the continued appearance of “gentility.” Mary’s attitude about Miss Matty’s prospects is determined by her mid-Victorian values (231). Mary’s solution, however, is that Miss Matty’s private living space should be turned into public space, furnished and provided by her working-
class maid, Martha. Miss Matty has spent much of the novel looking after Martha’s interests. By the time of the bank failure, however, it is Mary who has usurped Miss Matty’s role.

Mary, like Miss Pole, is equally adept at circulating in and out of the private sphere. Mary, like Miss Pole, is careful to use her position as the narrator and arranger of the stories of the village to articulate and set the class positions of the women and men around her. It is Mary who insists that a “sea-green turban” would not be age or class appropriate for Miss Matty’s wear and buys her a cap instead (97-98). It is Mary who tries to guide Miss Matty away from yellow-spotted lilac silk and towards a “quiet sage-green, that had faded into insignificance under the more brilliant colours, but which was nevertheless a good silk in its humble way” (144). Mary puts order to Miss Matty’s house and tries to teach Martha how to serve her mistress, even though it is Miss Matty who ultimately allows Martha to be courted by Jem Hearn (36, 50). Mary, like Miss Pole, becomes the keeper of Miss Matty’s secret love affair with Mr. Holbrook. Finally Mary, with Miss Pole, becomes the principal arranger of Miss Matty’s care after the failure of her bank.

John Paul Kanwit argues that Elizabeth Gaskell uses household details in her novels “to effect profound political statements” (190). He insists that for Gaskell, public and private life were indistinguishable, and that in North and South in particular, Gaskell focuses on the ways one can confront social problems through domestic rituals by making the link between taste and morality. Yet in Cranford, Gaskell focuses more on the anxiety that accompanies that Victorian relationship between class and morality. Her cast of twittering older women feel that they must become the arbiters of morality, and
yet they are simultaneously terrified that they fall short of “class.” Though they draw
together for survival, as Lepine points out, the women all have hybrid statuses that belie
simple categorization of “widow,” “spinster,” “middle class” and “working class” (128).
Gaskell reveals class as a conceit and performance, but sees class at the same time as an
important conduit – for good or for bad – for social change.
Chapter 4 Refusals and Refutations: The Making of a Different Femininity in *A Social Departure* and *The Awakening*

Janet Howarth argues that throughout the nineteenth century there was a gap between the ways that the role of women was portrayed in various media, such as political debates, sermons, newspapers and magazines, and what women actually did in their day-to-day lives (164-78). The same was true of American and Canadian women’s lives as well. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ann Romines and Carol Gerson, among others, have demonstrated, from the beginning of settlement in the colonies women were critical to debates about slavery and moral and religious reforms. They campaigned for political leaders, attended rallies, and followed national and local politics. As the nineteenth century progressed, they organized around issues of temperance, women’s reproductive health and children’s education. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson insists, women were critical to Victorian programs of moral and humanitarian reform (128-31). They took active part in political debates and demonstrations despite not having the vote, and they participated actively in the national economy despite being exhorted to stay in their separate spheres.

Yet the pressures to conform to a definition of femininity that placed women in the home as protectors of the family’s morality and its social standing were enormous, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. As shown in the previous chapter, the machines of the Industrial Revolution removed some of the more onerous burdens of homemaking from women’s shoulders. This in turn helped to foster public education for girls and gave women more leisure time, but it came at the cost of some of the freedoms that women had enjoyed in the eighteenth century. Industrialization put a
new emphasis on the nuclear family, the division between public and private spaces, and consequently on the regulation of sexuality and morality (Howarth 167-69). This shift was mirrored and exaggerated in North America, which experienced industrialization more slowly and unevenly and where women actively participated in the act of nation-building while at the same time being expected, as Barbara Welter has put it, to adhere to the four cardinal virtues of “true womanhood” inherited from Puritanism: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (152).

In both the United States and Canada the pressure to conform to an ideal of middle-class, domestic womanhood was particularly marked. Succeeding waves of largely conservative, often evangelical English-speaking settlers had a lasting influence on the social mores of the two emerging countries. Related in their theology and values, these immigrants placed importance on hard work, piety, self-sacrifice, doing and making for others and having a submissive and penitent spirit. They valued individualism and self-sufficiency, though they often collaborated or worked collectively for the survival and betterment of their families. They emphasized frugality and charity but placed equal or more value on the financial and social success that also came from the diligent work and sacrifice of the family as a whole. They valorized an egalitarian social system yet retained many of the nativist and class prejudices of their European origins. As Thomson insists, without the “rigorous systems of external authority and order” of the Old World, such as an aristocracy, status and authority were neither automatic nor clearly marked (130). It was up to the individual to prove his/her social worth by first, displaying financial success, and second, demonstrating his/her ability to govern both body and behaviour. The markers of gentility – silver, fine linen and silk – retained the same
importance they had had on the other side of the Atlantic, because they were visible evidence of personal success (Ulrich, *Homespun* 111-21). A well-groomed appearance, neat and appropriate dress, elegant table manners and knowledge of social conduct all indicated successful self-governance. Failure in any of these indicated immorality, laziness and spiritual and physical frailty.

In initial settlements, a woman’s ability in domestic management, frugality and self-sufficiency was crucial to the physical survival of the family. By the nineteenth century, however, female domesticity had become fixed as the only counter to economic instability. Welter insists that “in a society…where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same – a true woman was a true woman” (151-52). At its most fundamental level, domesticity defined women as diametric opposites to men. As Amal Amireh explains, domesticity insisted on “a fixed meaning of gender as the only category by which to define the self,” by placing on it a moral as well as economic value (112-14). A family’s social status was derived from a wife’s leisure, by her hours in the home with children. At the same time, when women were assigned to the realm of the home, they were likewise assigned authority over the functions associated with the home: childrearing, social and physical organization of the domestic space, religious and moral education and the appearance of all the members of the household (Thomson 128-29). As male power migrated away from moral and religious authority over the course of industrialization, religion, and by extension the governance of the body and behaviour, became the province of women (Thomson 129, Warren 147-51). In this way, a woman’s housekeeping, clothing and organizational skills, and her modesty, virtuous conduct and
sexual purity, were cast as necessary to her father’s or husband’s success; the lack of these as the reasons for his moral and/or financial failures.

The popular literature written by and for Canadian and American women in the nineteenth century largely reflects this drive for feminine compliance. Widely circulated and read in both countries, American women’s magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1830-1898), *Peterson’s Ladies’ National Magazine* (1842-1898) and the more fashion-oriented *Harper’s Bazaar* (1867-) address such issues as temperance, child-rearing, and public health (while assiduously avoiding controversial topics like suffrage), but focus overwhelmingly on proper female comportment, domesticity, fashion and needlework (Gilding 156). Canadian and American novels about women in the eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries follow what Nancy K. Miller has called “the heroine’s text,” in which there is a single determining event from which a woman must assume the consequences (Francis Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) and Rosana Leprohon’s slightly later *Antoinette de Mirecourt, or Secret Marrying and Secret Sorrowing: A Canadian Tale* (1864) are excellent Canadian examples). By the mid-nineteenth century, however, many of the novels and short stories written by and for women and girls tend to extol the virtues of the domestic sphere, where women act as the moral preceptor of familial life (N. Miller, 10-22). While Romines differentiates between Nina Baym’s concept of the “sentimental” novel of the mid-nineteenth century and the “woman-identified realism” of the end of it, she argues these novels have in common a reliance on women to create and define domestic spaces (*Home 7-11*). Shenac MacIvor holds the family farm together after the death of her father, while simultaneously guiding the behaviour of her younger siblings in Margaret Murray Robertson’s *Shenac’s Work at
In Louisa May Alcott’s *Rose in Bloom* (1876), Rose Campbell frequently “mothers” her male cousins, especially Charlie Campbell, who tries, unsuccessfully, to reform his moral character to suit hers to attain her hand in marriage. The blame for Charlie’s accidental death from alcohol consumption is laid on his mother for not teaching him adequate self-control. In Sarah Chauncey Woolsey’s (under the pen name Susan Coolidge) *What Katy Did* (1872), impetuous and headstrong Katy Carr learns only after an injury to her spine to take the role of her late mother as the moral centre of her widowed father’s home: patient, gentle, self-controlled, and maternal. Even in Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), the widowed Mrs. Todd’s capacious kitchen, herbal remedies and knitting sustain a whole community – a community whose welfare becomes her responsibility.

Women who rebel against these strictures do appear throughout nineteenth-century American and Canadian literature, both in adult fiction and particularly in the fiction geared towards girls and young women. Yet even in texts that question a woman’s place in the social or political order, the underlying message is that women must prove themselves patient, submissive and morally incorruptible to be considered successful. Those women who violate the order are punished or reformed, or they learn to adapt themselves and their roles to function within this hierarchy. Katy Carr starts out as an ungovernable and headstrong tomboy and must learn to be patient and enduring. Shenac MacIvor must learn submission to God and male authority to be worthy of marriage to Reverend Stuart. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Sally Kittridge in *The Pearl of Orr’s Island* (1862) is another wild tomboy turned into a capable housewife under the influence of pious Mara Lincoln, eventually succeeding to Mara’s place after her death as the “angel
of the house” and prospective wife to Moses Pennel (426). In Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), Jo March knits blue wool socks for the soldiers fighting in the American Civil War, but wishes she had been a boy so that she could go off and fight in the war instead of staying home to knit “like a poky old woman” (4-5). While Jo eventually rejects the advantageous marriage proposal of her wealthy neighbour Laurie in favour of moving to New York to pursue a career as a writer, her story still ends in *Good Wives* (1869), as the title suggests, with her growth into patient wife and mother. Though she continues to write professionally after her marriage, Jo learns, like Katy Carr and Sally Kittridge, to put the needs of her husband and boys over her own. While Warren insists that Alcott advocates economic independence for women, I argue that Jo’s successful maturation into a “good wife” is predicated more on her newfound self-control, humility and patience than her financial contributions to her marriage (Warren 156).

Textiles and textile making, as Lisa Smith points out, were considered a “litmus test of true womanhood and domestic potential” (345). In texts where a woman takes up her needle with patience and ensures proper care of textile goods, she usually shows a similar care over her husband and family. A woman who is deficient in textile skills is usually deficient in the care of her family and fails to live up to the virtues of true womanhood (Smith 345-47). In Margaret Sidney’s *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*, for example, widowed Mamsie must take in sewing to keep her children fed and clothed. Her selfless, careful needlework is reflected in/by her mothering skills: all of her five children have remarkably innocent, healthy childhoods and grow up to be helpful, hardworking adults. Her self-sacrifice is rewarded by the generosity of Mr. King, who makes her his housekeeper and assures the education of her sons. In *Little Women*, 
Marmee and her third daughter, Beth, are the standards for feminine patience and submission. Even when Beth’s health begins to deteriorate, she continues to knit and sew for her family and the children who pass her window on the way to school. She dies only after her needle grows too “heavy” for her tired fingers (300). Beth’s death marks the turning point in Jo’s maturity; nursing Beth teaches Jo patience, selflessness and care for others. As Welter insists, the attributes of “true womanhood” were the standards by which a woman was judged by her husband and society (152). She achieved success and happiness only with these virtues; without them, no matter her fame or wealth, “all was ashes” (152). Marriage and motherhood were both the culmination and result of a woman’s proper education in domestic needlework.

Yet this drive toward domesticity and “true womanhood” did not coalesce with or define all women’s lives. Many women, as Welter insists, felt that they could not live up to the impossible standard of virtuous, domesticized womanhood (174). As Romines has also pointed out, while the domestic realism of nineteenth-century writers like Alcott, Stowe and Jewett takes traditional white, middle-class experiences of housekeeping as the material for serious art for the first time, the domestic world of home, husband and children is bound up with a complex and sometimes violent past for women (Home 16). Neither did domestic novels fully depict late nineteenth-century women’s lives outside the home: women also worked for wages, travelled and agitated for political and social change. Both Amireh and Joyce W. Warren argue that fictional domesticity was often an elaborate charade: a number of the women writers who wrote domestic fiction were also principle breadwinners loathe to jeopardize either their reputations or their paycheques by overtly criticizing marriage and motherhood (Amireh 114-15, Warren 150-51). Moreover,
the language of “true womanhood” could itself be manipulated. Janice Fiamengo has suggested that the deliberately feminized rhetoric of the temperance movement, for example, was a strategic form of discourse and “a way of defining feminine subjectivity and organizing social relations – that could be assumed or questioned, more or less transparent as its context determined” (Woman’s Page 11-12). In this way, she suggests, women writers could both represent the modern woman concerned with education and employment, and reassure those committed to the ideal of separate spheres.

Nancy Armstrong insists that the opposition of angel (domestic, married women) and monster (fallen or mad women) in Victorian texts “provided a means of suppressing other oppositions” by reducing intricate, contradictory patterns of human behaviour into single binaries of male and female, public and private, and oppressor and victim (Armstrong 253). By thinking in such binaries, she argues, we reduce political power to its simplest level. We devalue how authority is constructed and deployed across a wide spectrum of political positions. In the two previous chapters I explored how women writers used images of textile making to convey complex social issues, like class dependence, poverty, sexuality and aging, which could not always be discussed openly. This chapter will explore how two very different writers, Canadian Sara Jeannette Duncan and American Kate Chopin, use images of textiles and textile making to explore the construction of middle-class female power, the limitations of the domestic sphere and the increasing complexities of women’s responses to the pressures of “true womanhood.” Though divergent in tone, perspective and characterization, Duncan’s A Social Departure: How Orthodocia and I Went Round the World by Ourselves and Chopin’s The Awakening have in common an ambivalence toward marriage and motherhood, particularly the
endless and “empty” work that are supposed to accompany them. By placing themselves slightly outside the domestic sphere, both trouble the delineations of private and public, and masculine and feminine space, and question the role of women in the ordering of those spaces. Both explore the effects the restrictions of the domestic sphere have on women’s relationships: to their husbands, to their children and particularly to one another.

S.J.D. and Edna are neither angels nor monsters. Both struggle for what Ann Heilmann calls “self-ownership,” the right of a woman to her own body in sexual and reproductive terms, and for the right to possess and own her own space, both financial and emotional (93). Neither is completely successful in her search for self-ownership, however. While S.J.D. congratulates herself on avoiding marriage and appears on the verge of publishing her first book by her arrival in London, in many ways she has traded one domestic space for another. The expatriate communities in Ceylon, India and even aboard ship replicate the same mores of her home in Montreal. The divisions between male and female roles encountered in Japan mirror the same discordances she experiences at home. Edna, unhappily married and suffocating in a close-knit Creole community, moves out of her husband’s house and hands off her sons to her mother-in-law, but cannot find a space for herself outside of the domestic sphere. Loving but not willing to sacrifice herself to motherhood, artistic but not willing to live the ascetic life of the female artist, and sensual but not given to outright carnality, Edna oscillates between the private and public sphere without finding a space that can be truly hers. The novel ends with her swimming out into the Gulf of Mexico in an implied suicide.

Both A Social Departure and The Awakening critique the ways that women are complicit in the limiting of their horizons, and the role that needlework has in blinding
women to issues outside of the domestic sphere. Yet neither absolutely condemns domestic femininity. S.J.D. repeatedly draws attention to Orthocoria’s more conventional femininity, love of clothes (and tightly laced corset) and lack of interest in politics, history or economics by highlighting S.J.D.’s more “masculine” interests and clothing. In positioning herself slightly outside a traditional gender role, S.J.D. gives herself an authority with which to observe and evaluate women’s behaviours in Canada and abroad. At the same time, S.J.D. uses her own intimate knowledge of fabric, sewing and clothing to criticize many of the public causes espoused by women and/or the manner in which women pursue them. She characterizes needlework as backwards-looking and passive, while ignoring the social and emotional needs that needlework can fill. This constant shift between acceptance and subversion of traditional women’s roles creates a tension within A Social Departure similar to Duncan’s “continuous positioning and re-positioning of herself and women” in her journalism (Langston 81). A Social Departure insists on a woman’s rights to education, career and financial independence, while waxing nostalgic for an idealized domestic past (Langston 82-83).

Kathleen M. Streater has argued that The Awakening is marked by this same tension between subversion and submission. While Edna chooses suicide rather than returning to the confines of domestic motherhood, her friend Adèle chooses to rebel less dramatically, but ultimately more productively, from “behind and within masculine parameters, manipulating the male-defined borders of her identity as wife and mother” (Streater 406). Adèle is neither the wilfully ignorant housewife decried by S.J.D., nor the pious exemplar of Welter’s “true womanhood.” Adèle sews, knits and embroiders, organizes the family’s mending and laundry, and cares for her husband’s needs. At the
same time, she is also politically and socially astute, physically confident and fully
cognizant of her sexual power over men. Edna rejects needlework, and in particular the
domestic busyness of the Creole “mother-women” on Grand Isle, as the output of
restricted lives and narrow viewpoints. Yet Edna also blunders through an emotional
affair with Robert and a sexual dalliance with Alcée Arobin, without really understanding
her own conflicted desires or the men with whom she shares herself. Though she admires
and likes Adèle, Edna neither acknowledges Adèle’s complexity nor recognizes her own
role in devaluing Adèle’s power. Katherine Joslin argues that the American quest
narrative/bildungsroman has traditionally been depicted as a “male journey away from
the domestic, social world of women toward the open road” (“Finding” 169). Glenn
Willmott insists that traditionally, a bildungsroman from a woman’s point of view was a
voyaging “in” rather than a voyaging “out.” He suggests that this voyage often sees the
transition from childhood to marriage as a “continuum of dependency,” and “represents
its original moment of anxiety and self-development in later youth, when this continuum
is broken by disillusionment and rebellion or reconstruction” (141). I assert that *The
Awakening* and *A Social Departure* are also quest narratives, written from a woman’s
perspective and with no easy answers. What is there for women outside of the domestic,
social world of women? What does a woman have to give up in order to find this space?
Is it ever truly hers?

Duncan is best known for her 1904 novel, *The Imperialist*, which is now
considered a Canadian classic for its examination of colonial life within the British
Empire. By contrast *A Social Departure*, the most commercially successful of Duncan’s
writings, has been virtually ignored by critics. In addition to some discussion in Thomas
Tausky’s *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire* (1980), Marian Fowler’s biography, *Redney* (1983) and Misao Dean’s *A Different Point of View: Sara Jeannette Duncan* (1991), there are only a handful of more recent critical appraisals of *A Social Departure*. Faye Hammill examines it through the lens of *fin de siècle* literature, insisting that Duncan creates a gendered textual space that, “rather than explaining women in relation to men, or justifying women to men, instead asserts the value of women’s independent experience and female friendship” (“Round the World” 118). Heather Milne argues that Duncan was always conscious of her conservative and white Canadian reader in exploring issues of gender and nationhood. Most recently Edlie L. Wong has studied *A Social Departure* from the perspective of Nellie Bly’s 1889 race around the world. While Wong seems to erroneously suggest that *A Social Departure* was written in the wake of Bly’s tour around the world (many of the stories that make up *A Social Departure* had already been published in the *Montreal Star* before Bly’s tour), she also argues that *A Social Departure*, with its blending of fact and fiction and focus on commerce and cultural exchange, humorously recasts the New Woman as the “ultimate global consumer, who facilitates the incorporation of the foreign within the domestic empire through an acquisitive femininity” (316). Sandwiched into the travel narrative, she concludes, is a commentary on domesticity and femininity within the larger process of globalization.

As both Hammill and Wong point out, *A Social Departure* does not fit comfortably into conventional literary categories at the end of the Victorian era. Written as a series of humorous and occasionally thought-provoking adventures, the book is less a travel memoir than a work of fiction: though Duncan used her own experiences as material, S.J.D. and the naïve and conventional Orthodocia are not Duncan and Lewis.
While Hammill suggests that S.J.D. is meant to represent a modern, more “real-life” North American woman, with Orthodocia cast as a character from an old-world romance, *A Social Departure* reads more as a series of satiric and self-mocking journalistic anecdotes than a novel (“Round the World” 115). As Tausky has pointed out, Orthodocia, in particular, is neither a complex nor well-drawn character, more akin to the characters Duncan liked to sketch in her articles than *The Imperialist’s* Advena Murchison (64). *A Social Departure* grapples, albeit lightly, with the real issues of marriage, family and female careers, yet avoids any depiction of nascent female sexuality or harsh subject matter often associated with *fin de siècle* literature.

*The Awakening* received mixed reviews and much criticism when it was published, largely because of the sexual relationship between Edna and Alcée, but also for Edna’s outright rejection of motherhood. The *Globe-Democrat* called it “not a healthy book; if it points any particular moral or teaches any lesson, the fact is not apparent,” while the New York-based *Outlook* said that “the story was not really worth telling, and its disagreeable glimpses of sensuality are repellent” (qtd. in Toth, *Unveiling* 221-22). Willa Cather wrote in the Pittsburgh *Leader* that the theme of *The Awakening* was “trite and sordid” (qtd. in Toth, *Unveiling* 223). Though her short stories were republished in several anthologies throughout the twentieth century, *The Awakening* was only reprinted once, in 1954, and Chopin remained largely unknown outside Louisiana until Per Seyersted published *Complete Works of Kate Chopin* and *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* in 1969 (Toth, *Unveiling* 242-43).

*The Awakening* is now considered an American classic, yet critics remain firmly divided on the character of Edna Pontellier and the meaning of her implied suicide.
Deborah E. Barker, for example, argues that although there is a sense of progression towards Edna’s artistic freedom, Edna ultimately pays an extreme price for that freedom. The ending is “a sober indictment of the possibility for women’s unencumbered artistic vision in the society of the novel” (Barker 79). Streater asserts that Edna’s suicide is only part of the story. While Edna gives the reader “an exhilarating, nihilistic escape from the patriarchal reality of our world,” it is with Adèle Ratignolle that Chopin offers an “accessible and life-affirming” form of feminism (415). Peter Ramos suggests that Edna’s death is ultimately a failure to understand that there is a space between motherhood and the ascetic life of the artist that Edna (whose ironic last name is suggestive of the French word pont or bridge) cannot negotiate. He insists that Edna’s inability to see beyond what she believes are two mutually exclusive roles for women is refuted by Chopin’s real-life example as both artist and mother. Ultimately Edna is a pitiable figure who, like the speaker in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), shows us “the magnitude of the obstacles women like them faced....(and) that such obstacles, though they demanded remarkable strength, creativity, discipline, and will, could ultimately be overcome” (161). All three see Edna’s life as a failure and her suicide as an escape.

Conversely, William A. Davis Jr. claims that Chopin wants to explore nineteenth-century ideas of female self-sacrifice. He insists that when Edna tells Adèle that she is willing to give her life for her children, but not her inner self, she is talking about her body and her soul: her husband and children can own her body, but she will not allow them to diminish her sense of selfhood. By swimming out to sea, she kills her body but saves her soul (Davis Jr. 2011). Elaine Showalter argues that The Awakening functions as
a metaphor for women’s writing in the nineteenth century. In this context, Adèle represents the sentimental and Mademoiselle Reisz the local colour of the two streams of writing available to women. Edna’s failure to follow either model represents Chopin’s rejection of the conventions of women’s writing (36-57).

Neither writer is a straightforward New Woman: neither uses her writing to openly effect social change, and their novels are too ambiguously or satirically worded for the didactic tone of much of New Woman writing. Yet throughout A Social Departure and The Awakening we find the same thread that permeates much of New Woman fiction: the need to first “prove” one’s femininity and thus authority, so as to provide a platform for a critique of the work that goes into the performance of femininity. Much of this proof of “true womanhood” is rendered through descriptions of dress, through an intimate and thorough understanding of fabric. As Warren insists, women writers who transgressed their publishers’ and readers’ ideas of feminine propriety risked losing their ability to make a living by their writing (151). The Victorian woman’s close relationship to cloth, specifically to the creation, purchase and interpretation of clothing, provided an alternate form of literacy that was understood as specifically feminine (Kortsch 9-15). It provided a means through which to assert “proper” womanhood, while at the same time subverting traditional norms of domestic femininity.

A woman’s dress revealed and reinforced the family’s success in the new social hierarchy, where class was seen less as a pre-determined state and more as an indication of hard work and financial acumen. As Susanna Moodie observes in Roughing It in the Bush, for Canadian and American women in the mid-nineteenth century, outward appearances were important:
A love of dress exceeds all other passions. In public they dress in silks and satins, and wear the most expensive ornaments, and they display considerable taste in the arrangement and choice of colours. The wife of a man in moderate circumstances, whose income does not exceed two or three hundred pounds a-year, does not hesitate in expending ten or fifteen pounds upon one article of outside finery, while often her inner garments are not worth as many sous; thus sacrificing to outward show all the real comforts of life. (203)

Moodie’s surprise at her neighbours’ displays of wealth points to a schism between public appearance and private economy. Alison Lurie argues that by the height of the Victorian era, this was the true contradiction of dressing for status: to dress above one’s station was considered both extravagant and deliberately deceptive, yet the show of wealth was key to social success. A well-dressed person cultivated the appearance of moral virtue, while an ill-dressed person was considered stupid and dishonest (Clothes 118). Dressing well eventually became a political strategy: rather than opposing fashion, many late nineteenth-century women’s rights activists believed that it would make feminism succeed where dress reform had failed (Rabinovitch-Fox 15-19). To differentiate themselves from dress reformers and draw attention to their respectability, a number of well-known suffragists, both American and British, dressed in the height of fashion (Kortsch 91-92, Lurie 223).

Bill Brown argues that nineteenth-century male writers, like Maupassant, Zola, and James, placed a strong emphasis in their stories on the material objects that inform a culture and inscribe and perpetuate semiotic meaning for the members of that society, often assigning values of kinship and belonging – or by extension – not belonging (178-87). This was a technique in which Wharton was also adept, by borrowing the language of the traditionally male discourse of architecture to transform a traditionally female discourse of interior space, and imbuing her settings and characters with the collected
objects, furniture and clothing that placed them at “the intersection of the private home and the streets of the public marketplace” (Kaplan 80). Wharton’s stories are full of *things*, a literary strategy that Janell Watson argues is meant to confer a social or intellectual distinction or elite status on their owner, particularly in fiction where class conflict plays an important role (25-26). However, though they pay close attention to the significance of clothing and dress, Maupassant, James and Zola tend to focus almost entirely on the visual symbolism of what people, particularly women, wear. In contrast, Wharton extends understanding of clothing to how it feels and how the clothing or dress helps to form the consciousness of the body inside it. As Jennifer Shepherd argues of *House of Mirth*, fashion builds the biological body into a social being and fashion creates and maintains social, racial and gendered privilege and ref虚构s this privilege as essential and natural (142-44). Dress functions as a site of semiotic meaning: dress sets limits on which members of a society can read its multiple levels of meaning, and who is allowed to approach and interact with the body the clothing houses. Yet clothing, like needlework, is much more than simply a concrete visual symbol. Daniel Miller, in his interpretation of Amelia Henare’s analysis of the making and wearing of Maori cloaks, argues that in dressing, the corporeal body subjects itself to a series of rituals and additions that create and reinforce its presence in a society (12). How that cloth feels, acts and reacts on the corporeal body help to create the social body, which in turn affects how the social body behaves and acts within that society, whether appropriately or inappropriately. Women, intimately connected as they were with both the making of clothing and the need for clothing as proof of social belonging, were also intrinsically aware of how the sensation of fabric and clothing could also produce meaning.
Though several critics have engaged with Duncan’s journalistic personae and contradictory reactions to conventional notions of femininity, no one has yet examined Duncan’s many references to fabric and dress and their role in her critique of femininity. Fiamengo has argued that Duncan’s newspaper and journal columns were elaborate performances often characterized by a contradictory relationship with the rhetoric of feminism. She insists that “as a woman in conscious revolt against the domestic realm of conventional femininity, she was profoundly engaged by – but also ambivalent about – other women who were likewise forging identities that distinguished them from their more conventional peers” (“Round the World” 64). Langston also insists that Duncan was uncomfortable with feminism and avoided portraying herself as a political or social commenter on women’s issues. At the same time, Duncan’s persona in her interviews often conforms on the surface to conventional notions of femininity, sometimes exaggeratedly so, and yet the direction and substance of those interviews exposes the assumptions behind traditional views of women (Langston 82).

I argue that Duncan employs some of the same strategies in *A Social Departure* as in her journalism. Christine Bayles Kortsch insists that for New Woman writers, depictions of dress allowed them both to display their resistance to “normative middle-class culture,” while also emphasizing traditional femininity in order not to alienate their readers (100). Duncan was very aware of the conservatism of her Canadian reading audience, and as Gerson suggests, may have been reluctant at the beginning of her novel-writing career to offend Canadian propriety (65). The clothes in *A Social Departure* deliberately disarm and mislead. They establish S.J.D. and Orthodocia as products of the same middle-class background and strictly-enforced propriety. At the same time they
poke holes in all the Victorian social conventions that might not allow the two women
to travel alone without a male escort. The conventionally feminine Orthodocia, who says
and does what many nineteenth-century women were brought up to say and do, acts as a
foil for S.J.D., allowing S.J.D. the freedom to play with traditional femininity,
particularly with regard to marriage and career.

*A Social Departure* begins with S.J.D. reminiscing about meeting Orthodocia in
Mexico and the circumstances that have brought them to Montreal four years later, ready
to travel around the world together. While firmly establishing Orthodocia’s position
within the English middle class with a name that echoes ‘orthodoxy,’ together with an
“auntly” chaperon and an improbably cozy address by the name of in “St. Eve’s-in-the-
Garden, Wigginton, Devon” (2), S.J.D. also suggests that Orthodocia’s seeming
unconcern for those same middle-class appearances is what draws them together as
friends and travelling companions. When her chaperon scolds Orthodocia for ruining the
front of her dress, she goes on to ruin the back of it as well (1).

However, when S.J.D. goes to pick up Orthodocia at the Montreal wharf, where
Orthodocia is arguing with some hapless customs officials over the open contents of her
boxes, S.J.D. notes all of the baggage that accompanies her friend, from a trunk and a
number of portmanteaux, to a sitz bath tub (3). Orthodocia’s baggage, as S.J.D. wryly
explains, “would have taken her comfortably through the universe with much apparel to
spare” (3). Orthodocia, as befits her social station, has brought changes of clothing to
match every sporting event and social occasion. As clothing became less expensive and
ready-made became more widely available in the late nineteenth century, it also likewise
became more difficult for the middle class-woman to keep up with the ever-increasing
complexities of outfitting oneself appropriately. The 1870s to 80s marked a change in women’s dress from highly ornamented, elaborately trimmed dresses to a simpler, more mannish style for day, but it also marked the first time that women had to have multiple changes of dress for sporting activities (Laver 193-211). At the same time, women of the “old money” aristocratic classes were just as anxious to make sure that their clothes did not resemble those of the “new money” created by the industrial boom of the nineteenth century as those of the middle class were to make sure that their apparel distinguished them from the “uncouth” working class, and marked their gentility (Kortsch 65, Beaujot 5). The difficulty for both middle- and upper-class women was how to express individuality, exclusivity and social propriety in the myriad outfits acknowledged as necessary for a complete wardrobe (Joslin Wharton 131, 123).

Those with the most to lose in not dressing appropriately were the women of the middle class. Women, Beaujot insists, were acutely aware of their own appearances and knew that their class status was never automatically evident. Class had to be “constantly maintained, demonstrated and proven by adjusting their outer appearance” (10). Though the title of a Social Departure suggests a purposeful deviation from social norms, S.J.D. and Orthocoria also risk being labelled bumptious for wishing to travel alone. While, like the English girls with “copper-toed leather boots without heels” of S.J.D’s imagination (5), women of the established upper classes could get away with bending or even breaking rules of social etiquette, those of the more newly established classes on both sides of the Atlantic had to work hard to prove their social worth. Women who dressed too well or too showily could be labelled social climbers or have their morality questioned, but if they did not have the right dress or appropriate gown, they were not
admitted to the social gathering at all (Joslin, *Edith Wharton* 131; Evalds 68). Orthodocia, who has brought “aesthetic tea-gowns, and trained dinner dresses, and tulle ball dresses, and tennis costumes in variety, to say nothing of walking and visiting toilettes with everything to match” (5), is, by the evidence of her wide variety of costume, of the upper end of the middle class, and desirous of asserting that status. The description of Orthodocia’s myriad pieces of baggage, her endless frocks, the stewardesses “on guard” for her (having received their instructions from Orthodocia’s family in Britain) and Orthodocia’s frustrated attempt first to bully and then to tip/bribe the young Customs officer, all advertise Orthodocia’s social inexperience and somewhat sheltered family life. Further, they suggest that though she comes from some money, Orthodocia does not have the worldly knowledge of the aristocracy, despite her connections to the third son of an English lord (3-5, 39).

Unlike S.J.D.’s initial impressions of her, Orthodocia is also acutely and uncomfortably aware of appearances: it is she who worries about the two young women sharing a train compartment with an English curate (11-12), and who makes sure that they have a chaperone when they go to stay at Jack Love’s farm in Saskatchewan (26). These all establish Orthodocia as a properly brought up, middle-class, conventional nineteenth-century young woman. There is also an implication in her large wardrobe, however oblique, that while S.J.D. thinks of marriage as a “casualty” in a woman’s life (2), Orthodocia’s ambitions may lie in an opposite direction.

By first establishing Orthodocia’s class status, however, S.J.D. is established as her social equal, despite their different ideas of dress. It is through S.J.D.’s social connections that they are invited to Lady C.P.R. Magnum’s ball in Montreal and to
Government House in Winnipeg for an “at home” reception, while S.J.D. faces the same strictures and arguments from her own family on the subject of their travel plans (5, 14-15). When they are in Winnipeg, S.J.D. also mentions taking Orthodocia to the Hudson’s Bay outpost to gratify Orthodocia’s somewhat naïve desire for a taste of the west and “to buy a pair of six-button Jouvin’s” for herself (14). Jouvin was the name of the nineteenth-century French glove manufacturer credited with mechanizing the industry, and by the late nineteenth century “Jouvin’s” was the name given to any pair of expensive, fine French kid gloves (Beaujot 47). Clean, well-fitted gloves were the hallmark of every properly attired woman in the nineteenth century: they hid any evidence of manual labour, thus assuring the observer of their wearer’s leisured status. French kid was the most expensive glove material, in part because it was the best at hiding perceived imperfections in the hands and the paler colours were more desirable shades for gloves, since they soiled easily and indicated that the wearer had the means to replace them often (Beaujot 31, 44). S.J.D. wants to buy “six-button” gloves, which would be worn for day and were about twelve to thirteen inches long, extending well up the forearm. Her expensive taste in gloves substantiates S.J.D. as Orthodocia’s social equal. If outward dress was considered an indicator of inner moral worth, then the details of their dress and the ability to “read” those details establish both young women as appropriately feminine.

They also demonstrate S.J.D.’s keen powers of observation. When she and Orthodocia meet an impoverished older English settler on the train through Assiniboia territory, S.J.D. notices “the quarter of an inch of useless kid” flapping at “each finger-end of her two-button black gloves” that this lady wears (17). While Mrs. Growthem’s gloves are kid, they have only two buttons, which indicates that they reach to the wrists
but do not cover them, making them at least a decade behind the fashion. They are also black and of the wrong size, which suggests that they were inherited from someone else or came from a church donation or poor box, the two most likely ways Mrs. Growthem would have acquired her second-hand gloves. Her gloves are vividly illustrative of Mrs. Growthem’s fall in social status, her hard life on the Prairies and her social isolation from other women.

Of Orthodocia and S.J.D., however, S.J.D. appears the less interested in traditional delineations of class and gender. S.J.D. yearns to travel, like a man, with nothing more than “an umbrella and a waterproof” and, like a husband to a wife, yields her own travel wardrobe space to Orthodocia’s army of dresses (5). She attempts, successfully, to lose the sitz bath that has accompanied Orthodocia’s mountains of baggage but is unable to convince Orthodocia to part with any of her frocks (3-5). It is S.J.D. who explains the history and economics of the Canadian Pacific Railway to an uninterested and unconcerned Orthodocia (10). It is S.J.D. who assures Orthodocia that sharing a train section (the curate has the upper berth) is perfectly acceptable practice (12), while it is S.J.D. reading Robert Elsmere, Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s 1888 intellectual novel about a crisis of faith, when Orthodocia and Mrs. Growthem chattily discover common acquaintances and share their stories (17). Moreover, when Orthodocia manages to buy and sell a Vancouver property within two days at a forty pound profit, S.J.D. cannot refrain from adding that this is the same friend she would have to “protect from extortionate cabmen and foolish bargains in curios,” much as a husband would protect a wife in more traditional narratives (55). Both her wardrobe and intellectual pursuits give S.J.D. an authority in her observations that is lacking in Orthodocia: of the two women,
S.J.D. is both appropriately feminine in appearance and masculine in judgement. This allows S.J.D. to distance herself from the women (and men), both European and non-European, whom she observes in her travels.

Kortsch insists that Victorian women understood not only the social significance of particular garments, but also the etiquette surrounding them (55). Chopin, like Duncan, also pays close attention to the small details of clothing, particularly how and when it is worn. Jürgen C. Wolter argues that in *The Awakening*, Edna “fights to subvert the male authoritative discourse of society by rejecting the century’s cult of domesticity, true womanhood, and familial/maternal responsibility” (29). She chooses instead to embrace the freedom and solitude of the sea, a metaphor which Heilmann argues stands for both orgasmic fulfillment and self-destruction in nineteenth-century women’s fiction (99). Wolter concludes that *The Awakening* is meant to be taken as political counter-writing that “stresses the desperation of women in a long struggle” (30). It is a view shared by a number of critics who portray Edna as a victim of an outdated and overtly patriarchal society and want to see her either as “an innocent victim crushed by a merciless, absolute patriarchy, or as having the last laugh by ducking out of life’s impassible and unfair obstacles” (Ramos 146). The role of clothing in *The Awakening* has been enfolded into these arguments, as symbols of either the construction or deconstruction of a patriarchal society. Toth suggests that clothing marks the gulf between men and women and illustrates the position of women as possessions or symbols of the patriarch’s wealth and success. Only when she sheds layers of clothing, and by extension, the expectations of a particular female identity as wife and mother, until she is finally naked in the sun at the end of the novel, does Edna finally become her true self (*Unveiling* 219). In a similar
fashion, Rowe argues that Edna’s body is the site of her rebellion against masculine possession and a refusal of the male gaze. The stripping away of her clothing happens just before her most significant moments of self-recognition, a metaphoric stripping to her hidden, inner sentience (Rowe 10). Joslin argues that fashion functions in Chopin’s fiction as a symbol of raw human/animal nature against the fabric of human culture. She suggests that in The Awakening clothing is a marker of literary naturalism, with a debt both to Darwin and the nineteenth-century sociologist Edvard Westermarck, who argued that clothing, and not nudity, is the real sexual lure. As Edna sheds her layers of clothing, her suicide becomes a “sensuous act of skin against air and water,” until the Darwinian mechanism breaks down in her return to water and childhood (Joslin, “Chopin on Fashion” 85). All three critics focus on the appearance of clothing, particularly in the disrobing; all three ignore the function of Edna’s and Adèle’s dress in constructing the female body from the inside out. More particularly, they miss the way that Edna’s and Adèle’s clothing signals an unbridgeable distance between the two women.

The first part of The Awakening takes place on Grand Isle, one of the barrier islands on the Louisiana coast. In a summer resort clothing was less physically restrictive than in the city. However, the exclusivity of resort life meant adhering to another set of rules, about how and when those garments were worn. The women on Grand Isle, including Edna and Adèle, wear white. White and other pale colours were more easily dirtied and stained, and required multiple changes of dress to maintain the appearance of freshness, lending it the distinction of privilege. Knowing/not knowing the etiquette for wearing white become the grounds for inclusion or exclusion from social activities: the owner of the resort, Madame Lebrun, “clad always in white with elbow sleeves,” presides
over table and dance floor, while Mademoiselle Reisz, the unmarried pianist, with “absolutely no taste in dress” and wearing “a batch of rusty black lace” in her hairpiece, is left out of most evening activities (2, 48). As Valija Evalds points out in her treatment of American college dress in 1900, while a simple dress and lack of ostentation may have been praised in print, dress still made all too visible a wide social gap between those who had money and those who did not (59). If the middle class was “both an economic classification and an imaginary category,” a social position that comprised both the lowliest clerk and the factory and bank owners, then the most visible and effective way of making delineations and differences between the varying levels of middle-class status was through dress (Beaujot 4).

Yet there are variations in each woman’s dress that reveal more about her than her class status. Edna first appears as a white umbrella, lined in pink, walking up from the beach. While we are never told who is holding the parasol, under it is also Robert Lebrun, the young man with whom she has developed an intimacy. Her husband, Léonce, watches her approach, and when she arrives they trade positions. He goes back out under the shade of the white umbrella and Edna takes back the wedding rings he has been holding for her. When Adèle and Edna walk to the beach a few days later, Edna is dressed simply, almost puritanically, in a “cool muslin” sailor dress of plain white with a “waving vertical line of brown” and big straw hat, rather like the muslin curtains that puff, float and flap “at the capricious will” of the breeze from the Gulf (28-29, 44). Edna’s unostentatious dress is reiterated through the description of her body, which is “long, clean and symmetrical,” and falls into “splendid poses” with a “graceful severity of poise and movement” (28). Grecian in its athleticism and movement, Edna’s body is also
unencumbered by accessories: she carries neither parasol nor fan. In contrast, Adèle is
dressed in a much more Victorian style, in “pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles” with
“draperies and fluttering things” and a veil around her face (29). She has needlework in
her pocket and a fan attached by a ribbon to her neck, while on her hands are long
doeskin gloves (28-30). Though of approximately the same height as Edna, Adèle’s body
is voluptuous, with a “more feminine and matronly figure” (28).

The differences between Edna and Adèle seem obvious at first, in the manner of
S.J.D. and Orthodocia. Einav Rabinovitch-Fox asserts that at the turn of the century
women had moved from the more upholstered, yet fragile look of the S-shape to a
straighter, more simplified style that promoted “a more sensual idea of female beauty”
(15). If Adèle exemplifies the Victorian idea of femininity, Edna’s severity of dress is
more modern in structure, and suggests that Edna herself is more forward-looking than
Adèle. Like S.J.D in her simple travel wardrobe, Edna’s body appears lithe in clothes,
almost masculine in athleticism. When they go on their walk, Edna takes the man’s role
to Adèle’s more fragile femininity in the way that S.J.D. does for Orthodocia: she brings
out blankets and pillows for the two of them, then takes the fan from Adèle and fans them
both, unconsciously repeating Robert’s same gesture to Adèle in a previous scene (31-2,
23).

The many accessories that Adèle carries appear to reinforce her traditional
femininity. Accessories were potent symbols of middle-class identity in Victorian culture:
the things with which women surrounded themselves were supposed to reflect their inner
characters, “an outering of the woman’s inner state” (Beaujot 76). At the same time, they
were also props that allowed women to play off ideals and assumptions of whiteness,
leisure and femininity, and encouraged women to see their bodies as visual spectacle (Beaujot 8-16). A woman was never considered truly dressed without the accoutrements that accompanied her clothing. Moreover, to be considered appropriately middle class, Ariel Beaujot insists that a woman also needed to know the complex etiquette of postures and gestures that accompanied the use of accessories (52-53). Accessories, she argues, allowed women to perform “passivity, asexuality, innocence, coyness and leisure” (Beaujot 9). Adèle’s gloves and veil, for example, are supposed to keep the skin pale at a time when women of the middle class were valorized for fragility. There is a double function to the gloves and veil, however. Victorians considered the hand an extension of the arm and face, and much emphasis was placed on how the pale hand enhanced the appearance of the arm, both in repose and in gesture (Beaujot 40-41). The ideal woman’s hands were small, with taper fingers and rosy nails (Beaujot 31). Adèle’s hands are “perfect,” “exquisite” and “expressive,” while her taper middle finger is a “joy” to look at (Awakening 15). Adèle is graceful in “every step, pose, gesture” (15). When Adèle asks Robert to accompany her back to the house, she leans heavily on his arm, “beneath the encircling shadow” of a sunshade, in an exaggeratedly feminine pose of frailty and dependence (38). Edna, however, does not see beyond the pose: while she enjoys looking at Adèle, she dismisses the brain inside. When Adèle praises Edna’s sketches, Edna’s initial reaction is one of complacency, for she sees no value in praise coming from the domestic sphere (105). To her, Adèle’s domestic life is a “colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment” (107).

Accessories like the fan and gloves created something of a barrier between man and woman while giving the illusion of physical proximity. Beaujot insists that for
Victorians, flirtation “existed in the nebula between consent and refusal – it was a game of hide and seek” (83). Edna’s sunshade facilitates her intimacy with Robert. Its shell pink lining makes her skin appear younger and more animated, while its cover invites physical and emotional closeness. Leonce’s appropriation of the parasol for his own needs, however makes the umbrella less a tool for covert intimacy than a symbol of ownership. The closeness between Robert and Edna is sanctioned by Leonce, who accepts Robert as a cicisbeo rather than a lover. The umbrella under which Robert and Adèle walk has the same function: Adèle’s relationship with Robert never goes beyond the same boundary of flirtation that Leonce assumes governs the intercourse between Robert and Edna. At the same time, the cover of the parasol allows Adèle to broach the subject of the intimacy between Robert and Edna. Her accessories reveal how adept Adèle is at wielding her femininity: when they reach her cottage, Robert makes her cup of bouillon, for which she reaches “a bare white arm” through the curtain over her bedroom door (40). Robert has no access to Adèle’s inner sanctum, either bedroom or true feelings. He sees only pale arm in its feminine pose, the way that Edna does. Yet that pose, and his response to it, is part of the unspoken social etiquette of the resort. He, Leonce and Adèle are insiders to the Creole community and know what is expected of them. Edna is not.

Edna thinks of herself as the more “modern” woman, and her outsider status in the Creole community allows her to maintain a sense of superiority to the other women on the island. Yet Edna’s emotional frailty, reserved sexuality and vestiges of Protestant propriety are all reiterated through how she inhabits the clothing and accessories she wears. She does not hide her true emotions from public display. On the night that
Mademoiselle Reisz plays for her, Edna’s skirts become heavy, like her arms, and “trail along the dewy path” (56). Instead of posing “catlike” in her hammock, like Adèle, Edna falls into her hammock “with beneficent repose that seemed to invade her whole body” (57). When Robert leaves, Edna’s existence becomes dulled, “like a faded garment which seems to be no longer worth wearing” (87). Leonce misses the signs of Edna’s feelings for Robert, but Adèle does not, because she is able to read how Edna allows her whole (clothed) body to don her emotional state.

S.J.D. and Edna each asserts her place as the more forward-looking woman. Yet neither is free of the strict propriety in which she has been raised. Nowhere is this more apparent than in how and when they wear their corsets. Leigh Summers insist that the function of clothing in defining feminine respectability was not just a construction of middle-class women, but a project of the whole of society in policing the relationship between dress and social order (21). The corset was an expected article of dress for women in the nineteenth century. Its purported intent was to reinforce a woman’s class status and her adherence to social etiquette. Yet a corset also highlighted the sexual potential of the female body, and made the woman more attractive to prospective mates (Summers 20-22, Kortsch 56). Joslin argues that the corseted, fully dressed female body was considered more sexually provocative than the naked one, in that it was what was left to the imagination that was the real sexual lure (Wharton 122-23). The practice of wearing a corset was derided by a number of New Woman writers, including Sarah Grand, who criticized tight-lacing as emblematic of the manner in which society demanded women deform body and mind to fit a unattainable ideal (Kortsch 59-60, 94-96). As Summers insists, a corset, like a fan or gloves, negotiated the “perilous” space
“between prevailing and antithetical constructions of femininity, which positioned (middle-class women) as either virginal or dangerously sexual” (22). This paradox of innocence and carnality is central to how S.J.D. and Edna define themselves in relation to other women.

When they are invited to the Tomita dinner party in Tokyo, Orthodocia arrives “in all the glory of full dinner costume,” while S.J.D. wears her usual black silk evening dress, in a colour and simple style that seems to approximate male evening clothes, but also “turned in, tucked up and begarlanded to faintly approximate (Orthodocia)” (109). Though Orthodocia has brought “aesthetic tea gowns,” the late nineteenth-century dress that could be worn with a light or no corset when receiving afternoon visits from other women, in public and mixed company neither she nor S.J.D. would dream of going without a corset (Joslin Edith Wharton 16-17). Dressed appropriately for a Western dinner party, they are both dismayed to find that Mrs. Tomita has invited them to a formal Japanese dinner where they are supposed to kneel on the floor, legs folded under buttocks, in the position known as seiza. Both women find their corsets creaking as they try to bow and kneel, while eventually Orthodocia’s corset laces split with “the most unearthly groans arising from all parts of (her) attire at once” (112). S.J.D. and Orthodocia, both outsiders to upper-class Japanese culture, are unable to gauge the appropriate dress for this party, and fall back on the norms of their own cultural background to comic effect.

When Edna finds out that Robert is leaving for Mexico, she goes back to her room intending to change out of her white dinner dress into a peignoir, an indication that she does not intend to go back out into mixed company that evening. Like Orthodocia’s
aesthetic dress, a peignoir was designed to be worn with a loosened corset or corsetless, in the privacy of the home and intimate friends. Adèle comes to the door and tries to entice Edna back to the dinner party. When Edna objects to returning on account of her inappropriate dress, Adèle tells her that she must come back, or it will not look “friendly” (84). Adèle’s tacit criticism of Edna’s refusal/inability to govern her emotions goes further. She suggests that being corsetless in mixed company is acceptable within the “family” that is the close-knit resort community: “‘You needn’t dress; you look all right; fasten a belt around your waist. Just look at me!’” (84). Adèle, the insider to Creole culture and its social mores, turns semi-public space – the dining room of a summer resort – into a private space where a corset is not required. Edna, as the outsider to the community, must adhere to a more rigid form of conduct, both emotional and physical control. Ironically, the corsetless Adèle is more comfortable hiding her true feelings, while the rigidly circumscribed Edna allows every one of her emotions to be read.

Again, however, there is more going on in both these scenes. Rabinovitch-Fox insists that from the 1850s on, the Orient was a source of inspiration for dress reformers, who adopted and adapted the looser Oriental dress in order to challenge norms of gender (17). She argues that the western tendency to equate the Orient with “feminine,” and the West with “masculine,” gave women the means to negotiate gender roles while leaving cultural and racial identities unchallenged (17). Ironically, as Joslin contends, by the end of the nineteenth century, the tea gown (or peignoir, or artistic dress), initially associated with private seduction, had become synonymous with “serious female intellectual and artistic labour” and freedom of movement (17). S.J.D. is scornful of the dress reform movement, remarking at one point that a crewman’s Nubian robe is “almost ugly enough
to be adopted by a dress reform society” (197). However, lacing too tightly, as Orthodocia does here, is in equally bad taste. As it does for the “Scandal” on their P. and O. ship, with “the perfectly awful way she laces,” a corset too tightly laced suggests vanity and/or sexual or moral impropriety and invites criticism by other women (A Social Departure 304, Kortsch 56). S.J.D. walks a thin line between masculine and feminine, and appropriate and inappropriate in her travels around the world. By disparaging both the dress reform movement and tight lacing, she makes herself the insider to Canadian middle-class values, and the more appropriately feminine woman: neither intellectual nor libertine. It gives her a platform from which to criticize the behaviour of other women.

Yet S.J.D. is also excruciatingly aware of how she and Orthodocia appear to their Japanese hosts. Though she wants to assure herself of her social position within a hierarchy that she and Orthodocia know and subscribe to, the feeling and constriction of her body ensconced within its corset gives S.J.D. double vision. With Japanese eyes, she sees Orthodocia as “a large low-necked pink-and-gray parrot in a very small canary cage,” a reference to Orthodocia’s bisected, corseted body (110). A few minutes later she watches with western eyes, and sees her friend as “graceful and tall and fair” against the smaller, traditionally dressed Japanese women (110). Edna, too, has this double vision/blindness, albeit in a different fashion: she admires Adèle’s beauty as she might “a faultless Madonna” (20), and is at the same time confounded by Adèle’s public face, which is an amalgam of chastity, flirtatiousness and absence of prudery (17). Edna is just as blind to her own feelings and desires. She will not assume a public face and come back to the dining room, whether corseted or not. Instead she bites her handkerchief, trying to hide, “even from herself” (86). Edna longs to find “self-ownership,” yet she is out of
touch with her own body. One of her most sensual and free moments is when she is finally alone; Leonce in New York and the children at their grandmother’s. Edna enjoys her solo dinner, particularly the sensation of dining in her peignoir (138). Edna’s moment of double vision is a sudden recognition of the latent sensuality behind her Presbyterian propriety, neither of which can be reconciled in Creole society.

Both Edna and S.J.D. like to think of themselves as outside of the conventions of femininity. Both use that sense of being outsiders to critique the needlework that other women do. Under the surface of all Chopin’s writing lies a profound ambivalence and discomfort with textile work. Chopin’s short stories are populated with desperate widows struggling to make ends meet with the only work available to them besides prostitution. In “A Sentimental Soul,” Augustine Lacodie, recent widow to the town locksmith, becomes a *blanchisseuse de fin*, a laundress, but is relieved of this work by the young and successful Gascon she eventually marries (156). Ma’ame Brozé, the impoverished and widowed sister of Monsieur Gamiche in “Dead Men’s Shoes,” can sew, according to Aunt Hal’fax, an African-American tenant farmer living on Gamiche’s property, who adds the rider that it, “don’t look like she got sense ‘nough to do dat halfway” (164). Concern for Ma’ame Brozé’s welfare and ability to support herself and her children leads Monsieur Gamiche’s inheritor, Gilma, to cede Gamiche’s land to her and her crippled nephew at the end of the story. In “The Lilies,” Madame Angèle sews dresses to make ends meet and labours to finish an Easter dress for a young lady, a necessity reinforced by the lack of money to pay back her neighbour, Mr. Billy, for the damage their cow does to his corn and cotton crops (145-46). These women live at the edge of existence, struggling to maintain a class status, and hoping for a man to save them from dire poverty.
Historically in the southern United States, textile “moveables” were a significant portion of a woman’s wealth and were used as indicators of a family’s wealth and prestige. Prior to the Civil War it had been a relatively agrarian and highly patriarchal society, and women did not usually inherit land (McNamara 5-10). The white wives and daughters of the South were expected to be ornaments of the parlor: accomplished in music, embroidery and fine sewing and yet able to organize and run the domestic space and its slave labour (Hagler 406-8). Even after the Civil War, when the lack of available household labour created a dilemma in how to redefine a woman’s proper domestic role, Southern ladies were expected to be refined, patient martyrs to the home (Cook 1). For Chopin, textiles, and the hands that make them, are more than simply symbols. They underscore the complex, ardent and sometimes thorny nature of relationships between women and the way that women both subvert and reinforce their own and each other’s roles after the disruptions brought about by the Civil War.

On Grand Isle, Aline Lebrun sews in her own room at the top of the main house, an attic room of “odd angles and a queer, sloping ceiling” (41). The room is described as inviting, with views of the Gulf and furnishings that are light and practical (41). Yet her sewing machine is a noisy, older model, “of a ponderous, bygone make,” and Aline, “who does not take any chances which may be avoided of imperiling her health,” employs a young, African-American servant to work the treadle (41-42). It is impossible to ignore some of Chopin’s references to the antebellum South in this description. While a young white woman would be trained in school in fine needlework and embroidery, on marriage she assumed a number of heavy responsibilities, including planning and overseeing every part of the food, clothing and health needs of both her family and its
slaves. Much of this clothing she would make herself, and the manufacture of clothing, from carding, spinning, weaving to sewing, was a woman’s most demanding and labour-intensive task (Ferrero 43; Hagler 412). Since seventy percent of all slave owners owned fewer than ten slaves and the majority of all slaves lived and worked on small to middle-sized farms, slaves were not taught or expected to have one specialized task. A white woman might enlist her daughters to help with the sewing, or she would farm out the labour to female slaves who had worked in the fields all day and spun or sewed long into the night (Ferrero 44-45). As Pat Ferrero also reveals, some slave women used their needlework skills to buy their freedom: the most famous of these, Elizabeth Keckley, who became seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln, at one point supported seventeen people through her sewing, including the impoverished family of her white owner (45). The labour of sewing, for both white and black women, was a never-ending litany of production and reproduction.

Sewing machines, which became widely available in the 1850s and 60s, removed some of the drudgery of sewing, and made it possible to do as much sewing in one day as would have taken a week by hand. At the same time, women’s clothing became more and more complicated to make, with tight bodices and bustles, and endless ruffles, pleats and pintucking. The sewing machine encouraged women to do more, rather than less, and in this they were exhorted and abetted by ladies’ journals like Godey’s to fill the time saved by the sewing machine with more work done by hand (Ferrero 38). Though the reader is never told what it is that Aline sews, her place at her sewing machine gives a hint of what it means to be a the single white woman the post-bellum era. Her loudly “ponderous” and archaic sewing machine, attached to a seemingly passive and female black body, is a
tactile reminder of slavery and of the sheer drudgery of textile work for both white and black women in the South. The starched, white cotton dress Aline wears is the product of both black and white female labour, a tenuous tie between white and black in a postbellum South, where white is meant to indicate financial and racial superiority. Chopin’s acerbically worded comment about Aline’s health reveals the tensions inherent to Southern culture as a whole, dependent on black labour but intent on the appearance of mastery and control. As a widow, Aline has little social or political power in white Creole society. Like Ma’ame Brozé or Madame Angèle, Aline appears to be skating close to a social abyss: the clatter of her sewing machine and her income from the property keep her one step away from falling down the social ladder.

The sewing machine also ties Madame Lebrun to one place. Unlike her sons, Robert and Victor, who travel back and forth, like Léonce, across to New Orleans and the islands around Grand Isle at will, Aline is tied to the care of her summer home for most of the year, and returns to her French Quarter home only in November. The only suggestion that Aline might escape this responsibility is in the written note cast into her workbasket from Montel, “the middle-aged gentleman whose vain ambition and desire for the past twenty years had been to fill the void which Monsieur Lebrun’s taking off had left in the Lebrun household” (42). Edna visits her in her attic room often after Robert leaves, “braving the clatter of the old sewing-machine” (87). She does not, however, aid in the sewing. She visits as Robert does, chatting with Aline and looking at an old photo album. For Edna, the sewing room is alien territory.

Yet Aline Lebrun is not a prisoner in her attic room. Marriage might give her less independence, rather than more: Louisiana was one of the last states to pass a married
women’s property act and in marriage, Aline’s home and income would pass to her husband (Jones 4). Montel’s desires are less important to her than the sewing under which his note is thrown. Aline makes a conscious choice to remain single, choosing of her own free will to maintain the family summer home independently and to raise her sons alone. The room in which she sews is hers, and is decorated differently from the rest of the summer house, in a simpler, more modern style. Though she seems to hearken back to an older culture, Aline Lebrun is a bridge to the modern woman’s life: capable, independent, at home in her world.

Adèle is also constantly depicted with needlework, whether embroidery or hand sewing. She sews for her children (15-16, 23). She takes embroidery to the beach, despite Edna’s exhortations to leave it behind (28). Moreover, Adèle looks beautiful as she sews. Her hands appear as seemingly a reflection of an inner morality that imbues her work with spiritual grace as she sews on “the little night-drawers or fashioned a bodice or a bib” (15). She also tries to get Edna to sew, at one point bringing over a pattern for night-drawers that Edna, somewhat unwillingly, cuts out (16). Yet Edna remains reluctant to join in the work of the other “mother-women.”

On the one hand, Adèle’s sewing would appear to function within a continuum of Victorian women’s lives, by making and sewing for others, particularly her children. It is a continuum that has been interrupted in Edna, in much the same way it was interrupted for Fanny Price and her cousins, through a lack of “proper” mothering. Edna lost her mother early in her life and has spent most of her life in the company of men, particularly her egocentric father. Adèle’s frustrated attempt to get Edna to sew is Adèle’s way of trying to “right” her and reorient her to a woman’s role in Creole society. Edna remains
oblivious to Adèle’s help, however: “Mrs. Pontellier’s mind was quite at rest concerning
the present material needs of her children, and she could not see the use of anticipating
and making winter night garments the subject of her summer meditations” (16).

Children’s clothing was widely available ready-made by the early 1880s and neither
Adèle nor Edna really need to make their children’s clothes. Adèle sews because it is
what she has been taught to do and she enjoys the work. Yet she also makes because it is
part of a performance of femininity in which she is absolutely complicit, exploiting to her
own advantage: Adèle’s needlework is an ornamental extension of her well-developed
sense of self. Whether she is folding up her sewing or carrying one of her children, it is
with an innate understanding of how she appears to both male and female gaze.

For Edna, both Adèle and Aline represent possibilities, lives that she could
assume and paths that she could take. There are other female lives and paths open to her
as well. Mrs. Highcamp offers one such path. Mrs. Highcamp, who is a friend of Alcée
Arobin’s and with whom Edna associates at the Jockey Club, is a “worldly but unaffected,
intelligent, slim, tall blond woman in the forties” whose somewhat prosaic daughter is her
pretext “for cultivating the society of young men of fashion.” In truth, Mrs. Highcamp is
a sexual predator, trapped in a loveless marriage and bored by parenthood, whose ruthless
acquisition of young lovers matches her daughter’s playing of Grieg upon the piano: “She
seemed to have apprehended all of the composer’s coldness and none of his poetry” (142-
43). Mrs. Highcamp maintains the outward appearance of her marriage, even to sitting in
the library with her husband and reading the paper with him after dinner, but both she and
her marriage are shams (142).
Mademoiselle Reisz, the little pianist who awakens Edna’s artistic and sexual being with her music, offers another such path. Mademoiselle Reisz, whom Kathryn Lee Seidel argues embodies nineteenth-century tropes of the female artist as lesbian, has never been married and abhors children (Seidel 200). Adèle’s opposite in every way, nevertheless it is Mademoiselle Reisz who cultivates in Edna a sense of beauty and artistic expression, opening up Edna’s sensitivity to her own body and sense of self:

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth.

She waited for the material pictures she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (50)

Mademoiselle Reisz’s own life is one of incompleteness and disadvantage. Doris Davis argues that serious music in the nineteenth century was considered the domain of men and that the expectations of a woman playing in an artistic salon or living room (as Mademoiselle Reisz does on Grand Isle) were very different than the physical freedom and emotional abandonment expected of the male pianist in a concert hall (92-94). Nor would a nineteenth-century audience have been receptive to the impromptu compositions that Mademoiselle Reisz plays for Edna as she reads Robert’s letter (121). On the one hand, Mademoiselle Reisz is as assured in her own identity as artist as Adèle is as mother. As Davis puts it, “she knows she is an artist and accepts the inevitable consequences,” including sexism, poverty, degradation and lack of emotional and intellectual support (96). It is only when she plays privately for Edna that the cracks in Mademoiselle Reisz’s
armour are revealed: “The music grew strange and fantastic – turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room” (121). Mademoiselle’s own desires remain nameless and unformed. Though she caresses Edna, and tells her that Edna has “captivated” her (121) and that Edna is the “sunlight” that replaces her fire on a cold day (150), the sexual desire that Mademoiselle Reisz clearly feels for Edna goes largely unreciprocated and unfulfilled.

Each of the four women represents both an archetype and a possibility. Each forms as well a part of Edna’s sense of self: the mother-woman, the woman of business, the artist-intellectual and the sexual predator. Yet none is ultimately satisfying, in part because Edna cannot move beyond the façade of each role. When Léonce must go away to New York, Edna tries to approximate Adèle’s interest in her husband: “She bustled about, looking after his clothing, thinking about heavy underwear, quite as Madame Ratignolle would have done under similar circumstances” (136). Yet “a radiant peace” settles on her when she is alone. Edna loves her children, but like Mrs. Highcamp, is looking for her own sexual satisfaction. Unlike either Mademoiselle Reisz or Aline Lebrun, Edna paints solely for herself and then gives away many of her sketches to Adèle: she is neither artist nor entrepreneur. Edna can find no woman, or community of women, with whom she can identify. Moreover Edna, like the men around her, misunderstands and misrepresents each woman in her own mind.

Like Edna, S.J.D. also criticizes other women’s lives, using her “borrowed” masculinity to distance herself from the restrictiveness of women’s roles and their complicity in them. When Jack Love brings over an “aunt” to act as chaperone for Orthodocia and S.J.D.’s stay, the aunt brings with her a square of “crazy patchwork” as
well as a pair of roast wild ducks and a pound cake of her own making (33). Crazy patchwork, also known as crazy quilting, was a uniquely North American invention of the late nineteenth century that combined satin embroidery embellishment with quilted squares made of random shapes and combinations of wool, velvet and silk fabrics. Likely a product of the thrifty colonial practice of reusing and combining salvageable pieces of worn out woollen clothing and bedding into utility quilts, and inspired by the Japanese art featured in the American Centennial Exposition of 1876, crazy patchwork was at the peak of popularity in the late 1880s, around the time that Duncan and Lily Lewis were making their trek around the globe (Shaw 55-57; Fererro 25). Despite the value placed in Canada on thrift and economy, crazy quilts were no longer the product of necessity. Rather, they had become elaborate embroidery samplers that most often combined expensive, boughten pieces of silk and velvet with sentimental fabrics saved from the family’s history, like a wedding dress or a christening gown, and often included birth, marriage and even death dates of family members (Shaw 56-57). They had also become a source of competition between women trying to prove their class, taste and artistic skill: no Victorian embroidery was simply gratuitous excess: every cushion, bell pull and doily was designed to put the family’s social status on display (Parker 159). The aunt, who remains nameless and whom S.J.D. describes as “corpulent, comfortable (and) uncommunicative,” “subsides” into her embroidery as soon as the introductions are made (33). The verb “to subside” means both “to sink into a sitting or kneeling posture” and “to cease from activity or agitation, become tranquil, abate,” a double meaning that can be read both against her disinterest in the conversation going on around her and the ways that embroidery operated both as a social weapon and a public silencer for women (OED
While silence and uncommunicativeness are perhaps traits one might enjoy in a chaperone, S.J.D. dismisses the aunt’s placidity and lack of interest in what occurs around her by suggesting that her embroidery is both the cause and result of her subsidence. The aunt is doing exactly what nineteenth-century Canada required of her: practicing domestic economy while being silent, despite being invited by Orthodocia to participate in the conversation. Orthodocia’s question, “Were you surprised at being dragged out here?” is a satirical metaphor for the larger conversation of women’s lives, that of having their lives organized and run for them by men. The aunt’s lack of interest in the parameters of her own life, S.J.D. implies, are as much a result of her own blinkered thinking as the life imposed on her by a patriarchal community.

Unlike the industrious aunt, neither S.J.D. nor Orthodocia is ever described as even holding a piece of embroidery, though they are clearly well-versed in choosing and purchasing fabrics to have made into clothing. Over the course of her voyage around the world, S.J.D. comments at intervals about life aboard ship with the Peninsular and Oriental Steamship Company, which controlled both a passenger liner operator and a commercial shipping line in the late nineteenth century. The life she describes is one of leisure and ease: baths in a marble tub, self-reflective sojourns in a steamer chair and elegant meals below decks with stewards to attend to every need (193-94). Yet for the unmarried (or widowed) woman without a male escort, the life aboard ship is not without its pitfalls. One of their captains, Captain Worcester, relates several stories to S.J.D. and Orthodocia about the young women consigned to his care by parents or attendants, with one in particular who “refused to ‘turn in’ at ten o’clock as beseemed her, but rather preferred the society of a callow subaltern and the seclusion of the hurricane deck” (200).
The captain, in his role as stand-in father, goes to great lengths to “preserve discipline,” eventually causing four lanterns to be placed around this “contumacious maiden” at all times (199-200). Again, while humorous, this episode highlights their somewhat precarious positions as single women: the scene mirrors the paternalistic care which S.J.D. finds Orthodocia complacently enjoying at the beginning of the novel, with the captain and three quarter-masters, as well as two stewardesses, guarding her on the quay in Montreal (3).

Though Duncan’s playful dedication to Mrs. Grundy suggests otherwise, one has to wonder whether they are as free of the domestic sphere as S.J.D. believes, since the P. and O. ship replicates the domestic space of home. On the sole occasion that she and Orthodocia sew, they hem the captain’s handkerchiefs on the trip from Vancouver to Yokohama. She sees it is a singular event that S.J.D. suggests is on a par with the day the steward makes almond-taffy and “the day the Chinaman died and went to Nirvana, and was embalmed and put in the hold” (57). While on the one hand, the hemming of the handkerchiefs might have given a spot of interest and difference in the monotonous day-to-day voyage of crossing the Pacific, hemming handkerchiefs was, like embroidering slippers or sewing shirt collars, an occupation of daughters for their fathers. Plain, utilitarian sewing like hemming was a basic domestic skill that almost all girls learned early, and practiced on simple items. The handkerchief was ideal for this practice: it was carried by most men in the top pocket of a suit blazer, so it was needed in multiples. The hemming of the captain’s handkerchiefs suggests that both S.J.D. and Orthodocia are subject to the same paternalistic care as the “contumacious maiden” of the captain’s story.
While they are in Tokyo, S.J.D. and Orthodocia attend a charity bazaar given in aid of a hospital by “the ladies of Tokio” (118). S.J.D. appears as familiar with these bazaars in Canada as was Duncan herself. Langston notes that contemporary female journalists wrote to a presumably female audience and focused on domestic life, social events and gossip, which was subject matter considered to be more engaging for a female reader (83). Duncan’s “Woman’s World” columns for the *Globe* contain a number of references, mostly negative, to embroidery and needlework, and a similar number of references to charity bazaars and exhibitions. Yet the Japanese version of the bazaar appears to thwart S.J.D.’s low expectations of such an event:

But upstairs there were no trivialities in Kensington stitch, or any other stitch. There were no gruesome vegetation hand-painted by amateurs. There were no baby-jackets knitted to imitate the warmth and durability of an April cloud, no perfumed handkerchief sachets or embroidered tobacco-pouches, or beaded chairbacks, that give the sitter cold agonies – but let me not grow maledictory under a possible feminine eye that acknowledges and loves these things!.....Why was the antimacassar absent and the mantel-drape a-lacking? Because the ‘lad[ies] of Tokio,’ laudably ambitious of the correct thing in charities as they are, are not yet quite equal to it from a manufacturing standpoint. The pleasant embroideries of Japan are the employment of people who make them a business, and the foreign needle is not conquered yet. (121)

Kensington stitch, which is an older embroidery stitch that combines long and short stitches so as to allow shading on a flower, human or animal figure or in a landscape, was re-popularized by the work of William Morris and the Royal School of Needlework, founded in 1872 (Kortsch 155-57). S.J.D. places herself, as she does in previous chapters, apart from other women. The “feminine eye” in this passage is not her own, and by distancing herself from it, she again takes on a more masculinized persona, one who is more authoritative in tone in this analysis of women’s “work.” More importantly, S.J.D. repeats many of the same sentiments that Duncan expressed in her journalism about
needlework and the “trivialities” of women’s lives. Growing up in Brantford in the 1860s and 70s, Duncan would have been surrounded by women who constantly quilted, sewed, knit and embroidered. She would have learned the basics of sewing at school and would have witnessed girls exchanging crochet and knitting patterns as symbols of friendship. She would have attended a church where the women’s groups employed themselves in the textile arts. Langston, in her analysis of an 1886 column for the *Globe* in which Duncan accompanies “Seraphima De Stitch” to the Ladies Division of a local fair, suggests that while on the surface Duncan appears eager to learn about embroidery, she also issues a “covert challenge to the conservatism and outdated social mores” to which “Seraphima” seems to cling, pointing out at the same time how irrelevant are these representations of femininity in a modern age (87-88). In another column for the *Globe* in 1885, Duncan blames needlework and the resulting diminution of women’s lives through trivial work for a woman’s lack of interest in the world around her: “Why is it that we have so little faith in our own opinions, so little definiteness, accuracy, grasp? Because we have never consciously needed it…It’s a great deal easier to paint on china, and Kensington is nothing to it!” (*Globe* May 20, 1885). For S.J.D., embroidery should be consigned to the past along with Orthodocia’s “sewing circle” at home in Devon.

The constriction of women’s lives she observes in Japan is repeated at other intervals throughout her voyage around the world. When they arrive in Hong Kong, S.J.D. observes that their sampan is manned by the women of the family, and Orthodocia, whom S.J.D. notes is “not a suffragist,” concludes that women have made more advances here than at home. She is forced to revise that conclusion when they both realize that the one in charge of the boat is a boy of about seven (181-82). In Calcutta S.J.D. and Orthodocia
meet the wife of Kirpa Singh, a clerk in an Anglo-Indian firm, who is a purdah-nashin, a woman not permitted to be seen by other men. S.J.D. makes note of the rooftop Mrs. Singh is allowed to frequent, measuring ten feet by twelve and looking out on other walled houses, and yet dismisses Mrs. Singh herself as a “gentle, domestic animal” (286-88). In Egypt, they speculate about the drudgery of a “tiny old chaperon,” likely engaged on salary, in charge of a pair of wild and not necessarily well-bred Irish girls (362). Here S.J.D. also hears gossip about the Khedivia, the wife of the governor of Egypt and Sudan, who is not allowed to receive guests, dine or to attend a ball with her husband, and lives her life in seclusion with the other women of the harim (364). Yet the lingering question is whether S.J.D. blames men or women more for the state of female dependence.

Much of S.J.D.’s criticism of women’s work, like her dismissal of the aunt who disappears into a square of “crazy patchwork” at Jack and Jim’s farm, is both of the old-fashioned un-necessity of it all and the way that work blinds women to their situation, the world outside their door and to social and political life as a whole. Whereas the German settlers who spin their clothes and weave their blankets seem to capture her imagination and respect, she insists that the endless production of useless bric à brac fills women’s lives with trivialities instead of real engagement with the world. It teaches them to be passive about their ownership of their own bodies and lives. Interestingly, though she starts out her study of the Tokyo bazaar seemingly praising Japanese needlework and painting over Canadian, she ends the paragraph by subtly eliding the two: “And why should one devote one’s life to the production of ugliness at infinite pains? And for the little ok’umas who had not the foolish audacity of this opinion, their lives had other idylls probably – the fingering of the melancholy koto, the arrangement of the household
vase – or domestic cares supervened the charge of many cupboards and innumerable mats” (121). With the words “many,” “innumerable” and more particularly the use of “idylls” to describe their daily lives, S.J.D. asserts that as much as Japanese women’s work might be more beautiful than Canadian, the result is the same. Even their fingers are not their own. Women are socialized and trapped into inconsequential lives full of banal tasks that preclude real lives, and the women who do not fight against it are doomed to having their lives, their hands and by extension their bodies organized for them by men.

This, too, is Chopin’s criticism of textile-making. When Robert finally returns from Mexico, Edna sees that he is carrying a new tobacco pouch, very different to the old one he carried before:

His tobacco pouch, which he laid upon the table, was a fantastic embroidered silk affair, evidently the handiwork of a woman.

‘You used to carry your tobacco in a rubber pouch,’ said Edna, picking up the pouch and examining the needlework.

‘Yes; it was lost.’

Where did you buy this one? In Mexico?’

‘It was given to me by a Vera Cruz girl; they are very generous,’ he replied, striking a match and lighting his cigarette. (194)

The tobacco pouch, like the one on Duncan’s list of women’s bazaar horrors, is elaborately embroidered and decorated. It was not made for purchase within the marketplace, but privately, by a young woman for a young man. Though Robert pretends not to understand the significance of the gift, Edna is completely aware of its importance. Whether or not the relationship involved sexual intercourse, Robert was seeing another woman in Veracruz, a woman who wanted to provide him with tangible evidence of her love. The tobacco pouch operates as a possessive marker, suggesting female ownership
over Robert’s habits and daily activities. In contrast, Edna, as Robert points out early on, always lacks “forethought,” neglecting even to order coffee before they go to the Chênière Caminada (63). Edna wants to believe that Robert, in holding on to the tobacco pouch, must have some sentimental attachment to it, and to the girl who made it, even though he professes not (194). Robert proves he is like Alcée and Léonce. He sees women as he wants them to be: as possessions and trinkets to be left when they no longer please. He dreams of Edna, but only in conventional terms. To him she is still “Léonce Pontellier’s wife” (206). Edna, on the other hand, wants to find a relationship with him that is outside of the conventional. Though Edna does not want to admit it at first, she realizes that she, too, is like the tobacco pouch, that her needs and desires are as impermanent and intangible as a piece of textile: “There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her, who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them (219).”

The elision of “eluding” her children with the disappearance of Robert links the tobacco pouch back to Adèle’s endless sewing for her children. In rejecting needlework, Edna rejects motherhood itself. Yet the sexually open life that Edna desires is always going to be haunted by the sordid prospect of pregnancy and childbirth. The itchy, woollen bathing suit that she sheds before going into the water is a rejection of the conventional female paths that she has been offered: domesticity and needlework, artistic poverty, sexual degradation or subservience in business. No matter the choices she wants
to make in her life, the sexuality that has been awakened, the artistic soul that longs for fulfillment, each come with a sacrifice. There is no path that she can choose that will give her independence without having also to think how that choice will hurt her sons. The female lives that Edna learns to see – and really feel – for the first time are all compromised by, and complicit in, male ownership and control. Heilmann argues that Edna’s swim out into the Gulf of Mexico after finally learning how to swim on Grand Isle is more than a physical victory. She argues that it “establishes her sense of self- ownership, physical, mental and spiritual” (87). Swimming puts her in control of her own body for the first time, which in turn triggers two fundamental insights into her sense of self: she becomes aware of her body’s potential for pleasure and she begins to claim her right to self-determination. Yet her swim is not a victory. Feeling judged by Adèle for not putting her children first, and mocked by Mademoiselle Reisz for not being daring enough, Edna has failed to find a community of women in which she can be adequately supported. In the last seconds of her swim she wishes that she could have talked to someone who understood her: “He did not know; he did not understand. Perhaps Doctor Mandelet would have understood if she had seen him – but it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone” (221). In a sense this is S.J.D.’s journey as well. She travels through the world, and observes women in other cultures as circumscribed by archaic tradition as she herself has been limited in a contemporary, industrialized world. She realizes, like Edna, that she has exchanged one birdcage for another. At the end of the novel, it is Orthodocia to whom marriage has “befallen.” S.J.D. remains free, at least at the present, to determine her own life and her own choices. Yet the question remains, at the end of each novel, whether and to what extent each woman
has freed herself from the needs and desires of the society in which she was raised. Who owns a woman’s body, whether at home or abroad? What is self-ownership when a woman has internalized the very values she wants to repudiate?
Chapter 5  Silk, Sewing and Female Community in *Wild Geese*

The question of who owns a female body – and the working output of that body, is also central to Martha Ostenso’s 1925 debut, *Wild Geese*, a psychological exploration of work and family duty on an isolated prairie farm. Patriarch Caleb Gare, mother Amelia, and their four children, Judith, twins Martin and Ellen and youngest son Charlie are locked into an elemental battle for survival. Many years ago Amelia gave birth to an out-of-wedlock son, Mark Jordan, with a lover who died before he knew she was pregnant. Amelia gave Mark up as an infant and married Caleb to protect the secret of Mark’s parentage, but the secret is now the leverage by which Caleb controls both Amelia and his children, especially Jude, in order to keep them from leaving the farm. The novel begins with the arrival of Lind Archer, the young teacher from the city, who unwittingly sets in motion the chain of events that will allow Amelia and Judith to free themselves from Caleb’s tyranny.

As almost every critic of the novel has noted, the Gares are isolated, both mentally and physically, and Ostenso’s descriptions of the landscape in (and with) which they interact are central to our understanding of their conflicting motivations and troubled relationships. Descriptions of the landscape are often mediated through textile metaphors that sew the landscape closely to the female characters that inhabit Oeland, particularly Jude, Amelia and Ellen. Indeed, the landscape becomes both another female character and a mirror for the interior lives of the women who inhabit it. However, unlike, say, Frederick Philip Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh* (1925) or Hamlin Garland’s earlier *Main Traveled Roads* (1891), in which a male character must pit himself against a sensual but
cruel female landscape to subdue and bring it to order, Ostenso’s landscape subverts the dominant patriarchal and imperialist narratives of Western expansion. She imbues our view of the land with a secretive feminine power that is subjugated, like its women, to the will of Jude’s tyrannical father, Caleb. Caleb believes that he holds “the whip hand” over his family, his community and his farm (18). But while the landscape and the women appear to submit emotionally, mentally and physically to this control, they each have a secret inner life and desires that escape this male control in subversive and eventually explosive ways. Glenn Willmott insists *Wild Geese* is the only one of Ostenso’s novels to offer “a transfiguration of the femme fatale into a figure of desire for historical power and engagement with others that is empathic rather than abstract” (136). I argue that Ostenso uses the psychic link between textile (particularly silk), landscape and femininity to explore the nature of “female” power in a very provocative new way, for when the women of Oeland cooperate with each other, they and the landscape have the potential to become a potent force for renewal and regeneration.

Though popular when first published, *Wild Geese* has had a mixed critical reception both in Canada and the United States. Born in Norway, raised in both the United States and Canada, and eventually dividing her adult life between New York and Minnesota, Ostenso has been claimed as both Canadian and American novelist and co-opted “into a narrative of Canadian literary development,” but has also been criticized for not being Canadian enough (Hammill, “Diaspora” 20). Ostenso’s close writing relationship with her husband, Douglas Durkin, has also been problematic for a number of critics, who argue that *Wild Geese* is the only manuscript not extensively edited by Durkin (Hammill, “Diaspora” 19, Arnason 305). While, as Stan Atherton asserts, Ostenso
and Durkin were prepared to sign a legal copyright agreement in 1958 asserting their collaborative efforts on all Ostenso works, including *Wild Geese*, David Arnason insists that there are elements in *Wild Geese* that do not appear in Ostenso’s later novels, and that it is the novel “most fully Martha Ostenso’s own” (305). Willmott argues, in contrast, that *The Dark Dawn* (1926), which reverses the subjugation/control narrative of *Wild Geese* with the ambitious, wilful Hattie Murker and her submissive husband, Lucian Dorrit, also explores female sexuality, individualistic will and the trope of the “femme fatale” (131-36). He concludes, however, that only with *Wild Geese* does Ostenso explore the transformative nature of female power through mutual empathy and forgiveness (136).

The novel also defies easy categorization. While the romance of Lind and Mark follows the conventions of popular romantic fiction with a resolution that ends, if not in marriage, then at least in the promise of one, the other relationships explore unconventional territory, as Hammill has pointed out: the sexual attraction between Jude and Lind; the transgressive homo- and auto-erotic implications in the relationship of Jude to the land and Caleb to his fields; the violent passion between Jude and Sven and the sadistic overtones to Caleb and Amelia’s marriage (Hammill “Sensations” 87-89). Moreover, like Austen, Ostenso gives her secondary female characters the realistic (and sometimes brutal) fates that Jude and Lind ultimately escape, particularly in the example of Mrs. Thorvaldson, who gives birth to a stillborn son because she has been forced to labour on the farm in her third trimester (142).

*Wild Geese* is often praised for its unconventional heroine, yet the bulk of critical work tends to focus, somewhat myopically, on Ostenso’s unconventional mix of romance and realism, particularly in her rendering of the landscape. Arnason, Dick Harrison, W.J.
Keith and Colin Hill all label the novel realist in the manner of Grove’s *Settlers of the Marsh* and Stead’s *Grain*, but each asserts that there are problematic elements that need some kind of explanation. Harrison notes Ostenso’s realist descriptions of the landscape and argues that *Wild Geese* represents a disenchantment with the settler romances of the nineteenth century while at the same time stressing there are many biblical parallels with the Old Testament which render the novel not ‘quite’ realist (101). In much the same vein, Keith suggests that Caleb’s death takes from earlier romances like *The Bride of Lammermoor* and *Lorna Doone* “a heightened, sensational effect that trembles between sublimity and absurdity just as Caleb himself is caught between fire and water” (4). Keith concludes that this literary ancestry places *Wild Geese* within a tradition of romance, and that the novel should be evaluated and assessed as such (4).

While Arnason seems to see the novel as proto-modernist because of its Freudian themes and sexually charged landscape, he also suggests that the romance of Lind Archer and Mark Jordan does not sit comfortably within the stark realism of much of the action. He argues that Lind and Mark act as romantic “elements” that are foils for the realist sections of the novel, and concludes that this marks a transformation in Canadian writing from romance to realism: “the romantic and ethereal world of Lind Archer and Mark Jordan provides a counterpoint for the passionate and earthy world of the Gares….the juxtaposition of scenes from a vague and romantic world with scenes from a concrete, specific, and realist world heightens the central conflict between freedom and bondage” (305-7). In much the same vein, Hill calls the novel modern-realistic, in the sense that, like Irene Baird, Morley Callaghan and Grove, Ostenso attempts to represent her contemporary environment through her “cinematographic” descriptions of the landscape,
which, though themselves tending toward the romantic, complement Ostenso’s particular brand of realism (98).

American critic Joan Buckley sees the romantic spirit of *Wild Geese* as the natural incorporation of Scandinavian materials, themes and motifs in the writing of a second-generation Norwegian immigrant:

The theme of patriarchal dominance, common in Scandinavian as well as in Norwegian-American immigrant literature, is central to nearly all of Ostenso’s novels, whether the characters are identified as Scandinavian or not….When a harsh father worked his children beyond endurance for the sake of the whole family, the children often rebelled, especially if the neighbours had an easier life. (76)

Buckley argues that the realist and naturalist elements of *Wild Geese* lend credence and shading to Ostenso’s New World reworking of Scandinavian mythology and oral history. Buckley’s stance is echoed to some extent by Mary Dearborn, who argues that *Wild Geese* is in a tradition of American literature that requires the child to defy his/her foreign-born (she assumes Caleb Gare is Norwegian-born) father in order to transform into a “true” American (74). M. G. Hesse argues that novel is the embodiment of Ostenso’s personal philosophy that, “the quality of human lives depends on the dreams that inspire and the direction in which they are channelled” (51). All three critics privilege the romantic elements of Ostenso’s novel.

Most Canadian critics tend to fall into one of two camps: the novel is either understood as a transition point in a Canadian literary movement towards realism (Keith, Harrison, Arnason, Hill); or as the T. D. MacLulich image of a Canadian “Northern” novel, in which a man is pitted against a punitive divinity and terrifying natural world (Lenoski, Hesse, Johnson) (Hammill “Diaspora” 19-22). Both, Hammill argues, can be aligned with cultural and literary nationalism, “since they present the Canadian literary
canon in terms of improvement and consolidation” (20). Yet both, as Leigh Matthews explains in her assessment of Prairie women’s life writings, have a problematic relationship to gender:

Examination of both historical and literary images of the Canadian prairies further suggests that the language settled on to describe this space is often gendered as female, so that western expansion becomes figured as a physical projections of Anglo-Saxon culture into the (supposedly) fertile landscape as a means to conceive a new national identity, one that is sustained on an individual level by the (male) farmer’s battle to control the productions of the land through cultivation. (142)

Both critical approaches focus entirely on the relationships between Caleb and Jude and between Caleb and the land by enfolding them into tropes of identity in which the female “other” must be subdued and controlled in order to achieve nationhood.

The most recent criticism of *Wild Geese* pays closer attention to the ways that the novel actually resists and subverts nationalist narratives. Willmott insists that *Wild Geese* is a female bildungsroman, which depends upon “a narrative of withdrawals and associations constructed in the private sphere,” where individual development is grounded in the domestic sphere and does not usually open a path into the public sphere of male power relations (140-41). He argues that *Wild Geese* ends with compromise, in that Lind “develops a darker wisdom, and…Judith learns to free her imagination and power of self-development, both within the limits of a social context still conditioned for women by marriage and patriarchy” (141). Yet he asserts that those compromises are also ambiguous. While Lind’s transformation is inward, it is produced by a defiantly anti-patriarchal outward agency. Judith’s transformation, on the other hand, is defined by the “negation of her mother’s experience with domesticity” (141).
Hammill, Casey and Keahey point out that though Ostenso intimately and obsessively catalogues the plants, landforms and details of the prairie landscape around the farm, the area itself goes unnamed; its location and nationality are left deliberately vague. Oeland, Latt’s Slough and Yellow Post, all of which figure in the action of the novel, are fictional names, while the big city to the south of Oeland is simply called “the City.” The landscape could describe Manitoba or Minnesota. As Hammill insists, any “evidence” that the novel takes place in the Canadian landscape at all is through the biographical details of Ostenso’s life and the particularities of her own short career as a teacher in the interlake area north of Winnipeg (“Diaspora” 18). All three critics, to different extents, articulate Ostenso’s reasons for leaving the Gares’ nationality unidentified as part of a larger concern with, and resistance to, a nationalist agenda, whether Canadian or American. Keahey suggests that Ostenso eliminates national and provincial boundaries in order to make her novel appeal to her American publisher and readership. The erasure of a specific time and place, as well as Ostenso’s suppression of her Norwegian heritage, almost incidentally gives insight into the imperialist and patriarchal ideologies that governed the settling of the Canadian Prairies (15-16). Casey argues that the erasure of borders allows Ostenso to be claimed as part of an American tradition of rural literature and “farm fiction.” She reads *Wild Geese* as a “middlebrow” novel, “productively marked by conflictedness, tension, negotiation, balance, meditation – in short, by the occupation of an intermediary ground, the often untidy, imprecise, inconsistent ground of the average reader, who is capable of holding reactionary and progressive attitudes simultaneously” (104). Casey insists that, like American women writing “middlebrow” novels in that period, Ostenso trades on a sense of rural nostalgia.
in order to critique both the past and present states of rural lives, particularly where women are concerned (104-5). Hammill, in contrast, focuses on Ostenso’s hybrid and diasporic identity as a Norwegian-Canadian-American writer with one foot in the urban environment of New York City and the other in her rural roots in Minnesota and Manitoba. She argues that all Ostenso’s novels, including *Wild Geese*, should be re-read for Ostenso’s “subtle explorations of race, ethnicity, culture and inheritance” as well as sexuality (“Literary History” 28).

What all four critics recognize is a tension within the novel that cannot be resolved by, or collapsed into, artificial binaries of romantic-modernist, Canadian-American or rural-urban. However, with the exception of Casey, who aligns Ostenso with American novelists Edna Ferber and Gladys Hasty Carroll, and Willmott, no critic has adequately foregrounded their analysis of *Wild Geese* in terms of gender and sexuality. Ostenso is most often compared to Canadian male contemporaries, Grove and Stead, and more occasionally to Callaghan and Sinclair Ross, and most often for the seeming inconsistencies within her texts that render her work different from that of these authors. Casey, in contrast, argues that the novel dismantles conventional views about rural women’s lives and challenges sentimental images of farming life. She also insists that the presence of Lind Archer and Mark Jordan, the sole urban characters of the novel, subverts any conclusion that it is the harsh landscape that forces its inhabitants into the rigid patterns of social hierarchy and manual labour that codify their behaviour to one another, despite Lind’s many assertions that it does: “Ostenso uses rurality as a means of sounding out modernity’s perils and possibilities, especially where women are concerned. Modern sexual and psychological crises, *Wild Geese* insists, are not engendered by the
Casey argues that *Wild Geese* is centrally occupied with an exploration of the psychological and emotional effects of male authority and governance over a family and a community, and that, as she puts it, “the forcefulness and singlemindedness necessary to wrest a living from a harsh landscape may actually make men unfit for cooperative membership in families and larger communities” (107). Casey’s insistence that modernity is an issue for rural as well as urban dwellers is unique to critical assessments of *Wild Geese*, but she, too, focuses on the relationship between Jude and Caleb.

Like Austen and Chopin, Ostenso is less concerned with the delineations and machinations of patriarchal authority than with the nature and power of women’s submission to, reiteration of, and resistance to that authority. The central relationship of *Wild Geese* is not Caleb’s battle with Jude, but the elemental struggle among Jude, Ellen and Amelia in the face of Caleb’s cruelty. Caleb’s control over his family depends on both Amelia’s submission to his will and her active cooperation in his cruelty to Jude, Ellen and Martin. As long as he has Amelia’s support, he keeps his children tied to the farm, but when Amelia begins to rebel against him, he loses his hold over all of them, including his land. The story is particularly Amelia and Jude’s, from their first conscious movements from oppression, both self-inscribed and dictated by their society, to a particular kind of freedom that can only be achieved *in cooperation with one another*. While Willmott argues that the “awakening” moment belongs to Lind and Jude, Lind is only a lightning rod for transformation. The blinding moment of insight is Amelia’s. She turns the cycle of disillusionment and rebellion to reconstruction. Her strength becomes
Jude’s, and her courage allows Jude to finally break free from the farm. When the women begin to cooperate both with one another, they not only survive, but thrive.

Central to the division between mother and daughter is the needlework that makes up a large part of Amelia’s day and forms the backdrop to Jude’s physical work outside on the farm. There are suggestions throughout *Wild Geese* that Amelia’s life before Caleb was more genteel than the existence she has on the farm, though she insists to Jude that Caleb came from “better people” than she did (138). In her youth she went to church, sang in a choir and wore silk dresses like Lind’s (38). Lind, who also has education and more refined tastes because of her more urbanized background, recognizes this within Amelia and speculates that Amelia “must surely have been worthy of a better lot” (14). The Gare farmhouse has small reminders of this fineness that could only be the output of Amelia’s hands: doilies in the main room (14), piece quilts on the beds in the loft (20) and the “carefully ironed, worn napkins” on the dining table (175). At the same time, mixed into Amelia’s needlework is evidence of deprivation and make-do. Amelia mends worn stockings over a handleless cup (15) and knits winter socks for Martin (285). Both Jude and Ellen wear worn gingham dresses and Jude wears out her boots before Caleb finally purchases her new ones (13, 113). The carefully ironed napkins go with cracked plates and “old forks with the bent prongs” (175). Caleb deigns not to notice the ways that Amelia makes the farmhouse more beautiful, however, because “it symbolize(s) something in his wife’s life that he had tried to obliter – a certain fineness that was uneconomical and pretentious” (175). Amelia’s fine textile work is an expression of her soul, and at the same time symbolic of her subjugation under Caleb.
In contrast to Amelia’s indoor work, Jude’s labour is all outdoors, plowing, tending to the crops and caring for the livestock. Jude is forced to labour as a man under Caleb’s yoke, and every description of her, as Arnason points out, likens her to a resplendent woman/animal with an animal sexuality (307). Yet Jude is also Amelia’s child, with a “certain fineness of mind” drawn from Amelia (27). Even in her outdoor labour, textile metaphors follow Jude. When she works the seeder in the fields, for example, she appears like an agent of the Norns, the old crones of the Norse myths, weaving “like a great dumb shuttle back and forth, up and down, across the great rough tapestry of the land” (36). In both an echo and reversal of Mansfield Park, needlework becomes emblematic of the schism between mother and daughter, but this time it is the mother who actively works to deny her daughter the skills and refinements that would give her opportunities in the wider world. Where Lady Bertram’s every impetus is to give her daughters the appearance of appropriate femininity in order to secure them a good marriage, and the women of Cranford shore up their diminished roles by becoming the keepers of village sexual and social morals, Amelia’s surveillance here is designed to pull her daughters down to the level to which she has fallen. She wants to keep them from the fulfillment of marriage and motherhood, all in order to protect her first-born son.

Critical studies of domestic sewing and needlework in literature tend to end with the Edwardian period and the New Woman writer. As Kortsch points out, the sheer number of women working outside the home by 1900 meant that universal absolutes about women’s domestic roles no longer applied, if they ever really had, and many women began to lose the “dual literacy” of cloth and print (16). At the same time grammar schools and newly created secondary schools for girls in Britain and North
America continued to operate as “a training in femininity through needlework, to the extent that boys were given books for prizes while girls were rewarded by being permitted to take home their needlework without first paying for it” (Parker 187). Messages in print and advertising culture early in the twentieth century continued to emphasize domestic needlework and thrifty accomplishment, and continued, both explicitly and implicitly, to equate idleness with sinfulness. In both Canada and the United States, where public narratives about domestic textile making had been so closely tied to the virtues of thriftiness and self-sufficiency, what women produced domestically was still considered evidence of their abilities as wives and household managers. Domestic textile making, particularly knitting and sewing, were seen as important female accomplishments until after the Second World War.

In addition, the kind of domestic work being done depended greatly on where one lived. The more rural and isolated the living, the more likely it was that the women in the family sewed, knitted and sometimes even spun yarn for clothing and household goods. Farm living was hard, and though Paul and Simpson-Housley insist that interlake Manitoba, the likely setting for Wild Geese, was already “a generation removed from the pioneer stage,” tremendous value would have been placed on thriftiness, recycling and mending farm tools, implements and textile goods in isolated farming communities. Marilyn Walker’s 1992 survey of Ontario heritage quilts includes several log cabin quilts from the early twentieth century made from fine woollen handspun, suggesting that hand spinning and weaving had not died out, as Nellie McClung wanted to believe, with the end of the nineteenth century (74, 83). Dorothy Burnham insists that in the Maritimes, particularly in Cape Breton, hand spinners and weavers, largely women, continued to
make for themselves and others into the 1930s (11). The colder climates of the northern United States and Canada created the necessity for warm winter clothing, especially socks and mittens, and bedding. Even as late as the 1920s, children in rural communities in Nova Scotia, for example, wore “shanks” in winter that were simple wraps made from tanned cow hides (Scott 26). Thick, sometimes doubled handknit wool socks made an effective barrier against the damp snow and biting cold (Scott 15-18). Penicillin was not discovered until 1928, and until that point, well-formed, hand-knitted socks were still considered the best defence against soil-borne illnesses and infections, as well as chilblains and frostbite.

At the same time, domestic textile production in more urbanized areas had become the exclusive province of the middle class, which, if anything, furthered class tensions in how and what women made. By the early twentieth century, urban culture, as Joslin says of the New York City of Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* (1913), was more “ethnically, economically, and – above all – socially fluid, in part because the mass production and affordability of clothes made sumptuary codes difficult to read” (111). Yet the new affordability of clothes also created the need for more changes of dress: to “keep up” socially, a woman needed morning dresses and afternoon dresses, evening dresses and ball dresses (Joselit 24-31). The desire for social status was inextricable from the desire for *things*, and the “right” clothing guaranteed a woman entry into the social world. So, too, did needlework. Having the time to sew or knit clothing for an infant proved a woman’s tenderness, love and financial security. As I pointed out in my analysis of *Social Departure*, while with clever fingers and the access to a sewing machine a woman could make the evening gowns that still lay beyond the affordability of the
working class, most working women had neither the time nor the inclination to do so, and for many of them, domestic making was a reminder of the deprivation and making-do of rural and urban poverty.

Canada, it must be pointed out, was also relatively late to large-scale clothing production. Until the latter half of the nineteenth century, clothing in the United States and Canada was made at home, by dressmakers, or through small establishments producing goods through piecework and homework, rather like the sewing taken in by Laura Ingalls in *Little Town on the Prairie* (1941), or the exploitative work done by Katrine Hafstein in Laura Goodman Salverson’s *The Viking Heart*. Where in the United States factories producing men’s and women’s clothing proliferated after the American Civil War, men’s suits and clothing only began to be factory-produced in Canada in the 1880s and 90s (M. Steedman 116). Women’s factory clothing began in the 1890s with cloaks and mantles, with dress production beginning in 1910 and growing into a well-established industry after World War I (M. Steedman 116).

The contradictory virtues of thrift, modesty and domestic textile production continued to appear in works written by women in the early twentieth century, particularly those aimed at girls and young women, and particularly in Canada. Many of them romanticized rural values against the pull of urbanization, and used images of domestic textiles and making to evoke a sense of homespun humility. Lindsey McMaster argues that Canadian readers were, more than Americans, resistant to urban themes, working-class issues and gender politics (2). In *Anne of Green Gables* and its first successors, *Anne of Avonlea* (1909) and *Anne of the Island* (1915), Anne’s growing love of clothing and finery is always balanced against the piety of the “humbler” arts practiced
by her older friends and neighbours, particularly Mrs. Lynde, who is a prolific quilter. When Anne goes to university, for example, the sight of Mrs. Lynde’s quilt hanging out on the line prompts her neighbour, a newly wealthy “tobacco king,” to buy one, much to the horror of his fashionable wife. Though an increasing number of consumer goods were available to purchase and there were new career opportunities to pursue, the implication in these novels was that young women were expected to know how to sew and knit, and were expected to find ultimate fulfillment, much like Adèle Ratignolle, in producing garments for children and items for their homes in their married lives.

World War I and its aftermath, in particular, placed a renewed importance on women’s domestic work. Anne L. MacDonald estimates that in the United States alone, hand and machine knitters had, by the end of 1918, produced six and a half million items for refugees and almost twenty-four million military garments (199). Despite the work that women also did in factories, on farms and in shipyards, many women’s magazines, from Redbook to Vogue, focused on domestic textile production for the war effort. They covered Red Cross events given over to knitting, ran features and photos of celebrities and wealthy women presiding over knitting and sewing bees, and gave pointers for home knitters and seamstresses. MacDonald argues that knitting was central to women’s social events during the war, and was the pre-eminent motivator for the numerous church meetings, teas and lunches given over the war period (206-7). When men came home from the battlefields in 1918, it was expected that women would go back to knitting and sewing in the home.

The tension between domestic needlework and women’s work, and male labour and familial responsibility grounds Wild Geese. The novel begins with the arrival, in
early spring, of Lind Archer at the Gare farm. Lind’s reception by the family is tentative and marked by undercurrents of tension, as they all wait for Caleb to arrive home. As they wait, each of the Gare women is described as seen by Lind: Judith, who has a “great, defiant body” and who stands “squarely on her feet, as if prepared to take or give a blow” (8), immediately breaks her father’s rules and gets Lind some buttered bread and a glass of milk; Ellen, who is reproachful yet meek, and whose badly fitting glasses makes her eyes “dilated and strained, the lids reddish and moist” (9), allows Lind to see her disapproval of both Judith’s action and Lind’s acceptance of the proffered snack (8); Amelia, who spends her time in the kitchen and only comes to the door to reprove Judith, unties her apron and straightens her dress before her husband walks in (8-9).

Each of the three women seems locked in a struggle with the other two. Ellen leaves in silence to confer with her mother in the kitchen about Judith’s transgression (8). Amelia reproves Judith for telling Lind that her father is prejudiced against female teachers (9). Judith seems bent on tormenting Ellen, and maliciously pretends to her sister that Caleb has already arrived. Yet it isn’t until Caleb actually steps into the house that these relationships come into focus, and the impetus behind the friction becomes clear. Caleb barely speaks, and when he does, his voice is “soft, almost like a purr” (11). His ability to divide and pit his family against each other, however, is unmatched. He embarrasses Amelia by insisting that they give the sole guest room (which has been reserved for Lind) to Skuli Erickson, who has arrived with Caleb for dinner. He does not talk directly to Lind and reprimands Jude for jumping up to go to bed ahead of the others by directing his criticism at Amelia. He insists that Ellen play the piano, though he makes loud conversation with Skuli over her music. Every request he makes seems designed to
humiliate and embarrass the three women, who in turn take out their feelings of powerlessness on one another.

Underscoring these troubled relationships is a simmering, sensual landscape which seems to mirror and reflect the resentment and passion locked in each woman. After everyone has gone to bed, Caleb goes out to survey his land. The landscape he views is both fecund and mysterious:

The dark, newly plowed furrows where in another five months the oats would again be stirring like a tawny sea under the sun; the acres where barley and rye would be sown for cattle feed, vanishing into the blue night toward the south; the small rectangle of wheat that he raised for chicken feed; the acres of narrow woodland stretching northward like a dark mane upon the earth; and the good, flat grazing land with two bluffs…and beyond the muskeg and a dried lake-bottom, his cherished field of flax. (17)

Gillian Rose insists that traditionally geographical surveys have been predicated on a masculinist view of the landscape that is white, bourgeois and heterosexual. In this perspective the landscape is constructed as feminine, and exists solely for the purpose of male pleasure (11-21). Caleb’s survey of “his” land indicates that he views the landscape in much the same way he views his family: as a subjugated female to his patriarchal male power. Johnson insists that Caleb’s inventory “belyes an erotic pleasure akin to the worshipful description of the lover’s body” (27). In this the two bluffs can be seen as breasts, the “small rectangle” of golden wheat as the pubic area, and the acres of woodland as skin or hair. All suggest the parts of a woman’s body, while the adjectives, “tawny,” “vanishing” and “cherished” loosely suggest a sensually feminine physicality. Even the reference to the ripening oat field is reminiscent of the gestation of a pregnancy. Everywhere in Caleb’s thoughts is the sense of entitlement and ownership, both over his land and his family, both of which he figures as feminine: “Caleb felt a glow of
satisfaction as he stood there on the ridge peering out over his land until the last light had gone. He could hold all this, and more – add to it year after year – add to his herd of pure-bred Holsteins and his drove of horses….all this as long as he held the whip hand over Amelia” (18, my italics). Caleb anticipates resistance, both from Fusi Aaronson, who does not want to sell his timbered land to Caleb, and from his children, who long for freedom, but he believes that he can overcome this resistance through subterfuge and manipulation. Caleb is, as Harrison has suggested, like an Old Testament patriarch. He has, as Lind later describes him, “the fixed, unreadable face of an old satyr, superficially indifferent to what went on, unconscious of those about him; underneath, holding taut the reins of power, alert, jealous of every gesture in the life within which he moved and governed” (36). In this moment, where he looks over his acres, he is sure of his place both as the head of a family and a community, and is always looking for opportunities to amass more power.

Yet the acres that vanish into the “blue night” point to an undercurrent of resistance to Caleb’s control. The muskeg that lies underneath the ridge, and which Caleb calls “bottomless and foul,” (17) has unimagined (and unstable) depths that make it impossible to control or manipulate. While Caleb wants to perceive the landscape as female, and therefore subject to his control, he is also aware of the dark and hidden places that lie beyond his reach. Whereas Caleb, from his vantage point on horseback, believes that his family and his land are his to drive, he feels a female resistance to his tyranny that is mirrored in how he moves within the landscape: “Caleb pressed on through the half-dark, leaning forward as if against some invisible obstacle” (17). This creates a sense
of a double vision: that of Caleb’s exerted force upon a feminized other and an equally resistant force pressing back on Caleb.

As Caleb surveys his farm, his thoughts stray to Amelia and her complex feelings for Mark, which is the key to all Caleb’s power:

Amelia’s word would start the children, then it would be all over – the results of his labour would be swept from these fields like chaff from a barn floor. He was too old to carry on alone. Hired help was worse than none – lazy, treacherous, rapacious. As long as he kept track of that little folly of hers….And so far, he had managed very well. True, he might at any time lose that little contact – the boy, good Lord, he must be a man now – might even die. He had come out of the war safely, in spite of Amelia’s praying…oh, no doubt the woman had prayed that he would die. But it was an uncertain world. Amelia, she was a soft fool, thank God! (18, ellipses in the novel)

As Caleb puzzles through the nature of the complicated relationships among himself, Amelia, their children and Mark, he believes that of all of them, Amelia is the easiest to control: “And Amelia, she was easy…yes, yes, she was easy, Amelia was” (20). Yet even as Caleb tries to assert his position over Amelia, it is clear that he is dependent on Amelia’s submission to his will. The troubling sense of the double vision returns, as Caleb thinks back to the early days of their marriage: “Amelia had loved the boy’s father, that he knew….His control over her, being one of the brain only, although it achieved his ends, also at moments galled him with the reminder that the spirit of her had ever eluded him” (19, ellipses my own). There is an unknown, untenable force that is beyond Caleb’s possession and understanding. Caleb senses it and fears it, but refuses to name it or admit its power, even to himself. His need to control the landscape becomes a metaphor for his need to fully possess Amelia. No matter how Caleb tries to coerce his children into the labour of the farm, he can only achieve his ends with the complicity of their mother. If Caleb is, as Harrison suggests, the image of an Old Testament patriarch, then “Amelia’s
word” in the passage above troubles that identity. The patriarchal word is law in the Old Testament. Amelia’s word refutes Caleb’s power over his family, and by extension his mastery over the land. Caleb’s power becomes self-made, rather than God-given, and totally dependent on his wife’s complicity.

For all his insistence on absolute sway, the land and the Gare women each have subliminal desires that remain beyond Caleb’s reach or understanding. These secret desires find their expression in textiles, particularly silk, especially once Lind arrives. Lind brings with her the tactile evidence of her city life. She wears silk underwear, silk blouses and silk dresses, all of which are impractical for farm life (11, 39, 125, 204). Her fine tastes and elegant wardrobe create envy in women like Mrs. Sandbo and Dora Brund, who like to use their (slightly) urbanized past to assure themselves of a superior class status, and it awakens hero worship in many of the younger girls, like Emma Sandbo, the Thorvaldson girls and even Gertrude Bjarnasson. In the Gares, however, Lind’s silk clothing awakens more than envy or worship: like a flame in Caleb’s carefully guarded flax fields, silk is all the fuel needed for at least one of them to explode.

Each of the women dreams about an existence that she wishes she could have. Whereas the workday life of the farm is represented by the wool of their sheep and the faded cotton gingham of the girls’ dresses, Ellen, Jude and Amelia dream about a life of silk – a fabric that is rich, ephemeral and impractical. For Jude it is the desire for a silk bed in which she can lie “forever” (21). It may even be for Lind herself. For Ellen it is for Malcolm’s silk tent, which he promises will keep her protected when it rains (166). For Amelia, it is for the silk scraps of her romance with Del Jordan and its enduring legacy in Mark.
To understand the depth of this longing is to understand the long history of silk and the multiplicity of meanings accumulated within the fabric over centuries. Silk fabric is exceptionally smooth, shiny and soft, and its tensile strength makes silk thread an excellent candidate for complex patterning on the loom, and dyeing both pre- and post-weaving. The thread comes from the cocoon of one of several species of domesticated silkworms, usually the *Bombyx mori*. The cultivation of silkworms, or sericulture, has existed in Asia for millennia, and may have its origins in China around 5000 BCE, yet for centuries the making of silk was a closely guarded secret. Silk’s lustre and exclusivity made it a status symbol to be desired, traded, bought and sold for political and social gain across Asia and Europe, and from the beginning the use and wearing of silk was associated with rank. The Byzantine emperors, starting in the sixth century, limited what silks could be used for private purposes and what was designated for use and trade by the imperial court (Harris 75). When silk began to be cultivated in Western Europe in the eleventh century, it continued to serve as a marker of prestige and privilege. The heaviest, most lavish European silks were reserved for the wealthiest, most aristocratic families, and silk clothing became the subject of sumptuary laws in Britain under Elizabeth I in 1574, and in colonial America in 1651. Both were widely ignored, as sumptuary laws often were, and Alison Lurie insists that after 1700 the system by which clothing indicated social class changed, from one in which the colour and shape of a man or woman’s clothing indicated high rank, to one in which “evident cost” was paramount, and “luxury, waste and inconvenience” denoted the clothing of the upper classes (*Clothes* 115-119).
For the newly industrialized middle classes, no other fabric symbolized success like silk, and the demand for the fabric was insatiable. It was late to be industrialized and laborious to produce, making the finished product expensive, which might also have enhanced its exclusivity and appeal, particularly for European-made fabrics (Field xix). However, silk was not universal as a status symbol. Throughout the eighteenth century, the finest silks were thought to be French, and European silks, in general, the most coveted by the well-to-do. The middle classes, particularly in North America, bought Chinese-produced silk, and to the women who sewed, embroidered and knit, there was a visible and tactile difference between the two (Field xix). By the nineteenth century, however, silks had become readily available and affordable to most of the middle class, particularly in the United States, which was the first to mechanize production with the import of reeled raw silk from China and Japan (Field xxii). Field suggests, however, that American silk fabrics were different from European fabrics: the peculiar stresses of mechanization resulted in thicker warp threads and a fabric “with a distinctive character of its own” (xxiii). While the market became saturated with medium grade silk fabrics, the most desirable silks continued to come from France.

To wear silk was to surround one’s body with a sense of luxury, opulence and ease. Yet as much as silk advertised the wearer’s wealth and social status, it could also indicate morally and socially transgressive behaviour. The shine, rustle and Oriental origin of silk lent it a sensuality and softness not found in other fabrics, and silk, like embroidery, was often associated with the decadence of the aristocracy. The equation of silk with both softness and desire also made it a convenient conceit for a woman’s body and by extension, a woman’s sexuality: “Sericeous,” the adjective used in entomology
and botany to describe a thing covered in “fine, silky or downy hair” (OED), can be used interchangeably with “pubescent.” Literature in English is filled with such similes as “she had hair like silk,” or “her skin was like silk,” and silk was often associated with the dangers of female concupiscence, such as “she enfolded him in her silky embrace.” In Cranford the other ladies have trouble accepting Mrs. Fitz-Adam’s change in financial status. When she returns to Cranford a widow, they ascribe to her black silk mourning clothes a lack of modesty that she would otherwise have possessed had she dressed in mousseline. Socially transgressive behaviour in a woman was assumed to be associated with sexual transgressions, and silk clothing was often as closely associated with prostitutes as it was with social climbers.

For Jude, Lind’s silks represent sensuality and opportunity, and they reinforce Jude’s fantasies of leaving Oeland. She covertly notices Lind’s fine silk underthings on the first night, when they are undressing in Jude and Ellen’s bedroom (11). The next morning she declares she will one day have a silk bed “and lie in it forever” (21). Jude longs for a life of leisure, away from the work-worn life on the farm, but she also desires a finer, more cultured life of music and dancing, like Lind’s, “in a more profuse place, where life was like silk, and she belonged there” (138). Perhaps more ambiguously, Jude longs for Lind, for the silkiness of Lind herself. Yet Jude does not know exactly what that life is or where she will find it.

In a moment that is the antithesis to the one in which Caleb surveys his acres, Jude sneaks away from her farm work on her own tour of the farm’s environs. Instead of climbing a ridge, however, she slips unseen into a cleft in the landscape, “a little ravine where a pool had gathered below the thread of a spring” (61). While Jude is alone, like
Caleb in the earlier scene, she is on foot, not horseback. Instead of scrutinizing the landscape like Caleb, Jude “feels” the earth. She feels life “smothering, overwhelming her, like a pillow pressed against her face, like a feather tick pinning down her body” (61), and in a spontaneous gesture, takes off all her clothes and lies in the April earth. The emphasis in Jude’s moment of intense and physical passion is not on seeing the land around her, but on feeling and experiencing the landscape in all its sensuous wonder:

Oh, how knowing the bare earth was, as if it might have a heart and a mind hidden here in the woods. The fields that Caleb had tilled had no tenderness, she knew. But here was something forbiddenly beautiful, secret as one’s own body. And there was something beyond this. She could feel it in the freeness of the air, in the depth of the earth….The marvellous confusion and complexity of all the world had singled her out from the rest of the Gares. She was no longer one of them. Lind Archer had come and her delicate fingers had sprung a secret lock in Jude’s being. She had opened like a tight bud. There was no going back now into the darkness. (61)

The scene is both auto- and homo-erotic: what Jude feels in the landscape is mirrored in what she feels about her own body and in what she feels for Lind. The cleft in the land is the cleft in her own body; the “forbiddenly beautiful” secret of the land is a nascent and powerful sexuality unlocked in her by Lind’s arrival, which is coincidently timed to the beginning of spring on the prairie. The “tight bud” that has opened suggests both a mental and sexual release, a release that both echoes and refutes Caleb’s “glow of satisfaction” as he stands on the ridge looking over his land (18). Where Caleb’s satisfaction takes place at sunset, as darkness falls over the land, Jude’s happens in daylight, under a blue sky in the springtime, and she refuses to go “back into the darkness.” Caleb’s satisfaction is frustrated by the sense that a part of Amelia has always eluded him, whereas Jude finds a release in the land/Lind that is both freeing and enlightening. Jude seeks and finds her
own sense of power and identity through a sexual exchange with a feminized landscape that is the antithesis of Caleb’s masculinised and patriarchal understanding of the land.

Moreover, Jude’s physical and psychic communion with the hidden space of the landscape is mediated through metaphors of fabric and clothing. Where Caleb only looks at his land, Jude takes off all her physical clothes, which represent her servitude to Caleb and Caleb’s ends, and instead clothes herself in raw nature, in the mud and dirt of an April day, in a landscape consistently described in metaphors reminiscent of silk fabric. In a spring where the cottonwoods are “festooned with ragged catkins” (25), with a softness in the air “unfurling like silk ribbons” (25), a “thin lustre over everything” (27), and a “shimmering wood trail” for the horses to follow (28), in this secret place, and just for a moment, Jude, like Edna Pontellier, removes the multiple and contradictory garments of a society that wants her to be a woman and a parent who demands she do the work of a man, and dresses herself in the silky landscape. In this moment of awakening, she clothes herself in something new, freer and less constricting, although what that is, she is not sure: “Something beyond Sven, perhaps....freedom, freedom” (61, ellipses in the novel).

Yet even as Jude thinks on the possibilities of a life outside the Gare farm, of her desire for Lind, and of a space that is solely hers, her own hands with the “maps of blisters” remind her of her place: “Jude hid her hands behind her and pressed her breast against the cold ground. Hard senseless sobs rose in her throat, and her eyes smarted with tears. She was ugly beyond all bearing, and all her life was ugly. Suddenly she was bursting with hatred of Caleb. Her large, strong body lay rigid on the ground, and was suddenly unnatural in that earthy place. Then she relaxed and wept like a woman....” (62,
ellipses in novel). In the moment that Jude thinks about Caleb, her body becomes “rigid” and “unnatural” against the earth. Where in the moment before, and the moment after, she is a part of the landscape and it a part of her, the image of Caleb – and the work of the farm that his image brings to her mind – temporarily divides her from the land, as it divides her from Lind and from the future implicitly promised in Lind.

The relationship between Jude and Lind is also repeatedly characterized by silk, and by the exchange of silk garments. In her treatment of sexuality and Lucy Maud Montgomery, Laura Robinson insists that the fear of marginalization and the lack of a settled home continued to motivate heterosexual partnerships before the late 1920s as the only viable option for women. At the same time, the expressions of romantic love that had characterized friendships between women in the nineteenth century, by the 1920s were being viewed with suspicion (176-78). Jude’s dreams of freedom are interchangeable with her desire for a life “like silk” at a time when the women who wanted “freedom” were often considered lesbians. Silk consequently becomes a metaphor for the sexual attraction between Jude and Lind. When Jude, in an act of rebellious independence, sells the wool from her ewes in Yellow Post, she immediately sends the money to the city for a dress, which Lind is to make up for her (148). After a day of berry picking, Jude interrupts Lind as Lind washes herself at the basin in the loft, and tells Lind that watching her is like “somebody is stroking my skin” (196). In the verbal exchange that follows, Lind asks Jude to let her help her get ready before she sees Sven again, noticing at the same time Jude’s “beautiful, challenging body” against the bed (196). Jude combs out Lind’s long hair, through which she loves to run her fingers and “to gather it up in a shining coil above the white nape of Lind’s neck” (197). Jude’s
hyper-awareness of Lind’s silken skin and hair are on her mind several days later when she works in the hayfield on the mowing machine. As she thinks about Sven, Jude’s glance falls on the fields, “where the depth of the hay stirred under the wind like something alive….a dark understanding had come upon Judith and now every living thing caressed, or was caressed” (201). As her thoughts turn from Sven to Lind, they also turn to world of silk she imagines in her future: “She had found herself stepping softly in [Lind’s] presence, had found herself looking into the mirror for some resemblance to Lind. These things Sven would not understand. He would have to learn to understand them, in the other world where they were going together after the haying” (202). While Hammill argues that Lind continually forces their relationship back to the conventional, heterosexual plot, despite her consciousness of their mutual attraction, there is a suggestion here that Judith is bisexual, and that she recognizes her desire for the unconventional. Moreover, in the exchange of silk that follows, there is a coded hint that Lind and Jude’s relationship is consummated.

When Jude gets ready for her next meeting with Sven, Jude goes into Lind’s room to wash her hair and her body with Lind’s “delicate soap” (203). She loves the feeling and the unforgettable smell, “like Lind,” and does not want to wash it off. Lind then loans her a silk blouse to wear and dresses her hair. Jude meets Sven that night, but Caleb sees them together. After Jude is confined to the farmhouse for trying to kill Caleb, Lind uses Sven as a cover to express her own feelings of loss and helplessness:

Lind was glad to find some response in Judith. “I’ll see (Sven), perhaps tomorrow, Jude. I’m pretty sure he’s thinking about you all the time,” she said cheerfully, putting her arm about Judith’s shoulder. “Do you know what I’m going to do? I’m going to make you something pretty. Something you can wear without anyone else seeing
it. You just wait.” Lind went into the other room, smiling back at Jude, who half smiled in return. (215)

The garment that Lind makes Jude is silk underwear, though whether camisole or pants is never specified. When Lind finishes it, she takes it to Judith, and spreads it out over her knees. Judith, in response to the gesture, traces “a lace insertion with her finger but not quite touching it,” insists that it is too pretty for her (226). When Lind contrives to arrange a meeting between Sven and Jude, it is Lind who also prepares Jude physically for the encounter, by “thoroughly” bathing her and then making her slip on the silk undergarment, as Jude rests on Lind’s bed (251). Jude’s response is to sigh heavily and “stroke her smooth sides with both hands” (251). The emphasis on touching and stroking through the medium of silk fabric, so often a metaphor for a woman’s body, suggests more than friendship between the two women.

Whereas for Jude Lind’s silk clothing drives her to rebel, for Ellen it is a continual source of irritation and confusion. Ellen is both Jude’s reflection and her opposite. Where Jude meets Caleb with fire and simmering resentment, Ellen waits with resignation and wilful blindness:

It was a pride of a strangely severe kind that kept Ellen from rebelling against her father. Rebellion would be the open admission of the consciousness of a wrong. Caleb was her father, and any wrong that he had committed must, necessarily, reflect upon herself. Hence she strove to vindicate in her own mind Caleb’s conduct of the lives and the affairs of the farm. In her struggle to do this she was driven farther and farther within herself. (164-5)

Ellen has come to think and reason as Caleb has taught her to, and her pride in self-denial extends to her ability to endure physical and emotional pain. She refuses to ask Caleb for new glasses, despite not being able to see, and insists that she is well enough to go to the Siding after, in somewhat biblical fashion, she puts a thorn through her foot (63, 84).
Ellen’s need to vindicate her father’s behaviour, even when she knows that this behaviour is unjust, makes her resent Lind’s presence in the house. She refuses to call Lind by her name and particularly dislikes the things that she associates with Lind’s more refined background, from “the dainty underwear she hung on the line to dry, to the manner in which she taught the children at school to look for beauty in every living thing” (125). Lind’s silk represents everything that Caleb has taught Ellen to hate, particularly the sexual fulfillment Caleb has taught her to fear.

Yet like Jude, Ellen longs for something that lies just beyond her ken. Though Amelia insists to Mrs. Sandbo that the Gares “can’t afford anything that isn’t useful” (142), Ellen grows sweet peas in a flowerbed below one of the windows in their sod-roofed house (84). Though annual sweet peas, lathyrus odoratus, are part of the fabaceae family that also produces edible peas, sweet pea pods are not edible and have no medicinal value. Like her twin Martin, who makes what Caleb calls “purely decorative and unnecessary outhouses” (110), Ellen grows the sweet peas in order to create something beautiful, much as their mother’s fineness comes out in her carefully ironed cloth napkins. Lind picks up on Ellen’s love of flowers when she makes her a sunflower costume to wear to the harvest jubilee (277).

The life that Ellen truly longs for is the one that Malcolm proposes when he asks her to leave the farm with him, a life that is like silk:

“I’d buy a horse for you – we’d go slow, and sleep out nights all summer under the stars, Ellen, and in my silk tent when it rains. I’ve got an old cabin up north – make lots of money on furs – you wouldn’t be needin’ for nothin’.” Furtively he touched her soft brown hair, the thing he had remembered as lovely about Ellen.

The touch thrilled her unbearably. Her back straightened, her hands dropped before her. Her heart beat like a gong sounding a brief hour. Why didn’t he snatch her up and carry her bodily away before she had
time to make up her mind? But he wouldn’t – things didn’t happen that way, for her. (168, my italics)

Ellen’s silken fantasies are entirely heterosexual, but, like her sister’s, they are also unconventional. Though she would be able to leave her father’s home, it would be for the kind of itinerant life decried by the Oeland community. Ellen responds sexually to Malcolm, wanting him to be carried away by passion, but, like Edna, she cannot move beyond the self-denial that she has internalized so completely. She ultimately rejects Malcolm and his silk tent, insisting both to him and to herself that Caleb will punish Amelia if Ellen leaves. When Malcolm leaves the Gare farm without her, Ellen dreams instead of a different kind of silky world, this time one of eternal maidenhood at the bottom of the lake the Bjarnassons are dredging: “she thought what a restful place the lake would be. It was glassy and lay in white and blue patches in the clear light. There would be no sound under its surface, only a luculent, gloamy peace” (170). Like Jude, when Ellen divides herself from the fertility of the landscape around her, and instead yokes herself to Caleb’s fields, she cannot find peace. Yet true to Caleb’s training, Ellen also takes a perverted pride in denying herself this fulfillment, although she watches every evening from her sweet pea bed to see Malcolm leave the Bjarnasson farmhouse, his last stop before leaving Oeland for the year. The sweet peas become representative of Ellen herself, “so carefully weeded that the blooms began to look self-conscious” (171). Her insistence on self-abnegation deepens the resentment between herself and Jude, who begins to rebel openly against Caleb as Ellen lapses into passivity.

Part of the resentment and hatred between Ellen and Jude lies in Ellen’s refusal of her own sexuality and Jude’s growing knowledge of her own desires, particularly after Ellen sends Malcolm away and Jude discovers she is pregnant. When Jude is let loose
from the house to stack the hay, she daydreams about Lind, “who was sweet and lovely, as wild honey” (235). Her dreams of Lind, however, make her judge her own femininity and body negatively in comparison: “She, Judith, was just an animal, with an animal’s passions and sins, and stupid, body-strength. And now she held an animal’s secret, too” (235). The sight of Ellen’s face and her “curious, red-rimmed eyes” watching her, makes Jude lash out both in fear of discovery and resentment against her sister by striking her down (235). When they are in the middle of the threshing, Jude again resents the passivity of her sister: “Ellen’s face had taken on a perpetual, self-righteous smirk. It seemed to Judith that it gave her sister some satisfaction to witness her debasement – as if she were congratulating herself on having given up what would have ultimately brought her the same misery that she, Judith, was enduring” (263). The differing degrees to which each has internalized Caleb’s patriarchal strictures divides them from each other.

The ultimate division between Ellen and Jude, however, lies not with Caleb but with Amelia. Where Ellen and Jude dream of the future, Amelia is locked in a past that she jealously guards and does not include her children by Caleb. In a highly charged yet subtle scene, Lind comes across Amelia quilting. Amelia has stretched the piece-quilt over the floor, and keeps her eyes close to it, seemingly oblivious to the shaft of sunlight coming through the window that cuts the quilt in two. The quilt is made of silk, odds and ends that Amelia claims to have saved up:

“What a gay comforter that’s going to be!” Lind exclaimed, stooping to touch a bit of yellow satin. “How long did it take you to collect enough pieces?”

Amelia did not answer at once, and when she did it was without raising her eyes. Lind divined that she had been crying. Her impulse was to kneel beside Amelia and ask her what the trouble was, but she had come in a short time to know that sympathy would only embarrass her. Whatever her grief, she jealously kept it to herself as if it were too
intimate for unburdening. The gaudy pieces of the quilt shimmered and blazed.

“These are odds and ends I’ve been saving since the twins were born,” Amelia said at last. “We don’t have much use for silks here you know. I thought I’d save up until the girls grew old enough to appreciate a nice cover.”

Lind knelt and fingered one of the larger pieces of silk. “That’s pretty – a kind of brocade, isn’t it? Was it a dress?” (83)

Amelia says to Lind that she has been saving the pieces for a long time, and Lind guesses that at least some of them have come from old dresses, dresses that Amelia confirms came from the days before her marriage to Caleb. But under the surface is the awareness between both women that all the silk pieces must come from Amelia’s life before Caleb. A “pieced” quilt is one in which the top is made from separate pieces and sewn together in a pattern, like the “squares and triangles” half-complete on the floor, before being attached to a border and backing (83). The silks for a fancy cover like the one Amelia is piecing could only have come from one of four possible sources: she would have saved the remnants from old clothing, traded for it with other women, used new, bought fabric or saved the silk linings from cigar or cigarette packages, commonly called “tobacco silks.” Save Caleb, no one comes to the farm and no one leaves. Amelia sees no other women. In addition, Caleb controls all the financial transactions and makes all the purchases for the house, from farm equipment to shoes for Judith. He would be unlikely to buy silk for Amelia, since it is a gift that would give her pleasure. There is no evidence that he smokes. The pieces for the quilt must all have come to the farm with Amelia and must be the remnants of her youth and relationship with Del Jordan.

Though quilts made from silk have existed for centuries, a quilt made from lightweight dress silk would be impractical for use on a farm and would normally only be
used on special occasions, such as a wedding. Unlike wool quilts, which were warm and durable, silk quilts were fairly delicate. Quilt historian and practitioner Hanne Vibeke de Koning-Stapel argues that in the late nineteenth and twentieth century silk quilts were generally only used by the middle and working classes for public occasions and for “show,” which is why they were often employed as wedding quilts or put on guest beds (14). Walker likewise suggests that silk coverlets and quilts were not used on an everyday basis and were generally to be found “adorning a sofa in the parlour, on the top of the grand piano, or as a throw on a guest bed, to be removed before retiring” (63). Silk quilts were treated as heirlooms, especially in rural communities where silk was hard to come by, and expected to last through multiple generations.

Amelia has been crying, and the reader is aware, as Lind is not, her emotion stems from knowing that her son, Mark, has come to live in Oeland temporarily as a farm hand. Though she is sympathetic, Lind does not have the key to Amelia’s secret pain. And while Lind seems to sense something of the significance of the piece of brocade she touches, she has no idea of the quilt’s deeper meaning. The real purport of the quilt lies in the silences and omissions in Lind and Amelia’s conversation. Caleb has gained control over his children only with Amelia’s full cooperation and complicity. Amelia is entirely cognizant that Caleb is destroying his family, but feels that there is no alternative for her save “which of her flesh she should eat” (47). Amelia here quilts alone, without the help of her daughters. Though the piecing of the top layer of the quilt was often done by women working alone, communal quilting bees through church and missionary groups were often the only social occasions besides church services where farm women could gather, exchange ideas and patterns, and share news and stories (Walker 8). Since she has
not left the farm in years and her daughters are wanted for work outside, Amelia quilts alone in tacit acceptance of Caleb’s will (36). Mark’s arrival, however, has also spurred Amelia to mild rebellion. While she has knowingly sacrificed Jude, Martin, Ellen and Charlie’s futures in order to keep the secret of Mark’s parentage, and agrees with Caleb not to “do anything” for the time being, Caleb is doubtful about her future intentions: “For the first time in his life, it was uncertainty that kept him silent, not the confidence that his will was understood without the utterance of his word” (80). There is a part of Amelia that defies Caleb’s assumption of ownership, and he knows it. In making a silk quilt for her daughters, Amelia is giving them something of beauty and her own more refined instincts in defiance of Caleb’s “word.”

Yet the silk remnants of the dresses she wore with Del, while they might hold precious memories of a finer, happier time in her life, also divide Amelia from her daughters. Amelia has deliberately cut up her own history of love and sexual fulfillment. She chooses not to share this history with her any of children and is knowingly complicit in Caleb’s control over them. The bar of sunlight that falls, “from the window across her sandy hair, [to] cut the quilt diagonally” (83), is emblematic of the two parts to Amelia’s identity, both before Caleb and after. Amelia has kept an important part of herself hidden from her children. As she sews this quilt, it is with the knowledge that her daughters, the intended recipients of this quilt, will never leave the farm, will never be married, and will never have children of their own, all because she has denied them her “word.” Moreover, dress-weight silk and silk taffeta degrade in sunlight and with extensive use, and eventually shatters along the grain of the fabric. It is ironic that Amelia, who has knowingly cut apart and therefore silenced her own history, cuts up the physical remnants
of that past life to make a transitory silk quilt for the daughters whose lives she has stunted and repressed.

Amelia is isolated in her textile work from the comfort that another woman could give her. The cut and stitched silk pieces are symbolic of the ways that Amelia has both absorbed, reiterated and refuted Caleb’s will. As Walker insists, quilts were “utilitarian objects which reflected the lives of women – their joys, their sorrows, time stolen from their long and demanding days; quilting was their relaxation as well as their therapy” (6). The quilt is a private narrative of Amelia’s life, one of monotony and despair as well as tactile pleasure and artistic fulfillment. At the same time, a silk quilt, because of its delicacy, was meant more for public admiration than private consumption. At the Gares no guests will ever see the finished quilt. There is no piano over which to drape it, nor a parlour sofa to adorn. No one will admire the work behind it or appreciate where the silks came from, in the way that Lind does. The silk squares and triangles only tell part of a story, to be guessed at and wondered over. Amelia’s quilting is contradictory: it fills her days with work, gives her an outlet for her emotional pain and allows her to share at least something beautiful of herself with her daughters, even as Amelia actively works to keep them from ever leaving the farm. The only bond between the women is in the physical labour they each do ceaselessly, without interruption and without question. Much of that labour is simply a form of endurance. Quilting is one more task with which Amelia fills her days in order to endure her life. It is both drudgery and an escape from drudgery.

Amelia’s deliberate silence also forces her daughters to protect her against Caleb, and this drive to protect Amelia puts a larger wedge between Ellen and Jude. When Caleb insists that Jude go to the seeder, she gives in because “he will take it out on Ma” (28).
When Caleb begins to chastise Jude for riding the mare, Ellen assumes that “Judith, thoughtless of Amelia, had done something again” (59). When Ellen reproaches Jude for her constant escapes to Yellow Post, Jude flares out at Ellen and insists that she will not endure another winter (97). Ellen’s solemn response is that “[Caleb] has some kind of threat he always makes to her – you’ve heard him – I’ve heard him. I don’t know what it is, but she’s afraid – afraid of what he’ll do. We can’t let him do it” (97). Habitual loyalty to Amelia keeps Ellen from leaving with Malcolm for his silk tent, and Judith from leaving with Sven for her silk bed in the city. Amelia’s pieced silk quilt cannot give them the silken future that they each dream of, nor can it mend their fractured, fraying relationship.

Lenoski and Hesse have each argued that the central image of the novel is Caleb’s opposition to nature. They both see Jude as a foil for Caleb, and Jude as a representative of the natural world. Hesse argues that, “it is of significance that – among the Gares – only Judith responds to the beauty of her environment and on one occasion is singled out with the prairie and proud birds” (50). Yet this is not quite the whole story, as both Ellen and Amelia also respond almost instinctively to the beauty and sensuality in the landscape, but choose, consciously, to divorce themselves from it. When Amelia readies Caleb’s suit for church, she stands for a moment at the door, looking at the willows “drooping in early bud as delicate as a green rain” (38). They make her think of Del, and then of Caleb, and the sermons that he brings home from church in Yellow Post. Almost immediately, she forgets about the “sweetness of the willows” and goes back to the kitchen stove (38-39). Ellen, in the glasses Caleb has given her, tries to see “beyond the grove to the trail” along which Malcolm will ride, but refuses to go any further than the

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fence of the milk yard because Caleb is riding next to Malcolm. As a result she misses the sunset “like ragged ribbons of rose and gold” into which Malcolm disappears (173). It is the thought of Caleb that keeps all three women from a communion with the natural world around them.

Amelia, Jude and Ellen are also kept from a communion with other women. Forbidden from leaving the farm, and forced into constant family intimacy without the relief of outside interactions, it is not surprising that Lind’s presence sparks the flames of rebellion. Yet there is an underlying sense that they might not find from the larger female community. Early on in Wild Geese, Lind and Mark, the two outsiders to Oeland, discuss their understanding of the people who inhabit the community:

“We are, after all, only the mirror of our environment...Life here at Oeland, even may seem a negation but it’s only a reflection from so few exterior natural objects that it has the semblance of negation. The people are thrown inward upon themselves, their passions stored up, they are intensified figures of life with no outward expression – no releasing gesture.”

“Yes, I think perhaps human life, or at least human contact, is just as barren here as farther north,” Lind remarked. “The struggle against conditions must have the same effect as passivity would have, ultimately. It seems to me that one would be as dulling as the other – one would extort as much from human capacity for expression as the other. There’s no feeling left after the soil and the livestock have taken their share.” (93)

Mark and Lind here repeat conventional outsider assumptions about the Prairie landscape and its people. Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh argue that Great Plains topography is “popularly perceived as absolute: absolutely flat, absolutely treeless, absolutely boring. It is also seen as absolute in the sense of being both unchanging and unchangeable, for better or for worse” (4). In Lind and Mark’s view, rural Prairie inhabitants reflect those absolutes: unchanging, unchangeable, absolute in their experiences and judgements. They
are molded by the land, and not the reverse. Lind’s and Mark’s discussion appears to reiterate Henry Kreisel’s assertion that “all discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian west must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape upon the mind” (6). Yet Lind’s and Mark’s perceptions of Oeland are belied by their experience of it. The Oeland landscape is overwritten by an imperialist and patriarchal ideology that mediates and shapes the community – and the landscape – through men like Caleb Gare, Skuli Erickson and Thorvald Thorvaldson. Thorvaldson’s nameless wife has a stillborn baby, not because of the labour forced on her by the landscape, but because of the brutality, laziness and dereliction of a husband who has forced her to milk and pasture the cows late in her pregnancy. Mark and Lind themselves are pawns in Caleb’s bid to control his family.

It is through Lind’s interactions within the community that Ostenso exposes the multiple schisms of race, class and gender that govern women’s relationships. Moreover, Lind’s opinions of, and judgements on, the women in Oeland, including Judith, Amelia and Ellen, are also overwritten with this patriarchal ideology. When Lind goes to visit Mrs. Sandbo, she instinctively likes the family, but she has trouble understanding how Mrs. Sandbo could miss the late husband under whom she “vass a dog” and whose “black shoe button” eyes, at least in the large photograph that adorns the Sandbo parlour, unnerve Lind (30). At the same time Lind has no trouble admiring the independent and successful Bjarnasson family and their stone house. Where Caleb is squat, and leans into the air (rather like his farmhouse), Mathias Bjarnasson is a “massive man” with a house in his own image: “he had excavated the earth and built its rugged, lasting foundation; had hauled stones in slow wagonloads, and with the care and fineness of a woman
patterning lace, had fitted them together in the mortar and had built four broad walls to the blue” (49, my italics). The home that Mathias has built is more than just stone walls: the house becomes a metaphor, both for Mathias’ family and his role as the “right” kind of biblical patriarch. With delicacy and patience, he has included everyone in his work, and built a home based on mutual cooperation and respect. Lind, who instinctively responds to busy domesticity and seems to gravitate to the idea of separate spheres in her cooking and cleaning for Mark, admires the beauty and competence that the Bjarnasson women bring to the farm: the clean kitchen with its round, braided mats, the grandmother’s handspun yarn and their bountiful food (50). Bjarnasson family life, as Casey has pointed out, is a throwback to the rural idealism of nineteenth-century “pioneer” literature, complete with a grandmother spinning wool, whereas the photograph of Mr. Sandbo seems to invoke images of abuse and hardship that are the flip side of pioneer life (107-9). Lind believes that ultimately loneliness is the real demon that stalks Prairie life, in “the menaces and the dreads of the great Alone,” (53). To Lind, men and women are meant to lead separate, but cooperative lives in order to survive the loneliness of the land.

Yet under the surface are ambiguities and contradictions, some of which Lind, as part of the dominant English/Scottish majority, might not understand. As Deborah Keahey points out, “readings of Prairie texts often involve a gender bias that validates the male characters’ futile struggles as necessary and heroic, while discounting the female characters’ homemaking knowledge as trivial or culturally inappropriate” (8). These readings further discount the experiences of immigrant women. Many of the Norwegian immigrants who ended up in Western Canada in the early part of the twentieth century
came from the United States rather than Norway, as Ostenso, herself, did. Many were experienced farmers, with considerable equipment and often a large reserve of cash (Loken 94). In the 1880s and 90s, the immigrants who did come directly from Norway were women, seeking better marriage prospects than they could find at home (Loken 102). It is quite possible that the Sandbos, who once lived in a railway town and are comparatively well-off, were part of these linked migrations. Mrs. Sandbo’s sighs for a departed husband are for a shared experience and background, for a lost community, and for the social and financial status she enjoyed as a wife that eludes her as a widow. Helga Bjarnasson, in turn, has “never been in Iceland,” yet she struggles to speak English (51). Althea, the middle-aged aunt of young Erik, is “somewhat intellectual” and still unmarried (52). Daisy Neijmann argues that Icelanders who settled in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, in contrast to Norwegians and Swedes, sought cultural preservation through isolation from other groups (245). Icelanders were highly literate and valued education for both men and women, and established over thirty Icelandic newspapers and magazines that circulated through the scattered community; Icelandic-Canadian women were also active in both the WCTU and the suffrage cause (Kristjanson 371-72). Yet Icelandic communities, like early Scandinavian settlements in the United States, remained remarkably patriarchal. While this helped to preserve the Icelandic language and customs within Canada, it also enshrined traditional values about women and men and their respective places in community life. Althea, though intellectual and well-read, would have required her father’s support to attend high school or training as a teacher. More often than not, the resources for education were reserved for boys, with the girls expected to help pave the way with farm or factory work (Neijmann 245-48).
In some ways, Dora Brund, whom Lind writes off as slatternly housekeeper, is ultimately not that different from Althea Bjarnasson. When Lind goes to visit the Brunds, she wishes that Mark could have come with her, but just as quickly realizes that she will open herself up to criticism about her morals from the Oeland community (126). She assumes that the harshness of their lives has made them inflexible, as if “the intolerance of the earth seemed to have crept into their very souls” (126). Yet Lind reiterates the very same intolerance in her visit with Dora. Dora opens the door in a “pink wrapper that was sticky with food” and Lind notices that their homestead is filthy (127). When Dora changes, it is into a “pale blue figured cotton dress ornamented with rosettes of black velvet,” a dress implicitly too dressy for a farmer’s wife. Dora insists throughout their conversation that she will never have children. Lind “reads” Dora through her clothing and conversation, and judges her to be slovenly and lacking moral discipline. When Dora admires Lind’s blouse, however, and recognizes it as a “city” purchase, Lind responds that Dora could easily sew one of her own. Lind assumes, from the appearance of the Brund home, that Dora does not have the money to purchase a similar garment, and that Dora should have the skills to make it herself. Lind’s implied criticism is that she expects Dora to be a better, more “feminine” housewife by cooking, cleaning and sewing her family into order. Lind’s judgement of Dora is the same as the Oeland judgements of Lind: that women are supposed to set a moral standard for the family and community.

Lind is blind, too, to Dora’s background. Most young women like Dora were pressed by economic necessity to find jobs, since many immigrant families could not afford to put their daughters into technical courses and needed the income that they could provide, which after the death of Mr. Sandbo is a likely necessity in Dora’s family. Very
often it was the girls who worked, in order to provide education and books for the boys of
the family. Most often this employment was unskilled labour that did not offer
opportunities for advancement or education, and made them more vulnerable to
discrimination and abuse (Kealey 39-41, M. Steedman 21). As Kealey insists, early
twentieth-century critiques of female factory workers also applied to a young woman
working at a lunch counter: the larger assumption was that they were “poorly paid, lived
less than respectable lives, and spent their money on finery they could ill afford” (42).
Lind’s sees Dora as lazy and uneducated. This, together with her overt sympathy for
Dora’s husband Joel, whom she thinks of as a “great, kindly ox,” dismisses Dora’s
experience as the oldest daughter in an immigrant family. Althea stays at home to work
on the farm, while Dora goes out to work in town, but both are judged by a white,
middle-class standard of femininity which neither can ever truly achieve. Lind’s own
white, educated, middle-class background blinds her to the women’s lives around her.
Her belief in her right to judge the morals of the working class and the largely immigrant
community in which she lives is predicated on that blindness.

In much the same way that S.J.D. reads and judges the women she meets through
what they wear, the Oeland women also judge one another through textiles, which further
isolates the Gares from one another. Jude and Lind ride to the Sandbos one Sunday when
Caleb is dining with Thorvald. Mrs. Sandbo, eyeing Jude inquisitively, notices that “Jude
did not yet have her new shoes” and that her dress is of “a faded calico for a Sunday,”
and looks forward to sharing this “choice bit of news” with Dora (113). Jude, in her turn,
is rendered self-consciously defensive by Mrs. Sandbo and her “plump young daughters
in their pink lawn dresses” (113). Mrs. Sandbo later maneuvers a visit to the Gares by
driving her cattle into their hayfield and then pretending that she has to drive them out again. Mrs. Sandbo knows full well that she will not be invited in for coffee, but looks forward to judging Amelia for the slight. When Amelia tells her that Ellen is working indoors, Mrs. Sandbo asks if she is sewing new summer dresses (135). Both women know that the visit is an elaborate charade, and Mrs. Sandbo goes home again, “doubly shaken, first by her renewed awe at the tyranny of Caleb Gare, secondly by the personal affront she had suffered” (136). Though Mrs. Sandbo recognizes Caleb’s abusive nature and miserliness, she partially blames Amelia for her inability to stand up against him. Yet none of the women offers each other succor or help: Mrs. Sandbo does nothing to reach out, either to Amelia or to Mrs. Thorvaldson.

The feminized landscape, in this patriarchal society, becomes at once a reflection of narrow attitudes and a refraction of them. This duality is partially expressed through contrasting images of silky mud and dust. Down in the valleys and secret places of the farm, Jude clothes herself in mud. Mud is life-affirming and productive, and symbolic of Jude’s burgeoning sexuality. In Caleb’s fields the landscape is covered in dust. That dust threatens to choke the life blood from Jude: “The sun was beating down upon the girl’s bare head and on the strong honey-brown nape of her neck. A hot, dusty wind was stirring the tops of the dry potato plants. A little groove of dust had formed on either side of Judith’s nose, and there were grey filaments of dust on the hair of her forearms. She crossed her arms and leaned forward on the hoe as Lind came up to her” (107). The dust metaphor is repeated when they do the haying, and again in the dry manure in which Judith is forced to lie after throwing the axe at Caleb (176, 207). Martin likens the whole Gare family to dried-up seeds: “They were all closed peapods, not daring to open” (176).
If the landscape is the embodiment of both female subjugation and female resistance, then the dust that clothes Jude is like the patched overall she is forced to wear – the visceral reminder of the endless, fruitless work that Caleb forces her to perform. Lind notices the same dust and sees the larger pattern in it: “Lind glanced down at the drying pools that lined the road, and saw the countless “lucky bugs” darting about on the water like crazy sparks of light. The reeds stood up straight and brittle. It must rain soon. Lind could not bear the dry dust on the reeds. Then she suddenly realized that it was not the reeds that she was thinking of, but the Gares” (112). Dust and dryness become metaphors for Caleb’s patriarchal control and the way the reproductive strength of the landscape and the family is used up.

At the same time, Caleb fetishizes the field of flax he is growing at one edge of his farm. The flax field is the key to all Caleb’s unspoken dreams, much as silk is to his women. Ironically, it also appears to him as much like silken fabric as it does a woman’s skin: In the spring, it inspires a stealthy caress, “more intimate than any he had given to woman” (147), in the summer it glimmers like a “silver grey sheet” (156), and in the fall it is “beautiful, stretching out and stirring with life, as though nothing could end its being” (213). On the last day of threshing, Caleb looks at the field of flax, which will be the last crop to cut, and almost regrets what has to happen: “a slow growing, deliberate, delicate thing it was, and a pride to any man who could successfully raise it. As he had done when it was in blue flower, he slipped between the wires of the fence and stood in the midst of it, almost furtively running his hand over the rough, fully seeded tops. Then, stepping with care, he waded far into it, touching it now and then, his eyes roving over it hungrily” (264). As the flax ripens with sensuality, Caleb’s only thought is to cut it down.
Johnson insists that the landscape constitutes “a fully realized erotic Other to which [Caleb] is irrevocably drawn” (27). Caleb’s stealthy caresses suggest that the field of flax is a stand-in for Amelia, for the emotional love that Caleb believes Amelia has robbed of him. It is also a stand-in for Jude, whose blooming sexuality he wants to cut down and repress. But if the flax field is representative of an eroticized, feminized “other,” it is not without a latent power of its own. Flax is a multiple use crop: the bast fibres of the stalks are used for linen fabric and rope (and rope was the predominant use for Canadian flax in the 1920s), while the seed of the flax is edible. Flaxseed is the source of linseed oil, used as both a foodstuff and, when bound with other oils or resins, as a traditional varnish, hardener or binder in paints. Linseed oil is also extremely flammable. The riper the flax crop, the drier the seeds, and the more immediate is the danger of fire. Dryness and dust, which are metaphors for Caleb’s need for absolute control, also offer the possibility of cataclysmic change. Caleb reaches out to caress the flax, in an exchange more intimate than any he has given to either his wife or children. While he knows the danger it presents, he believes that he has the upper hand, that he, Caleb, is supposed to “force from the soil all that it would withhold” (213).

Unbeknownst to Caleb, however, the women have become complicit in the plot to get Jude away from the farm with Sven, and that secret alliance has its nucleus in the domestic work that Caleb has always discounted. Lind, Jude’s first ally, begins to sew Jude, Ellen and Martin costumes for the masquerade dance that is to be part of the harvest jubilee, even before the younger Gares have Caleb’s permission to attend. When Caleb ultimately decides to let them all go, against Amelia’s judgement, it is because he believes that he has finally broken Jude, but he reckons without the connivance of Lind,
the Procne to Jude’s Philomela. With Jude’s half-hearted help, the costume she sews for her is a “flowing white Greek robe…of delicate material, which might with slight alterations be worn as a dress” (281). Lind has sewn Jude a wedding dress. Yet it is not until the terrible confrontation with Jude, where Amelia realizes her daughter is pregnant, that Jude can finally break free of the farm. The walls that Amelia has built to protect herself immediately crumble and Amelia sees herself in Jude – pregnant and helpless – and refuses to sacrifice her daughter the way she has sacrificed herself: “Without another word Amelia turned and walked down the stairs. She felt as if a terrific, incognizable world had opened upon her. She had need of something familiar to cling to” (280).

Willmott’s moment of “awakening” is not Lind’s, but Amelia’s. Amelia, finally awake to how she has sacrificed her children, and the danger her daughter is now in, willingly puts herself in harm’s way to protect Jude. Amelia is the reason that Judith has stayed, and now Judith is the reason that Amelia must find her inner strength: “Judith was gone. She had had to go. She, Amelia, had let her go. There was a ringing tumult in her ears. Mark Jordan would know now…but another young life would not be ruined as hers had been…the room seemed to grow dark and intolerably warm” (285).

By working together with her daughter, and finally allying herself with Lind, Amelia also finds her own power and ultimately, the possibility of reconstruction. In her loss and confusion, Amelia looks for something to do, to rein in and control her emotions. Like Fanny, Miss Matty, Adèle and Jack Love’s “aunt” before her, Amelia finds it in a mundane task, comforting in its repetition and rhythm: she knits a pair of socks (285). That humble textile work leads to her freedom, finally, from Caleb’s will. As she looks for a new pair of knitting needles in the desk, she discovers that Bart Nugent is dead, and
there is no “proof” to which Caleb can attest for Mark’s paternity. In the ensuing sexually
violent confrontation with Caleb, Amelia faces him down and defies both his rage and
brutality, knowing that this time her own will is needed to balance out the fates, that she
has the power to protect both Mark and Jude (292). The violence inside the Gare
household is mirrored in the violent and consuming fire that immediately breaks out in
Fusi Aronson’s willow grove: “smouldering cinders under the thick black web of burnt
grass grew to a red glow. The glow quickened in the bits of dry grass that remained –
spread underground through the roots of the willows, and was caught in the wind that
lifted it into the timber….within an amazingly short time the fire rose like a flaming
feather fan against the sky, and hurtled southward” (290). Caleb is the one who is finally
broken. He sees with horrifying clarity the consequences of his actions. When he goes to
save his flax fields, he stumbles into the muskeg, and gets tangled in the mud and “silky
reeds” under the surface. As he reaches his arms out toward the flax field, “as if in
supplication to its breadth,” that he sees “shimmering still, grey-silver, where the light of
the fire fell upon it,” the earth reaches back to him and take him under (298-99). Silk
becomes the means by which Caleb dies.

In a sense, the relationships between the women do not change much after Caleb’s
death. Ellen continues to harbour her secret resentment against Jude and Lind, and Mrs.
Sandbo, on her visit to the farm, secretly judges Amelia for her “airs” in serving coffee
bought in the city instead of that available in Yellow Post (301). Yet the labour that both
sustained and yoked Amelia during her marriage now has a different tenor: “Amelia was
quiet and serene, and went about her work as before. But she did not do it hurriedly now,
crowding her day full of unnecessary tasks” (300). Amelia now has the time to find the
“mellow radiance” in the world around her, and the independence to choose when, how and under what circumstances she will sew, knit or quilt. Both like and unlike Adèle Ratignolle, Amelia has no need to prove her femininity to the outside world, nor does she need to apologize for her love of fine needlework. They can co-exist with her work on the farm.
Chapter 6 Conclusion: Needlework, Middle-Class Femininity and Female Community

Shortly after I wrote the first draft of this conclusion, I learned that a fellow fibre enthusiast and knitter had passed away suddenly at the age of fifty, leaving behind three sons, a husband and dozens of devastated friends. In my immediate grief and sense of terrible loss, I did what I do at times of stress: I made myself a cup of tea and began to knit. Like Amelia, who knits when she discovers that Jude is pregnant, or Miss Matty, who knits as she privately grieves for Mr. Holbrook, in the brightly coloured yarn and the feel of yarn and needles within my hands, I found a kind of relief. The stockinette stitches of this pair of socks, endless repeated around and around in circles, were like prayer beads in my fingers. As I knit, I thought about my friend and our twenty-first century relationship.

Sally and I never met in person. We met on the internet, through Ravelry, the social network site for knitters, spinners and crocheters. We had each posted photographs of our current projects and discovered that we had knit many of the same things. We shared a love of colour and textile history, and we started exchanging emails and comments in online forums. We talked regularly for over three years, about knitting, raising sons and the creaking of our bodies into full middle age. As of this writing, Ravelry has over three million members around the world, the majority of them women, and the majority of those with at least one university degree.

Knitting and sewing have given me both a sense of community and continuity. Like Lind and Amelia, my maternal grandmother and great-aunts were Prairie girls, born and raised. Their mother, Jean Welsh MacMurchy, like Sara Jeannette Duncan a working
woman, moved from Ontario to Manitoba as a young nurse. They all knit; my great-grandmother with tiny, perfectly formed and finished stitches, filling in the gaps and deficiencies of an early widowhood with beautiful clothing that still gave the appearance of middle-class affluence. In the 1930s, when evening dresses were de rigueur for their social echelon and prohibitively expensive, they made their own. My grandmother, an itinerant air force wife, also used knitting and sewing to give the appearance of success, making constantly for herself and her daughters right through the 1960s, when my mother and aunt were at university. Needlework for all of them was both a task and a solace; a means for deception and an entrée into a social world.

Most of my closest friends today are also knitters, weavers and sewers. Not all of them are women nor are they all heterosexual. Not all of them work inside the home. Some of them have homeschooled their children, some are university professors. Some worked as young people in textile mills, or did their degrees in textiles. When we get together today, it is very much in the manner of Barber’s prehistoric “courtyard sisterhood,” gathering at one another’s houses to “spin, sew, weave, and have fellowship” (86). At these gatherings, the “work” of knitting or spinning is often secondary to sharing stories, histories, working out parenting problems or grieving together. Some I met through my work at the Textile Museum; while others I met through Ravelry.

Yet Ravelry’s potent online community is a reminder that textiles and textile making have become, as they are to Lind and Amelia in Wild Geese, or to S.J.D. in A Social Departure, middle-class pursuits overwritten by race, age, education and background. With the price of sock yarn averaging between twenty and thirty dollars a skein, a pair of hand-knit socks is no longer a necessity against the threat of blood
poisoning, but a luxury item for someone with the time and inclination to knit, much as silk embroidery was the embodiment and proof of Lady Bertram’s leisured status. Ravelry hosts meet-ups and classes at fibre fairs around North America and Europe, and advertises trips to such fibre destinations as Scandinavia and the Shetland Islands. Part of the allure of the online community is to share photos of knitting and crochet projects, yet the dialogues on Ravelry often expose a schism in the communities of women, in something of the way *The Awakening* does: the overwhelming majority of the women posting and attending these events are Caucasian, leading to the perception that knitters are all Caucasian women. Ravelry reiterates what television and movies have already normalized, which, as it turns out, is the same overwhelming message that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century: that craft is the occupation of white, middle-class femininity, requiring capital now in the form of computer and internet access, leisure time and disposable income.

Moreover, the same slippages in age and status appear in knitting today as they did in *Cranford*. Every time knitting, or sewing, or embroidery sees a resurgence in interest and becomes “popular” again, as it has at least a dozen times over the last two decades, its rise is accompanied by a newspaper article or television news reporter earnestly insisting that “it’s not just for grannies anymore.” The images, particularly in North America, of needlework as the province of old and elderly women, knitting jumpers and crocheting unwanted afghans out of cheap, acrylic yarns are pervasive and ageist, yet they persist. Today’s snobbery is about knitting “back to the farm,” with yarns grown and spun in North America. Ten years ago, those same yarns were called “barn
yarns,” and haunted the backs of yarns stores with the acrylcs, while hand-dyed skeins of merino occupied the front.

What I have tried to show, in my close readings of these five novels, is the multiple ways that domestic textile making became woven into the lives of middle-class women. Class was never a given, nor was it stable: needlework, with its multiple meanings, possibilities and relationships, was a means through which women writers could work through the anxieties of class and status in the nineteenth century, but textiles also provided slippery spaces between working class and leisured class, between domesticity and work for pay, between sexuality and innocence, and between manipulation and comfort. For Fanny, embroidery is her sanctuary as much as it is visual evidence of financial and emotional dependence. Needlework also allows her to be misread. Fanny’s appearance at her work sexualises her as much as the appearance of work hides her aunts’ and cousins’ defects of characters.

Where Miss Matty finds comfort in her domestic knitting, Mary and Miss Pole find a new kind of escape into the public sphere often denied the spinster or childless woman. The very portability of knitting and crochet gives them a new role: that of surveillance, which is itself at odds with knitting’s humble, gentle appearance. S.J.D. and Edna, who each long for a life outside the spheres of marriage and motherhood, find themselves only temporarily able to escape those norms. The busily knitting and quilting women who operate around the edges of A Social Departure and The Awakening make themselves both heard and felt.

Lind and Amelia, linked by a middle-class aesthetic and background, sew as much to prove their superiority to other women as they do for enjoyment. My own
family’s lore holds that my grandmother, whose 1950s ball dress was made from deeply discounted silk satin purchased in a bargain bin at a fabric store, used a Vogue pattern and nimble fingers to fashion for herself a large fabric rose to place on the back of the train. Every edge was perfectly sewn, and the dress was admired by women better placed both economically and politically. In the “yarns” that circulate freely among the women in my family, my grandmother had “the touch.” My great-aunts made more clothes, toys and doll things, but my grandmother had the elite taste that marked “true” class.

What I have tried to show is that textiles in women’s writing, or women’s stories for that matter, are never one thing or one symbol. They operate on multiple levels simultaneously, all pregnant with many possible meanings. They cannot be divorced from context, from the hands that make them, from the relationships behind them and through them. Domestic textile making both reiterated narratives of a woman’s place, as daughter, wife and mother, and at the same time refuted them. Like Procne, we have a responsibility to read domestic textiles deeply and carefully, with attention as much to what has not been said as what is on the page. Women’s stories are never simple subversions of patriarchal norms or normative assumptions of them. They are often both, at the same time. Textiles reveal the complexities of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women’s lives and show that we continue to be defined, at least partially, by those same narratives.
Works Cited and Consulted


Kelley, Rebecca J. “Fashion in the Gilded Age: A Profile of Newport’s King Family.”


