Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch: Rhetorical Aesthetics and Latter-day Saint Women's Poetry

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Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch: Rhetorical Aesthetics
and Latter-day Saint Women’s Poetry

JoLyn D. Brown

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch: Rhetorical Aesthetics and Latter-day Saint Women’s Poetry

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Master of Arts

Although the literary quality of women’s poetry from the nineteenth century has long been criticized by literary scholars, recent work in reception studies has documented readers’ aesthetic experiences with such poetry in order to appreciate its popularity and appeal (Stauffer). Extending this work in literary reception studies, I draw on scholarship in rhetorical studies, specifically rhetorical aesthetics (Clark), to demonstrate how conventional poetic forms and sentimental appeals can be used by marginalized communities to facilitate identification. I examine Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch, a collection of primarily Latter-day Saint women’s poetry compiled by Emmaline B. Wells for the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, as a case study in rhetorical aesthetics. The collection was compiled with the intent to change popular opinion about Utah woman and foster community within women’s movements of the time, including suffrage. By analyzing how these poems operated rhetorically—facilitating aesthetic experiences through familiar poetic forms and sentimental appeals—I conclude that the collection helped change negative public opinion of Latter-day Saint women. I argue that rhetorical aesthetics and reception studies offer an alternative way for literary and rhetorical scholars to reevaluate the value of women’s nineteenth-century poetry. This project invites additional scholarly inquiry into how women and other historically marginalized groups have used art to create rhetorically powerful aesthetic experiences that prepare minds for change.

Keywords: rhetorical aesthetic, nineteenth-century poetry, Latter-day Saints, identification, social change, Chicago World’s Fair, Columbian Exposition, women’s suffrage
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Introduction

When Emmaline B. Wells compiled a poetry book called *Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch* for the 1893 Colombian Exposition in Chicago, she had the daunting task of accurately and positively representing women from Utah and, by extension, women from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The popular press had presented the “Mormon” women of Utah as anything from poor, destitute, slow-witted, and deluded, to subjugated slaves of their husbands and sexually promiscuous (Neilson 80-81). Utah was settled primarily by members of the Church and as such, their practices and beliefs were reflected on Utah as a whole, including on their non-Latter-day Saint neighbors. Latter-day Saints were no strangers to the types of tensions that could arise from false representations of their faith and characters. Less than fifty years before, they had been driven from their homes in Illinois due (in part) to misinformation and false ideas about their religion and had sought refuge in the West. More recently, the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882 had brought negative attention to the Latter-day Saint practice of plural marriage. Despite the Manifesto of 1890 that officially ended polygamy in the Church, negative perspectives continued to spread about the women in the Church. Wells and other female leaders from Utah were anxious to provide another sort of story, one that showed Utah women to be culturally refined, moral, faithful, civic minded, and educated. They were particularly interested in demonstrating their support for the women’s rights movements.

*Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch* consists of thirty-four poems by women living in Utah. Each poem is accompanied by a watercolor drawing of a Utah flower or landscape painted by Edna Wells Solan. Printed on thick paper with elaborate type, the book is as much a work of art as the poetry inside its pages. The poems deal primarily with themes other nineteenth-century American women would have identified with, including women’s roles and patriotism;
reflections on the natural world, such as encounters with nature and its metaphors and symbolism; and navigations of life experiences, like birth, death, love, and heartache, and the complicated spaces where these experiences overlap. The poets primarily utilize conventional forms of nineteenth-century poetry such as regular meter and rhyming patterns—forms with which their target readers were familiar.

Beyond, but in connection with, the question of the right to vote, late nineteenth-century America generated activism and much debate about women’s civic duties, how they should be enacted, and what roles (private and public) women should play. The Chicago World’s Fair presented women with unprecedented opportunities for addressing these ideas (Maddux 2). Although Utah women had gained the right to vote in 1870, long before most women in the United States, their efforts to participate in the national suffrage movement had been met by some reluctance and suspicion from other members of the women’s movement (Neilson 81). The Chicago World’s Fair was a chance for Utah women to redefine themselves for their colleagues and join in their conversations about womanhood and civic roles. The compilation *Songs and Flowers* was one of the means by which these women hoped to accomplish this task. For years, a women-led news publication in Utah called *The Women’s Exponent* had been publishing poetry from women all over the territory, and a collection of poems must have seemed like a natural next step. Latter-day Saint historian Brittany Chapman explains, “In the nineteenth century . . . poetry kept pace with daily life as people often honored relationships, recorded personal experience, and expressed conviction and sentiment in verse” (68). The familiarity Americans had with poetry made a compilation an instinctual vehicle for Utah women’s efforts to counter poor public opinions.
The reception of women’s poems from this period is an important area of scholarly inquiry. In the early twentieth century especially, such poems were often dismissed as didactic, predictable, and saccharine. Since the late twentieth century, however, scholars such as Susan Wolfson and Stephen Behrendt have been reclaiming nineteenth-century female poetry in an effort to include women’s voices in the literary canon (Stauffer 373). Despite this extensive work, there remains what literary critic Andrew Stauffer has called a “contradiction” between the poems’ sentimentality (key to their contemporary popularity) and what scholars tend to find valuable in them (374). For Stauffer, approaching nineteenth-century women’s poetry from the point of view of reception history “can help us rethink . . . the place of the conventional in aesthetic experience and the question of poetry’s engagement with the similitude of our inner lives” (373).

Stauffer’s emphasis on the aesthetic experience offered by nineteenth-century poetry aligns with scholarship on rhetorical aesthetics. Rhetorical aesthetics directs critical attention toward the persuasive functions of aesthetic experience. As I will describe in more detail below, rhetorical scholars Nathan Crick and Greg Clark have argued that aesthetic experiences function powerfully as persuaders, and that therefore works of art can be understood as rhetorical objects that bring about civic change. Rhetorical aesthetics is less about artistic originality per se and more about artistic effects: especially uniting individuals, building communities, and promoting social reform.

In this thesis, I explore the aesthetic-rhetorical power of *Songs and Flowers* and how it facilitates identification with and changed perceptions about Latter-day Saint women. Using rhetorical aesthetics as my theoretical framework, I will analyze four poems selected from the compilation. I will show how poetic form becomes a vehicle for rhetorical function by inviting
aesthetic experiences of openness and sincerity, gratification of expectations, communal
derine, and wholeness despite difference. I hope to demonstrate how rhetorical aesthetics
provides an alternative way of reading poetic sentimentality and conventionality in this
collection, an approach informed by context, purpose, and audience influence.

**Literature Review**

Conventional literary approaches to nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint women’s poetry have
been largely negative. In 1985, Latter-day Saint literary scholar Maureen Ursenbach Beecher
stated, “these were not poets such as those of literary judgment might acknowledge. It takes no
great literary sensitivity to realize that newspaper poetry a hundred years ago was for the most
part superficial, bland, unimaginative, derived from known forms and themes, spelling out its
message in language more akin to prose than to poetry except for a self-conscious adherence to
rhyme and rhythm” (56). This focus on formal innovation and sophistication can also been seen
in vexed attempts to reclaim other nineteenth-century women’s poetry. While many female poets
were immensely popular, literary scholars have historically sought value outside this reality by
separating women’s poetry from its reception history.

One famous case study is Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), one of the bestselling English-
speaking poets of the nineteenth century. Stauffer points out that in order to recast Hemans’s
poetry as literary works that interrogated nineteenth-century culture, scholars have had to claim
that readers of the day were all deluded into “misunderstanding it, sentimentalizing it,
domesticating it” (373). Stauffer reexamines Hemans from the point of view of her readers.
Using Victorian-era copies of Hemans’s books with marginal annotations by female readers,
Stauffer demonstrates how these readers used Hemans’s words to capture their own passions and
losses, even going so far as to record the names of their children in the margins next to Hemans’s poems (378). Instead of contorting around sentimentality, Stauffer embraces the ways poetry reached real people with real struggles. By shifting perspective, Stauffer allows Hemans to stand within the context of her time without dismissing the value her readers found in her work.

Likewise, building on Beecher’s observation of Latter-day Saint women’s poems, I assert that their “adherence to known forms and themes” and “self-conscious adherence to rhyme and rhythm,” were central to their rhetorical function, particularly if we look to the purpose and effects of the poems, including what value the popular culture of the time might have seen in this type of verse.

Poetry was an essential component of everyday life for literate Americans in the late nineteenth century. It played an essential role in literary education efforts across the United States. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, schools began emphasizing poem memorization and recitation as part of the consolidation of free public education (Robson 5). For many in the U.S., knowledge—however deep or superficial—of poetry was seen as an indication of education and cultural refinement and was a form of emotional and intellectual exchange.

Chapman explains that nineteenth-century poetry:

was a meaningful medium for people to express things they really cared about. Effective poets were community celebrities, and recitations were a natural part of parties and celebrations. Poems were often written to mark occasions and to honor achievements and people. Culture was rich with rhythm, rhyme, wit, and emotion possible through verse.

(76)

The thriving culture around poetry made it not only an art form, but a form of communication and community building. People knew and even felt connected to simple, common poetic forms.
Rhetorical aesthetics, with its attention to the rhetorical functions of aesthetic experience, accounts for the persuasive effect of conventional sentimentality in art by attending to its historical context and audience reception. Acknowledging how art and rhetoric have historically been separated, Nathan Crick uses John Dewey’s theories of aesthetics to argue that it is possible for the two to work together to create real change. For Dewey, encountering art is an experience of emotion and change, particularly when an artist transforms an idea through a medium or form that replicates or creates emotion in its audience (Dewey 88, 113, 155). Crick sees Dewey’s thoughts on the transformational power of art as way for minority voices to be heard in the public sphere (11). Uniting rhetoric with the aesthetic experience is about freeing the silenced voice in a way that connects with others specifically by creating a whole-bodied, emotional experience. Crick contends further that for real change to happen in society, we need a different sort of oratory experience: “logic has a vital role to play, but only aesthetics makes us passionately committed to a hope that is more than a dream but is a future that we struggle toward in greedy anticipation of beauty” (135). Crick’s argument for aesthetic rhetoric explains the power of sentimental poetry of the nineteenth century to unite communities.

Kenneth Burke was also interested in how rhetoric unites people or allows them to identify with each other. Identification, in Burke’s terms, is a necessary reaction to our existence as separate beings that allows us to exist in consubstantial ways while maintaining our separateness (Rhetoric of Motives 20–21). Furthermore, identification is achieved when “a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications” (46). Style and form enable identification by creating emotions (especially fellow feeling) in an audience. Burke sees emotion as an essential component of eloquence, which is the “end of art and is thus its essence” (41). He explains that “pity, tragedy, sweetness, humor, in short all the emotions which we
experience in life proper, as non-artists, are simply the material on which eloquence may feed,” adding that “even the poorest art is eloquent, but in a poor way” (Counter-Statement 40–41). The moment shared emotion is created in an audience is the moment when a true rhetorical experience happens. And to create that emotion, Burke argues an artist must approach the topic with a mix of forms and styles that are both familiar and new, expected and different.

Gregory Clark uses Burke’s theories to examine how rhetorical aesthetics can create unity while also maintaining individuality. Clark examines the rhetorical work of jazz, particularly how it allows people of diverse backgrounds to create something whole and new. What allows jazz to flourish is the “constitutions” or shared form that the jazz musician works within while still allowing space for diversity. In essence, the creation of an aesthetic object and its associated experience rhetorically binds people as they encounter shared experiences within a shared constitution, thus allowing a unity that maintains individuality.

Viewing Songs and Flowers through the rhetorical aesthetic theories of Dewey, Burke, Clark, and Crick extends Staufffer’s call for affirmative and holistic approaches to nineteenth-century women’s poetry. When Wells compiled the collection for the World Fair, she created an aesthetic object that drew on common forms of poetry as shared constitutions to accomplish the rhetorical work of identification. For visitors to the buildings where one of the three copies of the book were displayed, an experience with the book would have been primarily visual. The watercolors and appearance of the book needed to showcase Victorian sentiments about women as creators of beauty (Reeder 287-290). The audience would experience awe at the craftmanship, and potentially read some of the poems, but most likely not all of them. The poems needed to be simple and accessible while displaying shared backgrounds, experiences, and emotions. Rhetorical aesthetics, together with a close reading incorporating historical expectations of poetic
form, can uncover ways *Songs and Flowers* created aesthetic experiences that invited a World's Fair audience to identify with Latter-day Saint women.

**Familiarity and Novelty**

A central key to the aesthetic experience of *Songs and Flowers* was the blending of the familiar with the new. At the heart of this experience is a recognition of satisfied expectations that creates an openness in the audience. Dewey explains the concept: “When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world” (278). Essentially, variations in established forms draw attention to specific ideas and themes, but, set as they are in within an expected form, these ideas are easier to accept. Burke describes this process in this way: “Once you grasp the trend of the form, it invites participation regardless of the subject matter. Formally, you will find yourself swinging along with the succession of antitheses, even though you may not agree with the proposition that is being presented in this form” (58). Clark likens the rhetorical work of familiar forms conveying new ideas or thoughts as a “pathway through experience for others to follow” (23).
The first poem Wells featured in *Songs and Flowers*, “Invocation” by Eliza R. Snow¹ (see fig. 1), is an example of how an aesthetic experience of openness and sincerity can be created through familiarity, preparing an audience to be more accepting of a novel concept. The poem is a prayer that contemplates a life before birth, an earthly experience, death, and the sort of relationships to expect after death. Wells’s decision to include “Invocation” at the beginning of

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¹ Snow wrote “Invocation” after the death of the Latter-day Saint Prophet Joseph Smith. In 1845, it appeared under the title “My Father in Heaven” in the small newspaper, *Times and Seasons*. It is now best known as a hymn text, “O My Father” (Hicks 1).
the book followed a common practice at the time of including an invocation or prayer (as to a
muse) before a series of poems. As an example of what Burke calls “conventional form,” an
invocation provides the audience with information on what to expect before encountering the
content of the art (Counter-Statement 126-127). An invocation gives audiences insight into who
or what the artist looks to as a source of inspiration for their creative work while indicating
humility on the part of the artist. Snow’s invocation begins with the lines, “O, my Father, thou
that dwellest in a high and glorious place,” calling on a Heavenly parent for guidance and
direction. By extension it places God as muse, so to speak, for the entire Songs and Flowers
collection, a gesture that would have resonated with other Christian audiences. The use of
Snow’s poem also nodded toward Snow herself, who, as the most famous female Latter-day
Saint poet, had been given the title of Zion’s Poetess. Although Snow died in 1887, six years
before the publication of this book, many Utah poets looked to her as a creative example. Using
her poem at the beginning of the collection made Snow a symbolic muse for Utah poets and
allowed Wells to indirectly allude to the Church’s longstanding poetic tradition, something those
outside the religion may not have been familiar with. Perhaps more importantly, because the
invocation form was used in many poetic collections, it also would echo other popular poets and,
by extension, link them as inspiration and interlocutors for the collection.

Another type of familiarity is established on a structural level. “Invocation” is written in
four tetrameter, eight-line stanzas with an abcb rhyming pattern.2 This type of poem is also
known as a long measure ballad stanza and was a common form for hymns at the time. Because
it is written in ballad stanza, poetic scholar Paul M. Fussell explains, the form carries a certain
implication of “primitive sincerity and openness” (134). The conventional nature of the

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2 The poem is in trochaic tetrameter with every other line being catalectic, a variation on traditional long measure
iambic tetrameter lines. Later in this section I go into more detail about some of the effects of this variation.
invocation form along with the simple metrical familiarity of the ballad stanza nods toward the shared history of poetry the Utah women hoped to draw on. This gesture was one of openness, in effect saying, we recognize the poetic tradition we build on and hope to create an offering worthy of, and fitting with, this past. The World Fair audience’s familiarity with this stanza form would likewise invite an open and sincere personal aesthetic experience as they read the poem.

Encountering a familiar form that created an open aesthetic feeling allowed the World’s Fair audience to be more prepared to accept the unusual religious doctrine that appears in Snow’s poem. Burke explains that poetic forms (including formal elements such as rhythms) operate within the work by either following or varying from what the audience expects. Variations in forms call attention to individual aspects of theme or story, redirecting the audience’s attention or creating emotion through difference (Counter-Statement 127). Snow’s poem is one of the only poems in Songs and Flowers that speaks directly about a religious doctrine unique to Latter-day Saints: the belief in a heavenly mother. This belief touched on one of the biggest struggles people outside the faith had with the Church, that of marital relationships, particularly polygamy. Instead of dwelling on polygamy, Snow’s poem speaks of the heavenly role of a woman beside a man. It alludes to the belief in the dual role of men and women and their ability to be married and continue families beyond death. This novel idea placed inside the familiar is supported by variations in metrical expectations that physically move the audience through difference, creating an experience that feels natural, because, as Dewey describes, it triggers an imaginative experience that “is a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole” (278). When variations contribute to this feeling of wholeness, an audience experiences a moment of enlarged understanding and potential acceptance of a novel concept.
One variation Snow introduces is the less traditional trochaic meter; most ballad stanzas were written in iambic meter. This variation plays an important role in encapsulating this Latter-day Saint belief about the union between men and women. Snow’s meter alternates between true trochaic endings and trochaic catalectic endings:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{/ } & \text{u} & \text{/ } & \text{u} & \text{/ } & \text{u} & \text{/ } & \text{u} \\
\end{array}
\]

Oh my Father, thou that dwellest

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{/ } & \text{u} & \text{/ } & \text{u} & \text{/ } & \text{u} & \text{/ } & \text{u} \\
\end{array}
\]

In the high and glorious place! (lines 1-2)

Many sentences are completed by the two paired trochaic lines working together, one feminine and the other masculine in ending. Within that framework, Snow’s message about premortal life and the existence of a Heavenly Mother becomes easier to accept and possibly could help shift the focus from polygamous relationships to relationships of equality and value for both sexes. This doctrine of equality is one of the strongest arguments Latter-day Saint women had for being seen as supporters of women’s rights and was perhaps the most notable belief they wished to share. The poem’s variations in meter and form convey the novel doctrine of feminine divinity and reinforces the audience’s more familiar concept of female equality. This pairing of the novel and familiar helps the World’s Fair audiences see Utah women as valuable participants in the suffrage movement.

**Repetition and Exactness**

While in the vein of Snow’s poetry and others in the collection, familiar forms allowed novel ideas to be more acceptable to an audience, one of the more often voiced complaints from scholars about Latter-day Saint women’s poetry (and much of popular poetry in the nineteenth
century in general) is that they use form without deviation or regard for the impact of their chosen poetic form, sometimes creating a poem whose form is at odds with its message (Beecher 57). Latter-day Saint poet Esther Bennion’s poem “My Heart” (see fig. 2) is an example of a poem that has little variation from the form it establishes. It is written in the most common iambic pentameter, with six stanzas of four lines rhymed abab. The poem explores the contrasts between worldly praise or censure and personal conscience and accountability to God. Set above a watercolor of purple wild geraniums and brown grass, its message is not hidden in metaphors or symbols but rings with what modern readers might find a childish, simplistic moralism and a lack of poetic skill. Fussell explains the connection contemporary readers would have to the form Bennion uses as the equivalent of “mnemonic verses, nursery rhymes, rhymed saws, and proverbs, and admonitions, hymn, and popular songs.” He adds this interesting summation: “The unsophisticated person’s experience of poetry is almost equivalent to his experience of quatrains, which tends to suggest that there is something in four-line stanzaic organization (or in the principle of alternate rhyming) that projects a deep and permanent appeal to those whose language is English” (133). While Fussell sees this common form as an indication of a lack of sophistication in a person’s poetry experience, he also recognizes that it has a strong appeal. The very nature of its simplicity and commonality makes this type of poetry memorable and lasting.
Of course, meter matters as much as rhyme scheme. In speaking of the qualities associated with rhythm as a repetitive form in poetry, Burke gives this description: “it very distinctly sets up and gratifies a constancy of expectations; the reader ‘comes to rely’ upon the rhythmic design after sufficient ‘coordinates of direction’ have been received by him; the regularity of the design establishes conditions of response in the body, and the continuance of the design becomes an ‘obedience’ to these same conditions” (*Counter-Statement* 130). The easy rhythm of Bennion’s poem creates a nostalgic aesthetic experience for World’s Fair readers who...
attended public school. The poem reads like a schoolroom motto, celebrating the inner
consciousness and peace that can only come from living with integrity. Stanzas four, five, and six
also create a thematic mirror of stanzas one, two, and three as they progressively deal with
related themes. For example, the first line of stanza one reads, “Though all the world proclaim
me good and noble,” while the first line of stanza four reads, “What though the world condemn
me without mercy,” setting up parallel concepts about the limits of the world’s perceptions verses
the truth that resides in one’s heart. The central form that reoccurs on both structural and line
level is repetition and rhythm, something that would have gratified expectations at the time.

Indeed, Bennion’s poem might have had a very different reception by a Chicago World’s
Fair audience. As noted above, from around 1870 through the end of the nineteenth century,
schools began incorporating memorized poems and recitation into their curriculum. This was a
time in the United States when free public education was becoming a standard and the presence
of poetry in schools was seen as an indication of a quality education (Roberts 5). In her book
Heart Beats, scholar of nineteenth-century poetry Catherine Robson sheds some light on the
arguments that were commonly made for recitation and memorization of poetry in the
nineteenth-century schoolroom:

Memorized poetry was important because of its religious and moral aspect; the
individual, both in childhood and in later life, would be guided, improved, and
comforted by the principles and sentiments stored within. Memorized poetry played an
unrivaled role in the development of taste, in the refinement of the uncultured, in their
elevations to a higher plane. (7)

By creating a poem that followed a pattern or form exactly, Bennion was producing a potential
recitation piece and contributing to a conversation about education and refinement. For a World’s
Fair audience, experiences with memorized poetry in the classroom and elsewhere would have made the accessibility of Bennion’s form as well as its message ring true to expectations of what poems should sound, look, and feel like. Thematically, “My Heart” offers a moral code to counter popular media’s portrayal of Utah woman’s sexual promiscuousness, cultural backwardness, and moral depravity.\(^3\) For a poem advocating integrity and morality, obedience to a form blends style and theme in a fitting way. Poetry that adheres to form shows Utah women’s ability to conform to expectations and follow with exactness, and because they can follow with exactness and conform, they are also moral. Beecher also acknowledges the cultural ramifications of conforming to expectations, suggesting its possible Latter-day Saint women “were loath to alter their pattern lest their inventiveness reveal a qualitative difference between them and their eastern sisters and they be forced to admit that the rough isolation of the preceding decades had toughened their senses as it had reddened their faces” (Beecher 59).

**Universal Experiences and Natural Rhythm**

While encountering a conventional form or familiar poetic stanza brings a rewarding type of aesthetic experience for those familiar with poetry, using the form or meter to recreate or draw on universal experiences essential to everyday life adds depth and impact to the aesthetic experience in a way that inspires community. Many of Dewey’s arguments about the aesthetic experience of art center on the concept that art is not created in a vacuum. It both comes from an artist’s experience in “the common world” (112) and is experienced by an audience with a history of life experiences. For Dewey, “experience is necessarily cumulative and its subject matter gains expressiveness because of cumulative continuity” (108). Thus, as we encounter art,

\(^3\) Among other things, popular media also portrayed Latter-day Saint women as deluded and stupid, subjugated to their husbands, and eager to flirt with non-member men to escape polygamy (Nielsen 82-83).
the aesthetic experiences we have are informed by our previous experiences. Encountering art that resonates with our own prior experience can create an aesthetic experience of empathy and unity, even with those who are vastly different from ourselves. Crick explains Dewey’s concepts in this way:

The universality of art, in other words, speaks in a language that draws from what is common in human experience—the natural rhythms that characterize our relationship to our environment. These rhythms are not simply the rhythms of “nature” in the sense of the cycle of the seasons or the rising and setting of the sun; they are the rhythms of expectation and loss, of tension and fulfillment, of struggle and death, of birth and hope. The creation of a community of experience is made possible when we witness in the art of others the rhythms we have experienced in ourselves. (161)

This type of connection is achieved through poems in Songs and Flowers that deal with universal themes such as events like birth and death or emotions such as sorrow and joy. The only full poem Wells included in the collection that was written by herself, “At Evening” (see fig. 3), is a particularly impactful example of how universal experiences and natural rhythms can create a sense of community.
Not only is the experience of death portrayed as a natural and universal event, “At Evening” also places women at a junction between nature and death that would have resonated with Chicago Fair audiences’ prior experiences and life views. Poetry dealing with death themes held added significance for women in the nineteenth century, and Wells would have found a particularly attuned audience at the Chicago Fair. For example, Victorian women in general often wrote poetry about death as part of their grieving cycle. As scholar Kylie Nielson Turley reminds us in her article on death poetry in the *Women’s Exponent*, “The abundant writing of death poetry
coincides with the conventional (typically feminine) Victorian approach to death” (55). This type of poetry had a long tradition for women in the nineteenth century. For instance, one of the century’s best-known American female poets, Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865), made a living in part by writing elegies for her readers in honor of their loved ones (Putzi 17). Additionally, the ties between expected roles of woman and the mothering care of nature were deeply embedded in the popular culture of the time. In her book on female relational poetry of the antebellum period, Jennifer Putzi reminds us that for much of the nineteenth century, popular culture viewed “the woman poet as an ethereal being whose talent was entirely natural, a mere absorption of the beauty to be found in family, religion, morality, and nature.” She adds that the title “the poetess” was “seen as nascent within all women, whether they ever published a poem or not” (14). In Wells’s poem, this innate quality of womanhood is transposed onto nature who can even speak of “Faith and Trust” to the “soul in nature’s poetry.” Woman is the ultimate unifying agent in her poem, naturally disposed toward empathy and shared experience, just as the women of Utah were disposed towards shared community and values.

Wells’s poem utilizes metaphors, sound, and rhythm to draw on womanhood and nature to create an unusually calming relationship with death. In “At Evening,” the speaker watches the approach of night from sunset to moonrise, until the culmination of night’s arrival brings sleep. Words and phrases like “peace and rest,” “memories of the past,” “steady sail,” “time,” “life to be,” and “yield to sleep” hint at death and burial and the unalterable ticking of time, over-laying the simple nature scene with metaphors of death. Wells instills an added layer of meaning by making nature itself sympathetic to death by personifying it as a woman who soothes “with her potent power” and offers “the world-worn heart her sympathy.” Other formal aspects of the poem such as meter and sound reproduce an aesthetic experience of progressing time that is layered
with soothing sympathy. Wells’s word choice places emphasis on alliterative and near-alliterative sounds that slow the reading. For example, lines five to eight read,

Great nature with her potent power,
Breathes to the world-worn heart her sympathy,
Amid the tranquil of such spell-bound hour,
The mem’ries of the past steal tenderly.

The letters t, b, d, and p all create a plosive stop in the sound as they are pronounced. When the letters occur next to each other, the reader is compelled to emphasize the transition from one to the next. Longer sounds of consonants like n, m, w, and s, as well as digraphs like th and sh also encourage the reader to linger on sounds. This, coupled with open vowels sounds like o, and ou elongates the words and slows the reader, reproducing stillness, rest, and reflection in the very words the reader encounters. Wells also mimics the steady beat of time through the plosive stops and digraphs. Coming both in the words and at the beginning or ends of words, they create puffs of air in a rhythmic pattern that repeats like a ticking clock or breathing. This steady ticking builds to the end, where the final lines linger on fricative consonants like s, h, abandoning the harsher consonants for a long out flow of breath coupled with narrower ee and i vowels that flow into the consonants as if succumbing at last to the inevitable. The entire journey is one of patient expectation coupled with a profound stillness, something seemingly at odds with the harsh reality of the universal experience of death.

The stillness and peace invoked by metaphor, sound and rhythm, turns death into an experience with, instead of a removal from, community. The transition from life to death, carefully portrayed in soothing tones like a mother hushing a child, turns the rhythm of time into the steady motion of being rocked to sleep, negating the idea of death as an isolating experience.
of loneliness. In the last stanza, “White-robed beings round our couches stray” as we move from one life to the next. The presence of these beings, coupled with the lingering wh and r sounds that soften the tick of time, turn death from a fearful experience to one of quiet stillness and companionship. The poem soothes the reader as it replicates the aesthetic of a mother’s calming presence in the face of the ultimate unknown. The image of the ideal woman, gently leading one towards the next life just as a mother rocks a child to sleep or nature teaches us of natural cycles, takes the fear from death, and invites peace in the knowledge that the journey to death is not one undertaken alone. For women who had lost children, for a generation that expressed mourning through poems, and for a culture that saw something innately poetic in a woman, the feminine aesthetic of “At Evening” would have a strong communal pull for a World’s Fair audience as they felt the natural rhythm of shared life experiences.

**Symbols and Qualitative Form**

Another way of understanding natural rhythms is through qualitative form. Dewey sees the variables of natural rhythms—those ups and downs inherent in life—leading toward his definition of form which is broadly inclusive of all life experiences and happens when a “equilibrium is reached” and “changes interlock and sustain one another” to create a feeling of wholeness (13). Crick explains, “during these moments the dualisms and divisions one carries about in conscious experience are dissolved as the whole resources of the self, including all elements of rationality and passion, become absorbed into the qualitative moment” (156). This moment of understanding is an aesthetic experience. Burke places what Dewey sees as a natural human process into a function of literary forms, particularly the subdivision of progressive form called “qualitative” progression. In qualitative progression, “the presence of one quality prepares
us for the introduction of another” (125) even if the events of the plot don’t necessarily
instinctively lead us there. We are often unable to see the “rightness” of the events until the end,
when everything comes together as a whole (125).

This meeting of the whole in qualitative form often points toward a unified underlying
theme or what Burke calls “the symbol.” The symbol is the “verbal parallel to a pattern of
experience,” or in other words, it is these universal patterns of experience when they are put into
a form that can be accessed by others (Counter-Statement 152). Artistic tools like metaphors,
images, and even single word choices can work together to point to the symbol. Burke notes that
incongruities will sometimes seem to arise when “symbols [are] subsidized in ways not
contributory to the pattern” (Counter-Statement 157). However, the ultimate pattern becomes
clear when “apparently arbitrary or illogical association of ideas can be shown to possess and
‘emotional’ connective” (Counter-Statement 159). Essentially, the choices the artist makes in
how to put the experience into a form may complicate the symbol, but ultimately, these differing
aspects can be pulled back into a cohesive whole. Thus, an aesthetic experience is created as the
author leads the reader through the various complexities of their symbol, even when they feel at
odds, towards a feeling of qualitative emotional rightness.

For Wells and other Utah women, navigating perceived dualities and divisions between
themselves and other women was a primary concern. Their way of life was constantly portrayed
as different in one way or another. For example, poems on nature were a common theme of
many nineteenth-century poets, particularly women, who were seen as cultivators of beauty in
the home and garden (Reeder 285). However, for Utah women, nature was more than the flowers
in the garden or the wreath on the door. In a 1914 Exponent article on literary women of the early
Church, Annie Wells Cannon gave this description of what might have been expected of pioneer
settlers living so close to nature: “The hardships of pioneer life are not generally very conducive to the cultivation of the finer qualities of the mind and soul. The making of new homes and conquering desert wastes naturally calls forth all one’s energy, and the tired work-worn body would naturally require all the faculties of the mind to assist in providing life’s necessities.” This seems to have been the perspective many outside Utah had of the settlers there, even though it had been several decades since the first pioneers’ arrival in Utah. Creating an aesthetic moment of qualitative equilibrium by using symbols where things that seem different (like Utah women’s frontier homes and the cultivated society ideals of American women) are held together in a harmonious form allowed Utah poets to point to a pattern of experience where nature and refinement are held together without conflict.

Wells seems particularly interested in showing how the impact of nature on the Saints became a source of literature inspiration and intellectual growth despite expectations. For her and other poets, nature was a schoolground, and the women of Utah had been refined by its lessons, not coarsened. Indeed, even Cannon, nearly 30 years later, viewed the early pioneers as an exception to the expectation:

The pioneers of Utah are a very different type of people . . . They were . . . a people of strong religious sentiment and innate refinement. There were many men and women among them of high intellectual attainment. The pioneers brought with them across the plains a printing press, and within three years after their advent into the desert, established a newspaper—The Deseret News—and founded a university. (“Early Literary Women”)

In 1893, the opinions Cannon seems to hold as universal were not held by many outside Utah. If Utah women wanted to reach those at the Chicago World’s Fair, Wells needed to show how a
remote desert home and intellectual growth, two seeming opposite ideas, could exist and even thrive together. In the process of showing this, an underlying symbol also takes root; if opposites such as a wilderness and intellectual growth can exist together, then perhaps even something as seemingly different as the women of Utah and those in the larger United States could also find ways to relate to each other. Indeed, this may be a reason why at least fourteen of the poems Wells chose are about nature, while twelve have clear themes about opposites co-existing in harmony. It’s also worth noting that on a design level, the book presents culture or “text” coexisting with the images of nature on every page.

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Fig. 4. Sarah E. Russell. “Hope.” Songs and Flowers of the Wasatch, p 19. Courtesy, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.
Sarah E. Russell’s poem, “Hope” (see fig. 4), is one example of a selection in the
collection that uses nature symbols in theme and meter to hold two opposite concepts together.
“Hope” is a five-stanza poem with quatrains of iambic tetrameter, and it appears next to a
watercolor of a group of trees near a stream with a mountain in the background. In “Hope” a
traveler finds a shady nook to rest in from their journey. Yet, the rest for the body becomes an
exercise for the mind, allowing it to receive insights. In this poem, nature is working in two
ways: as a place for hard physical work and as a school ground for intellectual insights. A
frontier life, it seems to say, is one of both exertion and contemplation, and both things
contribute to refinement. Through simple iambic quatrains, the poem creates an initial feeling of
unity that welcomes a reader to a familiar form. Russell then weaves in tiny moments of metrical
variation to represent the ebb and flow of nature and thought. Anapestic substitutions work like a
skip to quicken the pace and recreate an illusion of lightness in the otherwise steady iambic
pattern. These substitutions can be found at the beginning and middle of lines:

| u / | u / | u / | u / |

Where weary ones may stop and think

| u / | u / | u / | u / | u / |

O’er life’s deep lessons, and while they drink

| u u / | u / | u u / | u / |

Of the peace that reigns in this haven dear,

| u / | u / | u u / | u / |

Find happy respite from pain and fear.

The anapests recreate the effect of the stream as it flows at various rates around different objects
in the water, allowing the meter to be interrupted by beats that symbolically stretch out the
metrical foot, all without losing the established meter. Difference is caught up in the whole. Russell also achieves this sense of flowing unity through an enjambment in this stanza that links the drinking of water with the drinking of heavenly peace. The lines are linked to one another and cross the white space of the line endings. Nature, it seems, is quite capable of holding both temporal needs and mental stimulation in harmony together.

Interestingly, that sense of coherence contains difference. Ideas begin to slip as if caught up in the river’s flow. Shade can be both longed for and obscuring of clear intellectual sight; light can be life-giving but overpowering in the heat of the day. We can rest our body while working our mind or work our body while resting our mind. Each concept retains its individuality and difference even as it is joined together by the form. For example, in addition to enjambments, rhyming couplets pull lines together. Russell’s rhymes even occasionally hold significance as she rhymes “dear” with “fear,” “won” with “done”, and “fair” with “rare,” putting concepts that could be contrasted at the line ends. Meter and form merge thematic difference by sweeping it up in the flow though line endings, around metrical substitutions, and over linked rhyming lines. Likewise, the slippery nature of Russell’s symbols blurs the lines of difference resulting in a qualitative progression toward an emotional experience of harmony despite difference. The idea of hard work doesn’t have to be separated from the concept of mental growth. Refinement exists at the center of both experiences when they are swept up in the natural rhythms of nature itself. The symbol ultimately points toward a qualitative aesthetic experience of wholeness despite difference.
Conclusion

As each poem added to the collective whole, the final aesthetic experience of *Songs and Flowers* could take a World’s Fair audience on a journey toward a qualitative moment as well. A woman attending the Chicago World Fair who entered the Utah Building would find chairs and a sofa to rest on, rugs on the floor, and even a mantle complete with a clock. She would be surrounded by paintings, needlepoints, wood carvings, and written publications. In this home-like setting she could relax while she looked through and read poems from *Songs and Flowers* (Cannon, “The Utah Room”). The familiar forms this woman would encounter could foster an aesthetic experience of openness and sincerity that allowed space for novel ideas to take root. Finding adherence to poetic conventions might encourage her to feel confidence in Utah women’s morality and education. Feelings of hospitality and connection could blossom as she noticed poems about shared universal experiences. And previously held concepts of incompatibility and difference toward Utah women would be challenged repeatedly as disparate parts of life were seen to exist harmoniously together as a whole.

The cumulative effect of these aesthetic experiences was to help Chicago World’s Fair audience overcome the perceived differences preventing them from identifying with Utah women. Burke writes, “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 22). Thus, in finding how two things are unexpectedly alike, we identify with each other in an earnest and compensatory way and lines are blurred between groups. Burke further explains, “put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 25). To breach division and inspire unity, Burke says authors must find a shared
language to communicate “by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Rhetoric of Motives 55). Songs and Flowers exemplifies rhetorical efforts along this line. The collective whole becomes particularly persuasive as individual poems come together to demonstrate more thoroughly than a single speech could that the women in Utah were refined, well-educated, civic minded, moral, and Christian by all the standards of womanhood expected of the day.

Contextual evidence indicates Songs and Flowers was only a small part of a greater rhetorical event. The collection was noted in the Women’s Exponent as a “beautiful volume” that Utah women could take pride in when viewing (Cannon “The Utah Room”), and an unnamed reviewer wrote, “It is certainly a very beautiful book, and Utah may well be proud of the work, both poetical and artistic. It is excellent in every respect” (“Editorial Notes”). However, most newspaper articles focused on the Fair as a whole, without direct reference to any specific individual display’s particular impact. Addressing rhetorical studies’ traditional emphasis on oratory, with clear rhetorical situations, over literature, Burke notes that often the impact of an aesthetic experience is less defined, and this is perhaps why literature is sometimes left out of rhetorical studies. He contends this view is shortsighted because “it overlooks entirely the fact that there is the pamphlet, the political tract, the soap-box oration, to deal with the specific issues of the day, whereas the literature of the imagination may prepare the mind in a more general fashion” (Counter-Statement 189). In a sea of speeches and debates, art and scientific discoveries, the impact of Songs and Flowers, might be best classified as preparing the mind in this general fashion. It was one of many efforts Utah women undertook to present themselves in rhetorically positive ways. They also gave speeches, sang, and displayed many other literary publications, crafts, and arts.
As a whole, the Chicago World’s Fair was a temporary, six-month experience. For some it was a false display of fancy and illusion. For others it portrayed lived realities and inspired hope for the future (Maddux 26-27). In her book on women’s rhetoric at the Chicago World’s Fair, Kristy Maddux sees the blending of idealistic illusion and reality as the project of the entire fair. It was meant to be both a representation and a projection of an ideal American life. Women at the fair were particularly energetic and enthusiastic about exploring their roles in society, “[projecting] a cacophony of visions for gender in the Gilded Age’s changing social order” (Maddux 31). Thoughts and ideas cultivated throughout the preparation for, and execution of, the fair influenced future civic changes, even if the ideals weren’t always reached. Maddux points out that, “In the years to come, women’s clubs, advocacy organizations, and suffrage groups would all grow tremendously, due in no small part to women’s organizing at the fair and the important messages it projected about women’s capacity for civic leadership” (50). She argues, “If the fair influences subsequent events, and if it both reflected reality and created illusions, we must recognize that the fair was rhetorical; that is, it presented a persuasive message that intervened in the popular conversations of its era” (28).

Similar changes for Utah women in civic spaces underscore the cumulative effects of many different types of rhetoric working together. While many Americans continued to shun Latter-day Saint women after the fair (Reeder 312), it is clear is that outreach efforts as whole made a difference. Nielsen observes that many Latter-day Saint women who were present in Chicago were invited to private luncheons and receptions after making good impressions on other women attending. These friendships and connections would last for years and provide access for Utah women to many national women’s groups and movements (102). In May of 1895, the regional convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association was held
in Salt Lake City, and Emmaline Wells, along with other Utah women leaders, played a significant part in that event. In 1896, only three years after the Fair, Utah became a state. Reeder calls this “the ultimate badge of political acceptance.” Additionally, the Fair had ripple effects within Utah itself. For example, prior to the Fair, the Ladies Literary Club in Salt Lake didn’t allow Latter-day Saint women to join their group. But after the fair, the Club was opened to them, with Wells getting a particular invitation (Reeder 280-281, 311). It seems likely her work on *Songs and Flowers* played a role in this shift. The poetry collection was, as Burke says, a way of “preparing the mind,” with the results playing out on the community and civic levels. The value of a rhetorical aesthetic, then, is its ability to foster community and civic discourse through identification in subtle and cumulative ways.

Using rhetorical aesthetics to analyze identification through literature, particularly popular literature, reveals valuable insights about civic change. Rhetorical aesthetics, even when found in the sentimental poetry of everyday people, plays an essential role in creating lasting links between people and communities. Dewey agrees that art that is deeply embedded in community and culture is both a sign and creator of “a unified collective life” (84). While Dewey maintains that the choice to “communicate a special message” through art results in a lesser form of art, he also concedes that “because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate” regardless of intent. For the most part, this type of communication in poetry happens as an aesthetic experience, but this doesn’t diminish its impact for change. Clark writes,

> Change, after all, is what occurs when we communicate with each other. We can’t help but come away comprehending things differently than we had, regardless of how small the change or its consequence. What changes is some element of one’s sense of self—self
in the sense of how one understands things, and with whom one is partnered in
comprehending the world. That’s what is rhetorical. (7-8)
The case of Songs and Flowers confirms the insights of these theorists. Additionally, it expands
their views to include alternative and lesser-known ways of communication through art,
particularly arts traditionally ascribed to women. These types of communication-friendly works
of art might include poetry and painting, but also crafts, quilts, scrapbooks, or even letters. While
Burke and Dewey both attempt to reestablish metrics for evaluation of art based on an analysis of
the artist’s skills, rhetorical aesthetics leans toward valuing art for its public work: the acts of
community these types of communication invited, and the potential awareness they can direct
toward social issues.

Songs and Flowers demonstrates how rhetorical aesthetics provides an alternative way of
reading art, specifically poetic sentimentality and conventionality. By attending to historical
moments and popular conventions, rhetorical aesthetics allows poems to stand separate from
modern literary expectations. Importantly, rhetorical aesthetics provides us insights to how
writing builds community and promotes civic change in everyday and ordinary ways. It reminds
us that sometimes more conventional or popular ways of communication are more influential for
changing minds and encouraging identification.
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