Mormon Culture Meets Popular Fiction: Susa Young Gates and the Cultural Work of Home Literature

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MORMON CULTURE MEETS POPULAR FICTION:
SUSA YOUNG GATES AND THE CULTURAL
WORK OF HOME LITERATURE

by

Lisa Olsen Tait

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Lisa Olsen Tait in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

MORMON CULTURE MEETS POPULAR FICTION:
SUSA YOUNG GATES AND THE CULTURAL
WORK OF HOME LITERATURE

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Master of Arts

The few studies of Mormon home literature that have been published to date
dismiss it as inferior artistry, an embarrassing if necessary step in the progression towards
ture Mormon literature. These studies are inadequate, however, because they divorce the
texts from their context, holding them up to standards that did not exist for their original
audience. Jane Tompkins' theory of texts as cultural work provides a more satisfactory
way of looking at these narratives.

Home literature is thoroughly enmeshed in the cultural discourse of its day.
Beneath the surface, these didactic stories about young Mormons finding love with their
foreordained mates performed important cultural work by helping Mormons to think
about their personal and collective identities, by co-opting mainstream fictional forms and
giving them safe expression, and by reconceptualizing marriage in the wake of polygamy’s demise. The stories of Susa Young Gates illustrate these functions well. Gates was a prominent youth leader and prolific home author during the 1890s. Her stories extend and enact Mormon cultural discourse of the time and point up the connections between Mormon fiction and mainstream models.

The last decade of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of Mormonism’s transition from an isolated separatist movement to a thoroughly assimilated and modern mainstream religion. As Mormons shifted away from the defining practices of polygamy, communal economics, and ecclesiastical dominance of politics, they sought for new ways to define themselves that would retain their sense of distinctness from a world they still viewed as sinful. The result was new emphasis on formerly dormant or relatively unemphasized practices such as the Word of Wisdom and the law of tithing. This emphasis shows up in the story “Donald’s Boy” which repeatedly focuses on the necessity for Mormon youth to shun the corruptions of the world.

“Seven Times,” which ran in the 1893-94 volume of the Young Woman’s Journal, shows Gates’s debt to mainstream fiction in its extensive adoption of popular conventions, reworking such devices as the heroine’s development, the divine child, the lecherous villain, and the sick bed ordeal into a Mormon conversion narrative. As in popular American fiction, the role of the narrator is central to the didactic intentions of the story. The narrator becomes the dominant personality of the text as she both creates
and controls the emotion necessary to the formal and ideological demands of the narrative. Gates claimed to consider popular didactic fiction inconsequential, but her own comments and her wholesale use of its conventions suggests that her relationship with these novels was much more complex than she acknowledged.

“John Stevens’ Courtship” is Gates’s most popular and ambitious work. Its setting in the early years of Mormon settlement in Utah at the time of the first large-scale influx of “outsiders” into Mormon society constructs an idealized view of early Mormon culture that contrasts with the diminished faithfulness Gates perceived in her day. Gates’s artistic ambitions show up most clearly in her intense descriptions of her characters. These character descriptions draw on popular conventions to inscribe idealized gender constructs that interacted with Mormon ideology to remain in force in Mormon society long after they had faded elsewhere. Finally, Gates’s emphasis on the idea of a foreordained mate replaces polygamy as the essential doctrine of marriage, an important shift in post-Manifesto Mormondom.
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Foreword

Mormon literature is virtually unknown outside of the LDS Church. A few Mormon authors, notably Orson Scott Card and Richard Paul Evans, have achieved national fame for their writing, but not for works that could be considered specifically Mormon. Within the LDS Church, however, there is a thriving market for fiction that portrays Mormon themes and upholds Mormon values. Current best sellers include a series of historical novels depicting the history of the church, a fantasy series based on time travel to scriptural settings, and a series of novels following young Mormons through their experiences in World War II. Mormon romance novels are perennial favorites as well. These books are published mostly by Utah-based Mormon presses such as Deseret Book, Bookcraft, and Covenant, which also produce a variety of literature and media resources for LDS families.

Even among Mormons, almost no one knows anything about how the tradition of Mormon fiction began. A few old timers know of a novel called *Added Upon*, which was the first Mormon bestseller, but when people at church have asked me about my thesis, they have been surprised and curious when I have told them I am studying nineteenth-century Mormon fiction. “I didn’t know there was such a thing,” is the usual response.

Well, there is. And it is fascinating. For those of us whose heritage is fully Mormon, it is a glimpse into our family history. But this body of fiction—known as “home literature”—also provides rich insights for historians and literary critics alike as it takes us inside a culture in transition and points up the uses to which fiction can be put in a culture’s efforts to define itself.
In addressing this subject, I am aware that I am taking the non-Mormon reader into territory that is likely unfamiliar. Mormonism is more than a religious denomination. It is a lifestyle, a culture, an identity, complete with a unique language and social structure that makes it necessary for students of Mormonism to acquire a new vocabulary and conceptual framework. Imparting that framework cannot be the focus of this study, but for those who want to learn more about Mormonism, many good resources are available. Probably the best one-volume history of the church for a general audience is Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton’s *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1979). Jan Shipps’s *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) is especially helpful on the Mormon worldview.

In this study, I have tried to make the necessary explanations as unobtrusive as possible, providing explanation and vocabulary extensively up front and then assuming the reader has acquired that knowledge in subsequent discussions. Accordingly, a few basic terms should be addressed here. First is the name of the church. The common appellation of “Mormon” comes from the book of scripture produced by the church’s founding prophet, Joseph Smith, in 1830. Its official name, however, is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often shortened to LDS, and Mormons frequently refer to themselves as “Saints,” though obviously not in the Catholic sense.

The church’s lay priesthood functions in a highly organized hierarchy, with leadership at the local level provided by members of the congregation, most notably the bishop, who acts as pastor to his “ward,” as Mormons term their congregations. Though the priesthood is conferred only on men, the church’s auxiliary organizations for women...
and children—the Relief Society, the Primary, and the Young Women—are run almost exclusively by women, giving them important leadership positions within the church. There is no paid clergy, but the general leadership of the church (also known as General Authorities), headquartered in Salt Lake City and in regional offices throughout the world, is provided by men who work full time in church service, overseeing the many ecclesiastical and temporal concerns of this now-worldwide organization. At this level, the church is governed by the First Presidency, made up of the church president and his two counselors, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, all of whom are sustained by Mormons as "prophets, seers, and revelators."

This appellation for their leaders is not a symbolic title. Mormonism was founded upon the claim of new and continuing revelation, and Mormons believe that their leaders do receive inspiration, direction, and, when necessary, direct communication from God on matters of import to the church and its members. The name of the church, Latter-day Saints, reflects this belief that their religion is a restoration of the original doctrines, ordinances and organization of Christianity as established by Christ himself in ancient times.

This belief underlies Mormon claims to be the only true church on the earth—that is, the only church whose priesthood authority is recognized by God. It is this bold claim, along with its resulting sense of exclusiveness, that has created tensions between Mormons and the rest of society for much of the church’s history, resulting in the mid-1800s in mob violence and severe persecution that forced the Saints to abandon several
homes before finally fleeing to the deserts of the Great Basin to establish their society in relative isolation.

The doctrine of continuing revelation operates for Mormons on a personal as well as an institutional level. All Mormons, whether born and raised in the church or taught and baptized later in life by missionaries, are told that they are entitled to receive a personal witness from the Holy Ghost that the church is true. This witness is called a testimony, and it is perceived by Mormons as the foundation of their personal commitment to their religion. Teaching its members to understand and gain this testimony is the primary goal of all the organizations of the church.

Mormonism is a practical religion that extends to virtually every aspect of life. One of Joseph Smith’s revelations taught that “all things are spiritual” to God and that all commandments, even those that seem specifically temporal, are spiritual in nature (see 29:32 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a compilation of Joseph Smith’s revelations that is considered scripture by Mormons). Thus, Mormons consider such diverse activities as work, recreation, financial management, food storage, and community involvement to be part of their religion.

This view of the inseparability of the spiritual and the temporal was the basis in the nineteenth-century for the Mormons’ attempts to build an ideal society—Zion, the kingdom of God on earth—that would pave the way for the return of Christ and the ushering in of His Millennial reign. This led to cooperative efforts in economics, politics, and culture that carried over Mormons’ doctrinal peculiarity into the social realm, setting them apart from the rest of society as a quasi-ethnic group, a distinct and unique people.

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They took pride in the sense of peculiarity their beliefs gave them, but by the late
ten nineteenth century that peculiarity had become increasingly embattled. Most notably,
Mormons’ practice of polygamy during this time, which they believed was a
commandment from God, placed them in fundamental opposition to the social norms of
American culture and, inevitably, in opposition to the American government when it
legislated those norms through anti-polygamy laws. Mormons held on as long as they
could, but when the government succeeded in confiscating the church’s property,
disenfranchising Mormon voters, and sending the church’s leaders to jail or into hiding,
something had to give in order to preserve the church as an institution.

In 1890 that something was polygamy, which was officially discontinued by
church president Wilford Woodruff in a directive known as the Manifesto. The last
decade of the nineteenth century thus became a time of profound shifts and realignments
in Mormondom on the individual, local, and general levels as families were literally torn
apart by the discontinuance of polygamy and as Mormons began to align themselves
politically, economically, and culturally with the larger mainstream of American society.

Mormon fiction sprang up during this period of transition after decades of official
disapproval of novels, directed primarily at the young people who were perceived to be
wrongly influenced by reading them. Called “home literature” by the Mormons who
created and promoted it, this fiction took the form of short stories and serialized novels
that appeared in the periodicals published for the youth of the church. These texts reveal
the tensions in Mormon society during this troubled time, both directly and indirectly, as
Mormons grappled with re-drawing the boundaries of their collective identity. In the
process, they defined the role of fiction within the Mormon community and popularized views of marriage that remain forceful in Mormon thought.

This study does not attempt to pass judgment on either the formal or ideological success of home literature. My interest springs from a sense of how powerful the reading experience has been in my own life, and how much power that experience held for my ancestors in the days before electronic media displaced it as a primary source of entertainment. At a time when everything else in their world was changing, Mormons turned to fiction—to stories—to confront the competing demands of their religious and their secular culture. What they found in those stories today seems quaint and unsatisfying, even to Mormons, but their original audiences took them seriously and found in them solutions to their collective problems. We could do worse than to ask why.
Introduction: Recontextualizing Home Literature

"Leonard Fox, if you don’t stop reading them trashy novels, day after day and day after day you’ll go clean crazy."

Thus the first issue of the Young Woman’s Journal\(^1\) opens with "Whatsoever a Man Soweth," a story that reveals the concerns of late nineteenth-century Mormons over their official acceptance of fiction. Leonard, of course, doesn’t heed his mother’s warning, and by the end of the story he is a lost and broken man. "He never dares read a story or novel,'' his sister reports. "Not even the very best. He warns every young person he meets never to read novels." She then voices the real moral of the story: "Still I think he carries his warning to an excess. Young folks like something bright and gay to read. And novels are as great an educator as the theater. I only wish we had novels or stories written by our own people, with proper lessons taught therein’’ (50). The reader, no doubt, is intended to notice that this message is part of just such a story.

By October of 1889 when editor Susa Young Gates—already a well-known writer and daughter of church president Brigham Young—wrote this story for her fledgling magazine, fiction was gaining a firm foothold in Mormon culture after decades of official opposition. Earlier in the 1880s the other publications for Mormon youth had begun to allow small quantities of fiction in their pages, usually prefaced with a disclaimer that the stories were “founded in fact,” or “based on truth.” Often these stories were published right alongside editorials condemning novel reading. Because of its

\(^1\) This magazine and the other nineteenth-century periodicals for Mormon youth—the Contributor and the Juvenile Instructor—will be discussed in Chapter One.
Relatively late appearance on the scene, Gates’ *Journal* never had to justify including
fiction, and from the beginning its Literary Department featured serialized stories and
fictional sketches abundantly, many from the pen of Gates herself. During the early years
of this home literature movement, Susa Young Gates dominated the Mormon fiction
scene, writing serialized novels for all the periodicals (often at the same time), as well as
countless shorter stories and sketches—not to mention her monthly editorials and essays.
She seems to have taken the call to produce “novels or stories written by our own people,
with proper lessons taught therein” as a personal mission.

The term “home literature” was widely used by Gates and her contemporaries to
denote the efforts both fictional and non-fictional of Mormon writers to supply reading
material for other Mormons that would be uplifting and wholesome. Though Orson F.
Whitney, then a popular church leader and poet, did not originate the term, he solidified
its use in his 1888 sermon calling for the development of home literature as a means of
“spreading the gospel” and “building up Zion.” Twentieth-century scholars have used the
term “home literature” specifically to designate the fiction that dominated this movement
and the tradition of faith-promoting novels and stories that still thrives in Mormon
culture.

Probably not coincidentally the outpouring of home literature began at about the
same time as Whitney’s sermon. By 1890 the trickle of fictional pieces in the magazines
had turned into a virtual flood, and the self-conscious justifications for their appearance
were long gone. In 1895 several of Josephine Spencer’s stories were collected and
published in book form as *The Senator from Utah, and Other Tales of the Wasatch,* and
in 1898 Nephi Anderson’s phenomenally popular novel *Added Upon* appeared. Until this time home literature stories had appeared only in the periodicals. It is difficult to find circulation figures for these magazines, but their position as official organs for the church youth organizations undoubtedly gave them widespread readership and influence in the community.

Judging by its quantity and by contemporary statements, this home literature was well-received by its target audience. “What can be more interesting than the pretty romances we read in our ‘YOUNG WOMAN’S JOURNAL’ and the ‘Juvenile Instructor,’” opined “Millie” in 1897 (344). The stories of young Mormons marrying within the faith and overcoming challenges to their religion seem to have resonated deeply within the Mormondom of the 1890s—a society that was facing major adjustments and realignments as it abandoned the practice of polygamy and moved towards statehood. I believe it is no coincidence that the home literature movement took off at this time when Mormons were accepting the need to assimilate into mainstream American society after decades of separatist practices and rhetoric. This shift towards accommodation of the “outside” world challenged the self-image of Mormons as “peculiar” and “separate,” and a constant theme in sermons, editorials, and fiction of the time is the need to retain their insular identity as a community.

Very few studies of home literature have been attempted to date, and they are all aging rapidly. Two or three master’s theses were done at BYU and the University of Utah between 1930-1950, paving the way for a brief flicker of interest during the 1970s and early 80s in studies written primarily by BYU professors and published in sources
aimed at a scholarly Mormon audience. These studies focused mainly on developments in Mormon literature since 1930, with a cursory look at the earlier texts as background. These earlier studies are worth reviewing because they reveal the critical assumptions of their writers and provide a point of departure for this study.

Edward Geary’s “Poetics of Provincialism: Mormon Regional Fiction” and Eugene England’s “The Dawning of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 years” are two of the best known. Geary’s article traces the beginnings of “modern” Mormon literature in the work of Maurine Whipple, Virginia Sorenson, and other Mormon novelists of the 1940s, referring to the earlier home literature for contrast to more fully appreciate the achievement of these first “serious” Mormon writers. Home literature “has not had the impact on the world” its founders hoped for, Geary says, because “good fiction is seldom written to ideological specifications.” Home literature “is not a powerful literature artistically, nor is it pure,” he asserts. “In most cases its distinctive Mormon characteristics are only skin deep, masking an underlying vision which is as foreign to the gospel as it is to real life.” Geary concludes this part of his discussion with a descriptive definition: “The early home literature borrowed the techniques of popular sentimental fiction and the values of the genteel tradition with a superficial adaptation to Mormon themes” (15). Eugene England’s essay provides a helpful division of Mormon literary development into three 50-year periods, with home literature forming the middle period of 1880-1930. However, England calls it a “barren period” with “hardly anything of lasting value published” (141). Neither Geary nor England discusses specific works or authors.
Another article on the subject, Matthew Durrant and Neal E. Lambert’s humorous review of the Mormon anti-fiction campaign, does look briefly at specific home literature texts, but its judgment is essentially the same. The authors use terms such as “failure” and “imitative” to describe the stories and assert that early Mormon authors “were unable to rise even close to the artistic level of what was being written in the rest of the United States” (339).

Only Richard Cracroft has thus far published detailed analysis of specific home literature authors and texts—and these studies have been heavily weighted in favor of a patriarchal lineage, tracing home literature’s origins from Orson F. Whitney through B.H. Roberts to Nephi Anderson, virtually ignoring the dominance of Susa Young Gates, Josephine Spencer, and the numerous female contributors to the Young Woman’s Journal and the other periodicals in the 1890s. Furthermore, Cracroft’s surveys are marked by the same concern for artistic purity that informs the other studies. For example, in the introduction to the fiction section of their groundbreaking Mormon literature anthology, A Believing People, Cracroft and Neal Lambert describe home literature as “long on plot and short on artistry and character development,” and “amusing to the few modern readers who indulge” (257).

Such evaluations of home literature stem from its association with the popular literature of the nineteenth century. Within the critical tradition these scholars represent, “popular,” “sentimental,” and “genteel” are loaded terms, indicative of the poor quality traditionally linked to the writing of nineteenth-century women, whose novels, not
incidentally, vastly outsold those of the supposedly more “artistically accomplished” men whom this tradition has held up as the “true” literary masters of the time.

The fundamental problem with these judgments is that they divorce home literature from its cultural and historical context, holding it up to a standard of judgment that simply did not exist for its original audience. Such a decontextualization of home literature also ignores the wide and enthusiastic reception it received from readers at all levels of Mormon society. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with identifying standards of literary excellence and using them to judge a text, this process is inherently controlled by prevailing notions of what makes literature “good” and ultimately produces judgments that reveal as much or more about the judges as about the texts in question.

Over the past twenty years, feminist scholars have pointed out this fact and have argued for alternative ways of reading literary texts—especially popular and female texts such as home literature, which have been dismissed by prevailing literary standards. The result has been the opening of new critical methods and the development of nineteenth-century women’s writing and popular literature in general as legitimate subjects for academic study.

Jane Tompkins’ Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860 remains an essential work in this effort, and it is her theory of cultural work that provides the best alternative approach to home literature. Instead of dismissing such novels as entertainment or holding them to a supposedly universal standard of literary achievement, Tompkins writes, “I see them as doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historic situation. . . .” She continues:
I see their plots and characters as providing society with a means of thinking about itself, defining certain aspects of a social reality which the authors and their readers shared, dramatizing its conflicts, and recommending solutions. It is the notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them, that I wish to substitute finally for the critical perspective that sees them as attempts to achieve a timeless, universal ideal of truth and formal coherence. (200)

Instead of dismissing home literature as inferior art, then, we should begin from the assumption that it was popular with its original audience for a reason and then ask why, or, as Tompkins suggests, how it achieves that influence.

This approach represents a radical recontextualization of literature, asserting that the power of a popular text “depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical and familiar form.” Popular texts achieve their influence through their “embrace of what is most widely shared” (xvi).

Therefore, if we are to understand a text’s power for its audience, we need to “recreate, as sympathetically as possible, the context from which [it] sprang and the specific problems to which [it was] addressed.” Tompkins calls this a “new kind of historical criticism” that becomes the “only way of accounting for the enormous impact of works whose force escapes the modern reader unless he or she makes the effort to recapture the world view they sprang from and which they helped to shape” (xiii).
Adopting Tompkins’ methods, I have tried to reconstruct the cultural discourse that surrounded and gave rise to home literature. This cultural discourse includes the theological and cultural concerns of the Mormon community as directed at the young people, and it also includes the broader context of popular American fiction, which Gates shows herself to be thoroughly aware of.

Pursuing this connection between Mormon fiction and popular literature, we find that both rely heavily on stereotype in order to create characters, invent plots, and describe settings. Gates’s characters rarely surprise us. From the first moment they appear on the scene, we recognize them by the categories they represent—we know who is good, who is bad, who will change and who will not. This reliance on stereotype calls forth strong disapproval from those whose training has conditioned them to expect complexity and psychological realism in character portrayal. But, as Tompkins insists, the use of stereotype was essential to the aims of this literature. Stereotype, “rather than constituting a defect in these novels, was what allowed them to operate as instruments of cultural self-definition.” This is because “stereotypes are the instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic, social, political, and religious categories; they convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form.” She continues:

As the telegraphic expression of complex clusters of value, stereotyped characters are essential to popularly successful narrative. . . . [These characters] operate as a cultural shorthand, and because of their multilayered representative function are the carriers of strong emotional
associations. Their familiarity and typicality, rather than making them bankrupt or stale, are the basis of their effectiveness as integers in a social equation (xvi).

In this vein, it is important to remember, that Gates’s stories were not about their characters—they were about the readers and the moral lessons those readers needed to incorporate into their own lives. The characters simply serve as human agents to move the plot forward, acting out the advice to young Mormons in a way that editorials and sermons could not, representing the ideals of human behavior the stories were intended to inculcate. Stereotype becomes a way of meeting both the ideological and formal demands of the genre.

My readings of home literature texts emphasize how these competing demands, in effect, divide the narrative against itself. This, of course, is the dilemma of all didactic fiction. Davidson makes this observation of an early seduction novel in terms that could apply equally to home literature:

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\text{Far more of the text is given over to the didactic than to the dramatic, especially in the first sections. The moralists have the . . . largest claim on the reader’s time and attention, while the lovers have the story. Differently put, the text’s primary residence is with one discourse [fictional] while its primary concern is with the other [didactic]. (99-100)}
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At first this observation may seem to support Geary’s assertion that “good fiction is seldom written to ideological specifications.” But I do not bring up this aspect of home literature in order to pass aesthetic judgment on it. In fact, I believe that it is in these very
contradictions that home literature most powerfully expresses the state of Mormon culture during this period. Davidson’s statement above could be paraphrased to apply to Mormon society in general: their primary loyalty was to one discourse (their religion) while their situation demanded that they function within another discourse (mainstream American culture). Gates’s use of popular fictional conventions and her frequent emphasis on themes of gentility and respectability show that mainstream values had become ingrained in Mormon society, while her didactic denunciations of such values reveal deep ambiguity at this fact. In this situation, it is natural for people to turn to stories to help sort out and subdue the conflicts of shifting boundaries and changing identities. Home literature provides a fascinating glimpse of this process in motion.

Interestingly, most of the studies of home literature I have already quoted contain hints that a contextual approach to home literature is needed. Cracroft and Lambert concede that home literature stories “often afford interesting cultural insight into life in the Mormon West,” without then expanding on what those insights might be. Durrant and Lambert acknowledge even further that “laughing at this early Mormon fiction because it is not like Mark Twain or William Dean Howells . . . does not shed much understanding on Mormon literary history” (339). They don’t suggest what might shed such light, however, and their discussion of early Mormon literature is so humorous that we can’t help laughing at it. But such responses are not very helpful in actually understanding the texts themselves.
Finally, Eugene England, immediately after describing home literature as "devoid of lasting value," shifts gears and begins raising some of the questions this study addresses:

But there are important literary as well as historical questions to be answered by a study of that period, questions about the nature of the Church after . . . the Manifesto of [1890] (in the view of many a capitulation to the government and secular American society), and the period of accommodation to American styles and values that followed statehood in 1896. Historians and literary critics need to work together to understand the relations between the Church and culture in this difficult period. (141)

This study represents something of a first step towards answering England's call.

I am not going to claim for home literature a position of underappreciated art or significant influence on a national scale, but I do think it provides a fascinating snapshot of Mormon culture that will provide rich resources for cultural and literary historians alike. From the perspective of nineteenth-century women's fiction, home literature represents unexplored territory that gives voice to women who were themselves objects of ridicule and even paranoia in their own time, and who showed up as stock characters in much popular fiction of the day. This study also shows how fiction can function within a community to police its boundaries and confront its deepest fears. Despite its rapid descent into obscurity, the earliest home literature's most important cultural work may have been self-definition—creating a space for itself in Mormon culture and defining the
boundaries of orthodox literary artistry within that culture. Boundaries that remain virtually intact 100 years later.

This study looks at three serialized novels by Susa Young Gates that appeared in the Mormon youth periodicals between 1893-1896. I have focused on Gates because of her dominant role in the development of home literature during this period, and because her prominence in the community made her a visible voice of authority. I have chosen these stories because they represent the various modes home literature employed to perform its cultural work. In Chapter One I draw on contemporary statements and articles in the youth periodicals to show how the tensions of assimilation and identity were translated into Mormons’ cultural discourse. Gates’s novel “Donald’s Boy” then provides a case study of how home literature extends and enacts that discourse, emphasizing practices that create the boundaries of Mormon identity.

In Chapter Two, I examine some points of intersection for home literature and mainstream popular fiction. Gates herself embodies these intersections. Since she was both a voracious reader and a voice of communal authority. “Seven Times” further illustrates these connections, as it turns the conventional story of a woman’s self-development into a Mormon conversion narrative, directly employing devices from popular fiction.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the cultural work performed by Gates’s most ambitious novel, “John Stevens’ Courtship,” which returns to the period of Mormon isolation in frontier Utah to deliver a sensational warning about the dangers of intermarriage with “outsiders.” Gates’s story emphasizes the ideal of a “one and only”
foreordained mate that each young Mormon must find through obedience to the gospel. This concept becomes an important reworking of the Mormon concept of marriage in post-polygamy Mormondom.

It has always been clear that home literature stories are deeply enmeshed in their cultural setting. They assume a very narrow audience, and they assume that audience possesses a particular set of interpretive skills and assumptions. Using stereotypes, adopting conventions from popular stories, rehearsing and enacting the constant stream of authoritative counsel directed at the youth—these strategies enable home literature to function as a means for Mormon society to think about itself, and for individual Mormon readers to think about where they fit into that society. Recontextualizing these stories shows that they were much more than failed attempts at literary artistry.
Chapter One: Pressures and Responses

Fiction and Anti-Fiction

On June 3, 1888, Orson F. Whitney, popular bishop of the Salt Lake Eighteenth Ward, addressed the annual conference of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. His sermon, entitled “Home Literature,” has come to be seen as a milestone in the development of Mormon fiction.

Whitney proclaims that it is the destiny of the rising generations to produce “Miltons and Shakespeares of our own” who will, in turn, produce “a literature of power and purity,” destined to become a “mighty force for spreading the gospel.” He also outlines his criteria for this home literature: “Like all else with which we have to do, [it] must be made subservient to the building up of Zion,” and it must be original, with the Holy Ghost as its “genius” (131-32). Whitney quotes Carlyle that “Men of letters are a perpetual priesthood” and then concludes with a stirring call to action:

‘Awake, awake! Put on thy strength, O Zion! Put on thy beautiful garments’—the garments of wisdom and learning, that it may no longer be said of thee, with even a semblance of truth, or a shadow of reason, that thou art not what we say thou art, and all that the Lord thy God has said thou shalt be. . . . The star of truth has risen; the Sun of Righteousness will come; the night of error is past, and above the eastern hilltops, even now, are breaking the golden splendors of the dawn. (133)^

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^Here and elsewhere, I have retained all original spelling and punctuation in nineteenth-century sources. This seemed preferable to inserting [sic] in the many places it would be appropriate.
Since the term “home literature” has come to be equated with Mormon fiction, it is ironic that Whitney does not specifically encourage young Mormons to write fiction. In fact, he offers no definition at all of what he means by “literature.” However, it is more significant that he does not *condemn* fiction outright, given the longstanding official disapproval of novel reading and fiction in general that had been aimed at this same audience for more than two decades.

Perhaps the most visible force in this anti-fiction campaign, by virtue of his position as a General Authority and editor of the *Juvenile Instructor*, was George Q. Cannon. Editorials against fiction had appeared regularly in his magazine since its beginning in 1866, with the warnings running along three or four major lines, summarized in an 1881 editorial: “As you value your children’s future, banish novels from your habitations. Discourage the reading of fiction. It poisons the mind; it destroys the memory; it wastes valuable time; it warps the imagination; it conveys wrong impressions; it unfits the person indulging in it for the stern and important duties of life” (90).

Opposition to fiction was hardly new and certainly not limited to Mormons. Many of Cannon’s arguments parallel, almost verbatim, the sentiments of no less a figure than Thomas Jefferson, as expressed in an 1818 letter:

> When this poison [i.e. the novel] infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. Reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. Nothing can engage attention unless dressed in all the figments of fancy, and nothing so bedecked comes amiss. The
result is bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life. (Qtd. in Jorgenson 78)

This censure of fiction was common throughout the nineteenth century. For example, the Cincinnati-based Methodist Ladies’ Repository consistently refused to publish fiction and, as Nina Baym shows, it denounced the love of novels in terms of original sin:

‘Our mental constitution is originally and naturally diseased. It loves undue excitement.’ The measure of a novel’s pernicious effect was precisely the degree to which it afforded pleasure; that which was popular was necessarily pleasurable and necessarily evil. The habit of novel reading would go far not only ‘to destroy the taste for useful studies, but also to destroy the power of severe mental application.’

Furthermore, in terms that echo Cannon’s above, “novels made readers, especially young women readers, unfit ‘for the arduous duties and stern realities of life’ and also had a tendency ‘to weaken the barriers of virtue’ by ‘introducing impure scenes and ideas into pure minds’” (32-33).

Thus, Mormon anti-fiction sentiments employed an already established and widely available discourse. Cathy Davidson, in her study of the rise of the novel in post-revolutionary America, notes that this widespread opposition to fiction was based on an “implicit suspicion of the undisciplined imagination, a conviction that literature must serve clear social needs, and a pervasive assumption that social need and social order
were one and the same” (49). Such sentiments are easily recognized as common among early Mormons.

Besides the frequent editorials, Cannon’s *Juvenile Instructor* and later the *Contributor* printed articles condemning fiction on philosophical grounds or offering sensational stories about the harmful effects of novel reading. Also common for a time were “resolutions to retrench,” all by or about young women, many mentioning novel reading as a habit they will give up.

There is no clear way, 100 years later, to assess the attitudes of “average” Mormons toward fiction. The frequent editorials against novels suggest that they were widely available and that their popularity raged unabated. A statement by Susa Young Gates, who was growing up in the 1860s and 1870s when the anti-fiction sentiments seem to have represented the official line, is telling. “I have read so many novels,” she admits, and “I have been just as much benefitted as I have been harmed by them” (“Novel Reading” 496). Gates specifically mentions “Walter Scott, Miss Muloch, Charles Kingsley, George Eliot, Thackeray, and Louisa M. Alcott.” And though she professes that she is “not altogether sure” of whether people should read “fairy stories,” she concludes, “I never found myself injured by the perusal of the Arabian Nights. I read them thirteen times when I was thirteen years old. . . . Indeed, I believe that much of the imagination and invention of my mind, such as it is, was engendered by the beautiful and quaint stories” (498). If a daughter of Brigham Young (himself no friend to novels) found access to such books, no doubt others did as well.
At any rate, the campaign against fiction was a losing battle from the beginning, as its leaders occasionally acknowledged, and by the early 1880s the attacks on "trashy" novels were complemented with calls for Mormons to produce their own literature:

[T]here is a great need of more books for our children—books that will attract and at the same time instruct them. The multiplying of such works in our midst will do ten times more to counteract the evils of outside literature than all our public denouncing of such evils will... If we do not wish our children to read the pernicious, trashy stuff that is imported from abroad, let us furnish them something better at home. (Cannon, 1882, 56)

This home literature, as they called it from the first, was to be based in real life, to contain elevating morals and messages, and to be free from the impurities of the world.

It was not until the end of the 1880s, however, that the call for home literature explicitly included approval for LDS fiction. Writing under the pen name "Horatio," B.H. Roberts, another General Authority, observed in 1889, "[I]t is becoming generally recognized that the medium of fiction is the most effectual means of attracting the attention of the general public and instructing them" (135). He continued:

This class of fiction, indeed, is working its way into our own literature; and stories illustrating the evils overtaking young women, who marry those not of our faith, have appeared... Nor do I think any one reading those stories can doubt their effectiveness; and I am of the opinion that this style of teaching can be employed successfully in other directions. (136)
As Roberts hints, fictional and semi-fictional stories had already been appearing in the *Juvenile Instructor* and the *Contributor* for a few years. Conducting a page count of the rise of fiction from 1880 to 1890, Durrant and Lambert found that by 1884, “4 percent of the Contributor and 12 percent of the Instructor were dedicated to fictional prose.” By 1890, those numbers had risen to 19 percent and 24 percent respectively (331).²

It would not be entirely accurate to credit the statements of Roberts and Whitney with directly “causing” the increased production of Mormon fiction that closely followed them. More likely, they express a general view that had taken hold among Mormon leaders and that had already led to the loosening of previous editorial policies against printing fiction. Still, the outpouring of home literature in the 1890s suggests that Mormons were hungry for this kind of literary outlet.

The shift from condemning to endorsing fiction represents an acknowledgment of fiction’s immense power and a determination by community authority to turn that power to its own uses. The basis of the Mormon objection to fiction was a fear that its power to shape individual identity would prove disruptive to the community. Again, Mormon leaders’ concerns paralleled those of American moralists, as explained by Davidson:

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²In the case of the *Juvenile Instructor*, these numbers may be somewhat misleading. Aimed at younger children, its stories were much simpler and more directly didactic than those that appeared in the MIA publications, with very little attempt at characterization or even plot. Besides increasing in quantity, these stories exhibited more pronounced attempts at “literary” achievement as the home literature movement gained ground. Also, Durrant and Lambert make no reference to the *Young Woman’s Journal* in their study. This is not totally irresponsible, since fiction was already established by the time it began publication, but it seems incomplete to discuss the rise of fiction in Mormondom without even mentioning it.
Had the novel not been seen as a covert or even overt critique of the existing social order, there would have been no need to defend so rigorously what had not been called into question nor to strive to persuade potential novel readers of the harm that they would do to themselves should they foolishly indulge their appetite for fiction.

To the modern reader, the whole contretemps over fiction well may seem a tempest in a teapot, but it is important to remember that the early reviewers, by attacking fiction, were defending a vision of society which they viewed ... as well ordered and manifestly worthy of defense. (40-41)

In this case, fiction was part of a challenge to the social order that Mormons felt from all directions. Novels ostensibly represented a threat from the outside, but when young Mormons read those novels and imbibed their ideas, the threat became an internal one as well. As Baym explains, “In gratifying the self, novels foster self-love and a tendency to self-assertion that make the mind ungovernable and thus jeopardize the agencies of social and psychological control” (Novels 39). Mormons were not alone in perceiving women and young people as most susceptible to this threat. Baym continues: “That most readers of novels (and virtually all those who read novels only) were thought to be women and youth made particularly ominous the implications of a novel reading based on self-gratification as opposed to social feelings” (Novels 39).

Fundamentally, leaders feared that young Mormons would identify with the wrong kinds of people and situations, ultimately encouraging them to make choices on an
individualistic rather than a community-centered basis. George Reynolds’ editorial on “The Influence of Outside Literature” is one of the strongest expressions of this fear:

Take, as an example, the young lady whose mind is crowded with thoughts and fancies of the impossible and unnatural heroes and heroines of romance, and whose matrimonial aspirations are turned in the direction of some modern counterpart of her beau ideal of chivalry. then how insignificant, how wearisome, how disgusting become the constantly recurring duties of her every day life as a wife and a mother; whilst plural marriage she personally avoids as utterly incompatible with the notions she has formed of life in its most desirable forms. . . . (358-9)

These fears were not wholly unfounded. Cathy Davidson explains this power of reading, drawing on the theories of Bakhtin.

‘In a novel,’ this critic argues, ‘the individual acquires the ideological and linguistic initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image (there is a new and higher type of individualization of the image).’ Within the novel, ‘there always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness’ —a surplus that creates new needs, different desires, and that thus controverts the status quo. (44)

For young Mormons, the status quo was the expectation of their elders that they would remain within the fold of their “peculiar” society, marry into its patriarchal order (one of their names for polygamy), and willingly submit to the persecution of the world for their faith. As they had grown up increasingly aware of the rest of the world.
however, this option came to look less desirable, and Church leaders believed that the reading experience was a powerful way of encouraging their discontent. Davidson concludes that “the very temporality of the novel . . . similarly aggravates desire in a way that extends far beyond the novel to compromise even the good work of those other forms” (44). In other words, leaders feared it might make young Mormons less willing to make sacrifices in this life on the hope that they would be rewarded in the Millennium.

With this background for the development of Mormon fiction, it is important to emphasize that home literature was not a grass-roots movement. The youth of Zion may have been reading fiction in overwhelming numbers at any given time during Utah’s territorial period, but *Mormon* fiction did not develop until official channels had made room—and delineated boundaries—for it. Leaders recognized that they would not be able to eradicate fiction from their midst; the next best solution was to attempt to tame it. Thus, the call for home literature represents a co-optation of a threatening discourse by the dominant discourse. This brings us back to Tompkins’ theory of cultural work and turns our attention to the wider context of Mormon society at this time.

**A Culture in Transition**

The experience of the Latter-day Saints from the time they reached the Salt Lake Valley in 1847 until Utah was admitted to the Union in 1896 was one of almost constant push and pull between Mormons and the rest of American society. They had welcomed the isolation of Utah as a respite from persecution and an opportunity to build the Kingdom of God on Earth, a kingdom that would encompass all aspects of life. “If the
Latter-day Saints can associate together, free from the contaminating influences that are in the world, it is a blessing and a great privilege,” church president Brigham Young taught (Widtsoe, *Discourses* 237). Phrases such as “separating from the world” and “fleeing Babylon” were common in their discourse, and even after the Salt Lake Valley developed a substantial non-Mormon population, Mormon exclusiveness was legendary. “We did not ask the gentiles to come here and set up shop,” Young sermonized. “We do not ask them to give us their goods, neither do we ask them to take them away. They are at perfect liberty to open their stores and exhibit their goods for sale, and we have the privilege of letting them alone; and that is not all, I mean that we shall do so” (*Journal of Discourses* 12: October 8, 1868, 285. Hereafter cited as JD.).

Their vision was of a literal Kingdom of God on earth, encompassing all aspects of life. George Reynolds expressed this vision succinctly:

> [T]he civilization which we are seeking to establish is widely different, and often opposed to the civilization of the nineteenth century by which we are the most closely surrounded and intimately connected. . . . Their’s is Babylon the Great. ours is the Kingdom of God. (357)

But the isolation didn’t last long. Just two years after the Mormons’ arrival, Salt Lake City found itself a stopping place for forty-niners rushing to the California gold fields, and various events brought a fairly steady stream of “outsiders” into Mormondom.

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3. “Gentile” was the Mormon term for all non-Mormons, part of the Saints’ self-definition as the Lord’s “covenant” people. Hence, the joke went, only in Utah could a Jew be called a gentile.
until, in 1869, the completion of the transcontinental railroad permanently ended what was left of their isolation.

Time and again the Saints’ practice failed to live up to their preaching on these matters. “Have we separated ourselves from the nations?” Brigham Young asked his people in 1874. “Yes. And what else have we done? . . . Have we not brought Babylon with us? Are we not promoting Babylon in our midst? . . . [T]here is not a Latter-day Saint but what feels that we have too much of Babylon in our midst” (*JD* 17: April 18, 1874, 39).

The inroads of gentile influences were met by Mormon leaders with stern efforts to retain the boundaries of their community. As Mormon historian Davis Bitton explains it, Mormons’ experience of constant persecution and challenge from the rest of society “froze the Saints into a strong suspicion of ‘outsiders.’ It was in-group versus out-group, we versus they. Outsiders were associated with threats to the Mormon values. . . . [T]heir fears were real and were often perfectly justified. But the result was a ‘garrison mentality’ that could also include self-righteousness and parochialism” (23).

Given the demographics of Utah at this time, it was no coincidence that these fears focused intensely on the young people of Zion. Bitton reports that by the 1880s something like 54 percent of Utah’s population was teenage or younger—44 percent under the age of fourteen (55). These young people represented the second and third generations of Utah Mormons, and leaders worried that they lacked the powerful conversion experiences of their parents. They had not walked across the plains in exile with the early pioneers or experienced firsthand the hardships of creating new settlements...
from scratch on the hostile frontier. They had not known founding prophet Joseph Smith or most of the other early church leaders personally. And worldly influences, including novels, had always been readily available to them.

In typical fashion, the Mormons created organizations to combat these fears. In 1869, the same year the railroad was completed, Brigham Young gathered together several of his daughters, including thirteen year-old Susa, and organized them into a Retrenchment Society, with the charge to set an example in cutting back on frivolous fashions, manners, and activities. Retrenchment Societies were soon organized throughout the Territory, and in 1877 this organization was renamed the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA), with a parallel Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) organized in 1875. The purpose of these groups, as their names suggest, was to provide opportunities for personal and cultural development under the “safe” auspices of the church, and they sponsored an impressive array of activities, including plays, readings, socials, debates, lectures, and artistic displays.

In 1866 the Sunday School organization had begun publishing the *Juvenile Instructor* for Mormon children and their leaders. Edited by George Q. Cannon, an Apostle and later member of the First Presidency, it provided scriptural and doctrinal instruction as well as educational information on a wide range of secular matters. In 1879 a magazine was begun as the official organ of the MIAs. Entitled the *Contributor*, it published articles written by leaders and lay members alike, covering the spectrum of theological, social, political, intellectual, and domestic concerns of the times. Its editor Junius F. Wells was a member of the General Board of the YMMIA, and from the first its
implied audience was more male than female. In both of these magazines Mormon youth were admonished to shun the worldly influences all around them, including novels, and remain true to the gospel.

In 1889, Susa Young Gates’s *Young Woman’s Journal* joined the *Juvenile* and the *Contributor* as the official organ of the YLMIA. Gates was part of a younger generation of Mormons, and she had grown up in the days when Utah’s isolation was subsiding. Staunchly committed to the church, worried at the worldly influences available to the youth, Gates nevertheless recognized that Mormons had to find ways to be “in the world but not of the world,” as a popular Mormon saying went, and she worked extensively in the national suffrage movement at the same time she labored in the YLMIA.

Despite these efforts, by the 1890s when home literature took hold, it had become a commonplace that young Mormons were measurably less faithful than earlier generations had been. As Bitton summarizes, the perception of Mormon leaders in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was that “the young people were going to the dogs; they were growing up without testimonies or convictions of the truth of Mormonism; they were not living constructive, purposeful lives but were wasting their substance in riotous living” (63).

Such sentiments appear frequently in the youth magazines. One article in the *Contributor* opined, “The implicit confidence in God, which enabled the parents to perform deeds of valor and mighty works; which planted their feet in the desert and converted it into a garden of comfort and cheer . . . is seldom thought of by [today’s
youth], with their attention turned toward the goal of wealth and luxury without labor” (Anderson 465).

“Is Faith Decreasing?” asks the headline of another editorial. The answer is yes, as evidenced by the Saints’ reliance on doctors instead of the priesthood (388). From 1894-96 the *Contributor* featured a series of articles with titles such as “Pioneer Sketches” and “Frontier Life in Utah” describing the hardships the young people’s progenitors had endured to settle the now-pleasant land. Such articles were pointed reminders of their elders’ faithfulness.

One article sounds an almost hysterical note of fear for the youth. “Who has not been struck with the continuous necessity for rebuke and regulation among the youth of Israel?” asks H.W. Naisbitt in 1895. The more we tell them what not to do, the more determined they seem to be to do it anyway, he bemoans. After reciting a litany of disregarded counsel, he finally wonders, “Could poor human nature be redeemed by insisting upon wrong-doing?” (366-373). There is no indication in tone or substance that his suggestion was offered with tongue in cheek.

Fiction, of course, was one of the worldly influences Mormons feared. Reynolds’ article again expresses this well:

Literature of this class extols a state of society utterly inconsistent with that which will exist when the government of God holds sway upon the

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4Men holding the priesthood were called in to lay hands on the sick and pray for their recovery. This was called “administering to the sick” or, more generically, “giving a priesthood blessing.” Sometimes miraculous faith healings resulted; other times it was understood that God would honor such blessings according to His will for the sick person.
earth. Those of our people who are addicted to the habit of reading this class of works, and of filling their minds with their plots and episodes, insensibly to themselves imbibe a spirit and develop a state of feeling antagonistic to the teachings of divine revelation, which dwarfs their growth in heavenly principles and measurably unfit them for the realities of life. (358)

To some extent, this conflict between autonomy and authority is typical of what we now call the generation gap in any time or place. But in the case of home literature, the conflict is intensified because of the profound shifts taking place within Mormon society at the time.

In 1888 when Orson Whitney delivered his sermon, it had been not quite a year since LDS President John Taylor had died in hiding from federal officials seeking to arrest him for polygamy. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Mormon men of all ranks—and many plural wives, as well—had gone into hiding to escape prosecution, and many had gone to jail. The Edmunds Act of 1882 and the even more strident Edmunds Tucker Act of 1887 had brought the church to the brink of disaster, disenfranchising Mormon voters and confiscating church property. It was a time of intense pressure and gradual concessions by the Mormons, leading to the issuance in 1890 of the Woodruff Manifesto officially advising Mormons to stop practicing polygamy. This change of policy, in turn, led to the granting of Utah’s statehood in 1896, symbolic of her assimilation into mainstream American society.
Thus the 1890s marked the beginning of the end of Mormonism’s separatist vision. Thomas G. Alexander, in his study entitled *Mormonism in Transition*, explains it in terms of a “challenge to the paradigm under which they had operated at least since 1847.” This paradigm had required “the integration of religion, politics, society, and the economy into a single non-pluralistic community,” with polygamy the basis for family structure. When this paradigm proved unacceptable to Victorian America, “the Mormons began groping for a new paradigm that would save essential characteristics of their religious tradition, provide sufficient political stability to preserve the interests of the church, and allow them to live in peace with other Americans” (14).

During this time, as historian Jan Shipps interprets, “The special features that had served the LDS community as distinguishing marks were either being stripped away entirely or so transformed that they no longer functioned to keep the cultural context in which the Saints lived set clearly apart from the rest of the nation” (139). Mormon identity as a “chosen” people depended on boundaries that had become untenable:

The government had made it clear that institutionally established and maintained boundaries could not be tolerated in this nation, and this meant that the Latter-day Saints were faced with a serious internal problem. Somehow the responsibility for boundary maintenance had to be shifted from the corporate body to the individuals within that body, and that shift had to be legitimated in such a way that it would gain general acceptance.

(116)
These concerns are never far from the surface in Mormon leaders’ counsel to the youth during this period. A letter to President Wilford Woodruff from his counselor, Joseph F. Smith, read at a session of the YMMIA conference in 1891 and published in the *Contributor*, reflects the concern. Smith observes that the “trying circumstances” of the anti-polygamy campaign seem to have been needed in order to develop the Saints’ “faith, hope, and charity” and to “draw the dividing line to some extent between the truly faithful and those prone to evil.” Now that this persecution has largely subsided, however, the Saints may be in even greater danger. Smith warns:

> There is more danger to the work of God in the flatteries and fellowship of the ungodly than in their opposition. The true disciples of Christ have more fear from peaceful contact with, and the voluntary friendship and association of the world, than from its enmity and hatred. . . . Some who have stood the tests of persecution and grown stronger thereby, may not be able to withstand an era of peaceful contact with the powers of darkness.

(351)

In closing, Smith emphasizes his caution to “beware of the dangers which threaten [the youth] in the event of our passing, for a time, out of a period of active opposition by the world to the work of God, into an era of comparative quiescence and peace” because the “influences which have always been antagonistic to the cause, always will be . . .” (351-52).

For Mormons in this transitional time, there could yet be no compromise. The forces of evil were just as active as ever in opposing the work of God. And if the
realization of their utopian vision would have to wait until the Millennium. If the
boundaries between the Saints and the world had become less obvious, that was all the
more reason to emphasize their differences with the world and cling to their self-image as
a peculiar and special people.

One way of achieving this, Alexander explains, was a new emphasis on "certain
doctrines or practices that had been relatively dormant," such as the Mormon code of
health, known as the Word of Wisdom, genealogical and temple work (14), and the
"second best" law of tithing, as opposed to the previously attempted efforts at communal
economics (6). These practices were largely unobjectionable to the rest of society but
enabled Mormons to retain their sense of being set apart. Especially urgent, as we will
see, were the warnings of leaders for young people to marry within the faith. Virtually
every home literature story takes up these themes in some way.

"Donald's Boy": Ideology versus Form

Gates's novel "Donald's Boy," which ran through all twelve issues of volume six
of the Journal in 1894-95, provides a good example of how Mormons used their fiction
to extend and enact the cultural discourse about the importance of remaining separate
from the practices of the world. Elsewhere, Gates attempted a much more extensive
adaptation of conventional fictional devices and a more ambitiously artistic treatment of

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5Specifically, the Word of Wisdom required abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and "hot drinks,"
which were interpreted as tea and coffee. It also advised against excessive consumption of meat and
commended grains and herbs as the basis of the human diet. See D&C 89.
her narrative, but this novel is a straightforward message that dramatizes the advice of the older generation to the youth.

“Donald’s Boy” primarily addresses the issue of intermarriage, but along the way it also manages a strong emphasis on Word of Wisdom and warnings against other “corrupt” practices (notably gambling) that found their way into Mormon sermons of the time. At the same time, “Donald’s Boy” illustrates how home literature stories are divided against themselves, with the demands of the fictional discourse and those of the didactic discourse undermining each other.

The situation is this: Donald and Margery Jones have been living in Salt Lake City for ten years, during which time they have become quite wealthy—and quite lax in their religion. Gates hints that Donald still participates in church work, but he is preoccupied with his business concerns and spends much time away from home. Margery and the children have pretty much quit going to church at all, and, worse, they have allowed worldly practices to take over their lives. The oldest son, Stuart, has taken up smoking and drinking, running in a crowd of non-Mormon young men who spend their time drinking, gambling, and scoffing at Mormonism. The daughter, Phylis, is in love with Doremus Horton, a wealthy an attractive gentile. A younger teenage son, Asa, has also taken up smoking, card-playing, and horse racing, watched with admiration by ten year-old Bert, while even the youngest child, six year-old Moses, hints that he is interested in cigarettes. Into this situation comes Donald’s elderly Aunt Ellen for a winter visit from her home in a country town. Aunt Ellen becomes the moral mentor of the story, guiding Margery and the children as they experience several tragedies and trials that bring
them back into the church. Ellen’s point of view and her dialogue frequently serve as proxy for the narrator’s.

First little Moses takes suddenly ill with something that sounds like diphtheria. and Aunt Ellen’s insistence that the family rely on God instead of doctors—rewarded by Moses’ recovery—spurs Margery to regain her faith and begin attending church again. From here the emphasis shifts to Stuart and Phylis as each undergoes a conversion process. Phylis has been touched by the ordeal with Moses, and she has become close friends with Winnie Solden, a faithful Mormon girl who serves as her mentor in the same way Ellen has done for Margery. She is still engaged to Horton, however, and she holds onto the hope that his love for her is strong enough to induce him to change for her benefit.

Meanwhile, Donald’s disapproval of Stuart’s habits has led to a confrontation resulting in Stuart’s moving out of the family home into a lodging house operated by a non-Mormon woman. While not necessarily disreputable, this situation gives him the freedom to pursue wholeheartedly his worldly pleasures, as his guilt and anger at his father also drive him to drink too much. Stuart’s misery is compounded by his attraction to Phylis’s friend Winnie and his knowledge that he has no hope of winning her affection unless he changes his ways.

Phylis’s situation picks up on the cultural discourse of the time about choosing a husband and embodies a debate that appeared frequently in the Journal: Is it better to marry a bad Mormon or a good gentile? Margery voices the standard argument in the
opening installment of the story. speaking to Donald of his concern over Phylis's attraction to young Horton:

[O]f course both of us would rather see our children married to good young men in the Church. But, seriously, my dear, there are so few young men in our Church who are eligible. They are wilder, if anything, many of them, than are the outsiders. And wouldn't you rather see her marry a perfectly respectable man out of the Church, than to a bad man who had a nominal standing in the Church? (23)

Just eight months earlier in the February 1894 issue of the Journal Gates had considered this very argument in her editorial, the result of a question from the girls in her Sunday School class whether it was better to marry a Mormon man who did not live his religion or a non-Mormon man who was nevertheless honorable. Gates reports that she responded, "If a person was to ask me which I would rather have, the small-pox or the diphtheria, I should be almost at a loss what to answer. 'May the Lord preserve me from either,' I should be most apt to reply" (245). Her answer, finally, is that the girls have to trust God and follow their leaders’ counsel. "I have heard some of the highest and best authorities in this Church say that it would be far better for girls to die, or live single lives, than to wed either out of the Church or unworthily in the Church,” she reports, adding, “Good gracious, it is no disgrace to be an old maid, as it is called” because single women who “remain pure and true, need not fear. God will provide a partner for them in eternity” (245).
In order to appreciate the urgency of these concerns, we have to understand Mormons’ beliefs about marriage. Joseph Smith had taught that marriages performed (or “sealed”) in a temple by proper priesthood authority would last beyond this life and that children born to such marriages would be bound to their parents in the eternities in a long chain of familial love. Righteous couples would then progress in the next world to become parents of spirit children and, eventually, creators of new worlds for those spirits to inhabit. Thus the choice of a marriage partner had eternal implications.

Young Mormons were constantly reminded of this principle. In the *Contributor*, for example, Junius F. Wells editorialized at length on this subject:

Marriage with all people is a serious business; but with the Latter-day Saints more serious yet than with any other. By others it is looked upon as involving the whole happiness of this life; with the Saints it does all this and more, it affects the happiness of that life which is to come. The wedded state is a condition on which the fullest happiness, the greatest glory and highest exaltation of both men and women, in the theology of the Gospel, very largely depends. Of course the orthodox Christian world regard the association of man and wife as altogether too material and unholy for heaven; but that institution which contributes most to refine, purify, and exalt the nature of man and woman in this life, may be trusted to work no mischief in heaven. (154-55)

The message of this editorial is similar to that of Gates’s, but with a twist in favor of the men: Wells asserts that women are more interested in men’s superficial qualities than in
their spiritual worthiness. “How often it happens, in the experience of woman, that social accomplishments outweigh more sterling qualities of soul. because. forsooth, the latter happens to be encompassed by an uncouth exterior!” Women, he admonishes. don’t be fooled by appearances (154).

Hattie C. Jensen reiterates these concerns in her treatise on “Marriage” in the Journal. “Marriage is to us Latter-day Saints the most important step in life, for by it we make or mar our whole existence. By it we are glorified eternally and enjoy peace and happiness on earth; or are cast down to hades in the depths of misery and despair” (404). Though there are many unworthy young men, and the girls need to refuse to associate with them until they improve themselves, Jensen stresses the importance of looking past appearances in deciding who is a worthy mate: “I know, however, that many of our young men, while outwardly appearing rough and unpolished, inwardly have hearts of gold, and need only a woman’s refining influence and loving, gentle powers to mould them into perfect gentlemen” (403).

Such advice was offered to the young women with all the more urgency because of the common perception that there were not enough marriageable men. Volume five of the Journal (1893-94), for example, mentions this concern so many times that it becomes a given assumption in almost every discussion of marriage and supplies the context for the warnings against marrying outside the church. “If girls ought to marry, what are they to do now when there is such a surplus of marriageable girls to the comparatively small number of marriageable young men?” Gates asks (92). “The question is becoming too
frequent, ‘Is it not better for our girls to marry those outside our faith than to remain single?’ Let me shout the answer in your ears again and again. No! No! No!” (92).

It seems likely that the perception of a lack of eligible husbands resulted from the demise of polygamy as a marital option for young Mormon women. In previous decades polygamy had been defended by the claim that there were more eligible women than worthy men. In the 1890s, however, it would have been awkward to continue this argument openly and appear to be defending polygamy after its official discontinuance. Now the usual explanation for the disparity was that the young Mormon men were going to the dogs.

One writer reports, “One mother living in a city of perhaps three thousand inhabitants remarked to me that there were seventy-five fine, marriageable girls in the place, with no prospect of obtaining husbands” (“Diener” 277). “It is very evident that a similar condition of things prevails in many parts of Utah,” she continues. “The cause of this is not to be found so much in the greater number of female than male births in the Territory, but more through the rejection of unworthy suitors by pure and noble maidens, or the disinclination of young men” to get married.

Hattie C. Jensen, quoted above, confirms this explanation for the lack of marriageable men: “That there is a probability of some of our girls not obtaining good husbands is not due to the fact that our young girls outnumber the young men, but that the young men in many instances are not up to the standard.” In keeping with prevailing views of women as the keepers of morality, however, Jensen turns the responsibility back
onto the girls, insisting that the men “never will be [worthy] until the girls all unitedly
join in bringing them up to that perfection that is desirable in a husband” (403).

Likewise, in the same issue Gates publishes a resolution by the YLMIA of
Mapleton, Utah, to refuse to dance with any young man who drinks. “And as it will be
very humiliating to have to refuse a gentleman, we the young ladies of Mapleton do
unitedly pray to our Father in Heaven to give you young men strength and courage to
resist temptation,” the resolution adds (400). Gates attaches an editorial note that this
resolution has been “very effective” in Mapleton and the general leaders “wish every
Y.L.M.I.A. would adopt similar resolutions and stick to them” (401).

Thus, marriage and the perception that there were not enough worthy men for
LDS girls to marry were central concerns of Mormons in the 1890s, and Gates’s
repetition of the discourse surrounding this issue shows that she intended “Donald’s Boy”
to provide a case study.

Along with the warnings not to marry an unworthy man, young Mormon girls
were repeatedly warned not marry a man on the hope, or the promise, that she could
change him. This misguided belief is Phylis’s hope when she first becomes engaged to
Horton: “That she would have to become a stranger to the religion in which she was
raised had never occurred to her, and she wound up her meditations by declaring that
there was no necessity for such a thing. Of course if Doremus married her he would have
to come to her terms in everything, and he would undoubtedly” (273). Even as she thinks
these hopeful thoughts, Phylis knows that she is wrong.
Phylis’ conversations with her friend Winnie provide Gates the opportunity to repeat the arguments against marrying outside the fold. Winnie herself has recently divorced an unworthy husband after a hasty marriage based on the kind of infatuation Phylis feels for Horton. This gives her the moral authority to counsel Phylis, and her conversation sounds like it has been recorded straight from the pulpit. Recounting her unhappy marriage, Winnie first debunks Phylis’s argument that her love is strong enough to overcome any obstacle:

I have felt just like you do. I thought I couldn’t live without him. I broke all bonds, disobeyed my mother; gave up everything for him and gloried in the thought that I could sacrifice everything on his altar. Well, the Lord says we shall have no other gods before Him, and in less than four months after my marriage my idol lay shattered at my feet and at the end of a year, there was not a spark of love in my breast for him. . . . (309)

To this sad tale, Phylis tries to protest that her beloved Doremus and Winnie’s husband are totally different characters, but Winnie has an answer: “You may think so, and I hope so; but you may be sure that my faith in him was as great as yours is in Horton.” At this, Phylis wonders aloud whether Horton’s not being a Mormon really makes much difference, since she isn’t all that religious herself, giving Winnie an opening to voice the advice Mormon girls had heard many times:

‘I can assure you, Phylis, that it makes all the difference to be married to a man not of your father’s faith. Though you may not have much religion yourself, you are very sensitive about what your father and mother believe
in. You cannot bear to have it ridiculed, and it cuts you deeply to have it sneered at. Well, this becomes the first stepping-stones to discord, disunion, and finally separation in many cases.’ (310)

Fortunately, Phylis comes to see the wisdom in this counsel, leading to a confrontation with Horton over the subject of religion. Horton interprets her hesitance towards him as “nervousness” and urges that they marry right away: “We will go abroad till our nest is furnished. I’ll show you the grandeur of the Old World; you shall live in a whirl of pleasure and excitement; there will be no time for thinking, and you will come home as tranquil and content—just as worldly as I am” (498). Winnie’s advice to Phylis is evident in her response to this proposal that would have seemed so enticing just a few months earlier: “But afterwards, Doremus, there would still be an afterwards. . . . There would be times when I should want to go back to my people, the Mormons, I mean, and you would not like that. You would laugh, Doremus. . . . It would make me miserable.”

After Horton leaves, Phylis goes to her father in tears and declares, “I’ve given up Doremus. I’m going to be an old maid for the Gospel’s sake’” (499). Since she has already renewed an acquaintance with a man from Sweetwater, though, we know her fears will prove to be unfounded.

Likewise, the vices displayed by the young Joneses—card playing, gambling, and especially drinking alcohol, coffee, and tea, and using tobacco—were the stuff of frequent editorials and warnings to young Mormons. As I pointed out above, the Mormon dietary code, known as the Word of Wisdom, was an especial concern at this time. In November 1894, for example—the same issue in which the second installment of “Donald’s Boy”
appeared—Gates takes up this theme, apparently in response to extensive sermonizing on this subject by church leaders at the recent general conference. “No one who has kept the law [i.e. the Word of Wisdom] in the past will fail to testify of the many blessings which follow its observance,” Gates testifies. “A cup of tea is a small thing, a very small thing to the person who cares nothing about it; but it is a mighty gate between God and the soul who cares more for it than for the law and word of the Lord,” she concludes (76-77).

Months earlier, she had taken up this theme with the usual assumption that it was women’s responsibility to guard men’s morals as well as their own: “[D]o not offer anyone, much less a young man, a drop of liquor,” she pleads. “If the time comes when you are an old woman, you will be thankful if you can say truthfully that no man has ever received at your hands wine or strong drink.” Moreover, she advises the girls not to let “even coffee and tea be spread upon your table for foolish men to drink.” Serve them some hot lemonade or a glass of water instead, she pleads (154-55).

The worldliness of the Jones family in relation to these things is made abundantly evident in the scene where we first see Aunt Ellen at the Jones home. The older woman has been waiting for breakfast for some time while the family oversleeps because of the late hours they kept the night before. One by one, the Jones children rebuff Ellen’s attempts to reprove them. Phyllis, primping shamelessly, laughs off Ellen’s suggestion that she has not been given her pretty face only to attract young men: “‘You silly old Aunty; of course I’ve got it for that very purpose, and no other.’”

Next, Stuart comes in and begins to eat. “‘I haven’t time for ceremonies, Aunty, so if you don’t mind, we’ll dispense with the blessing.’
'But I do mind, my son; I’m used to having my food blessed, and if it’s for lack of time, you must dispense with it, get up a bit earlier.’” Ellen proceeds to offer a blessing, while Stuart holds his annoyance in check.

After the prayer, Phylis offers Ellen a cup of coffee, to which the older woman replies, “‘You know I don’t drink coffee, child.’

“‘Well, I didn’t know but you had been infected by our bad example, and had concluded that it wasn’t as bad as you thought at first,’” Phylis replies, again impertinently. The Joneses are not only breaking the commandments, they are making light of it when someone attempts to correct them.

Now Phylis and Stuart begin talking about their friends and a party they attended the night before. Aunt Ellen breaks in, “‘Don’t you associate with anybody but Gentiles?’ asked Aunt Ellen abruptly. Stuart’s reply again makes light of Ellen’s attempted reproach: “‘Oh yes we do, when we come across a respectable Saint now and then; but we like the sinners best’” (106-107).

At this point the younger boys enter noisily, and Asa holds forth on one of his friends’ horses and a play they are planning to attend that night. The conversation goes so quickly that Aunt Ellen only manages a couple more remonstrances, but by this time we get the point. The Joneses are very worldly indeed. After breakfast, when the children are all gone to school, Aunt Ellen gets the chance to sum up her opinion of the situation. Asked by Margery if she is comfortable with them, Ellen replies, “‘Yes, my dear, life is tolerable for me under all circumstances; but I guess I should find it more to my taste were I not a Mormon.’
"'Not a Mormon. Aunty! Do you think our life incompatible with Mormonism?'

"'I think you have gotten very fashionable, Margery.'

"'We must live in harmony with our means and position, Aunty.'

"'Then I fear you are in a wrong position'" (108).

For the rest of the story, Aunt Ellen's disapproval of such activities is taken for granted, and the story itself serves as the sermon while we watch Stuart decline into a dissipated lifestyle, culminating in an accident that leaves him crippled.

The plot unfolds predictably, with the family's trials turning them back to God, and by the end of the story all that is left is for the young people to find suitable mates and be rewarded for their repentance. In Phylis's case, this is achieved easily as she returns to the country town of Sweetwater to live with her cousin, Clara, and finds love with a childhood playmate. Stuart's case is not resolved so easily, however, and this is where the story shows most clearly the underlying tension between the didactic and fictional discourses that construct it.

We have watched as Stuart has suffered through his feelings for Winnie, and we have seen that Winnie is, indeed, a righteous young woman. It seems only natural, therefore, that Stuart will now marry Winnie, and she will help him complete his spiritual rehabilitation. Our expectations, however, are a trap that Gates means to expose. After all, the leaders insisted, it was deemed just as dangerous for a Mormon girl to marry an unworthy Mormon man as to marry a non-Mormon. For example. Hattie Jensen's treatise on marriage warns the girls to beware of men who pretend to reform just so you'll marry them. "Be sure that the reformation is in the heart before you have anything to do with
You have only to look around you for examples of some of our dear Mormon girls who have been led astray by blindly trusting in promises that were alas! too soon forgotten, and were all too quickly made in moments of passion to be sincere” (403-404). Stuart’s reformation has not yet been proven.

Gates seems to have two goals for the final section of the story: she wants to drive home the moral about not marrying a man in order to change him, and she wants to end the story with the conventionally romantic emotional scene. One is an ideological demand, the other a formal one. The problem is that in order to deliver the lesson, she has to subvert the romance. Thus, when Stuart pitifully begs Winnie to marry him, her response combines the ideological and the romantic in a way that subverts her former portrayal as a strong, admirable character:

‘You and I are not suited to each other; we should not be happy. I am not as strong as you think; I am weak. I must have someone on whom I can cling for support in the daily struggles with this life’s trials. And you Stuart—forgive me for saying it—are not strong enough. Now don’t interrupt me. If you knew how I have suffered before! My life has been wrecked once, a second time I dare not venture out on the sea of uncertainty. When I marry again it must be a man tried and strong in the Gospel.’ (541)

Brave words, but as she watches his response, she has to suppress her desire for him.

“She took a step forward then stopped and clasped her hands tightly before her. That twitching lip and drooping head, the whole forlorn attitude of this handsome boy. A wild
desire to run to him and let him rest his poor head on her arm came over her . . .” (542). As it turns out, Winnie has protected herself from such an impulse by already promising to marry a widower who has proposed to her. Later, she tells her mother that she had known the scene with Stuart would occur, “and therefore I sent my answer of acceptance to Brother Freeman [before going to the Joneses]. I dared not otherwise. I was afraid of myself” (542).

This refusal in spite of her feelings is meant to show Winnie’s strength and to re-emphasize to the reader the importance of marrying a faithful Mormon man. It comes off as unsatisfactory because Winnie has been the most exemplary character, and in any conventional love story it would be right for her character to be rewarded for her past suffering and complete repentance with a marriage that represents the height of love and bliss. Her rejection of Stuart seems an excessive case of self-denial. It also seems an unfair rejection of Stuart’s evidently sincere efforts at repentance. But the point here is not about Winnie or Stuart personally. At this moment in the story, Stuart has not yet proven himself to be a fit husband for a good Mormon girl, and therefore Winnie must reject him in spite of her feelings, even if her refusal subverts the readers’ expectations of a romantic resolution.

In this story, then, when the ideological and the formal come into conflict, Gates shows her loyalty to be firmly in favor of the ideological and sacrifices the reader’s romantic expectations in order to affirm the moral. This structure itself becomes an implicit message to the girls in her audience: Don’t trust passion. Do what is right even if it seems unexciting. The truest rewards are not immediate.
Still, Gates knows her genre well enough that she knows she must have more formal resolution than the scene with Winnie and Stuart provides. Thus, she tacks on a letter from Phylis to Winnie, written three years later. We learn that the Jones family has moved back to Sweetwater and that all have become active and believing participants in their religion again. Stuart has changed completely, and has married his cousin, Clara, who adores him. It’s the Mormon equivalent of living happily ever after, made possible by the repentance of the Jones family.

**Conclusion**

“Donald’s Boy” thus becomes a dramatization of all the major themes of counsel from Mormon leaders to Mormon youth. In typical fashion, Gates has worked in as many didactic concerns as her narrative allows, relying on the voice of Aunt Ellen to enunciate warnings that were no doubt familiar to her readers. In the end the blending of narrative conventions and didactic messages is uneasy, as shown in the resolution of the Winnie-Stuart story. Instead of serving as grounds for condemnation of this and similar novels, however, this unevenness points up, again, Mormons’ ambivalence towards their own position in relation to American society. In essence, “Donald’s Boy” tries to be bilingual—speaking the terms of Mormonism through the language of fiction. In so doing, it manages to both fulfill and frustrate the demands of both discourses, much as Gates and her people, no doubt, felt the pull between being Mormons and being Americans.
Chapter Two: Susa Young Gates and Popular Didactic Fiction

Biographical Sketch

Susa Young Gates’s literary efforts must be understood in the context of her life and her many activities. She was, by any standard, an amazing woman. A confidant of her father, Brigham Young, and frequent stenographer of his speeches, Susa was the second daughter born of his marriage to Lucy Bigelow, on 18 March 1856. She spent her childhood in the relatively privileged environment of the Lion House, Young’s communal home for many of his wives and children, but at the age of 15 she moved with her mother and sister to the much more isolated and undeveloped southern Utah town of St. George. By this time Susa had shown herself to be a talented writer, serving as editor of the college newspaper at the University of Deseret in 1870 when she was only fourteen years old.

Apparently, her father was well aware of her abilities—and her ambitions. Throughout her life Susa loved to quote the advice he had given her early on:

If you were to become the greatest writer, the most eloquent woman speaker, the most gifted and learned woman of your time, and had neglected your home and children in order to become so; if, when you arise on the morning of the Resurrection Day, you found that your duty as a wife and a mother had been sacrificed in order that you might pursue any other duty, you will find your whole life had been a failure. (Editor’s Department, June 1894, 449)
For awhile it must have appeared doubtful that Susa would live up to this counsel, though not necessarily by choice. Married hastily at sixteen, she was divorced at twenty-one and her two children were raised by her husband’s family. But she soon found a place at Brigham Young Academy in Provo and enjoyed several years of college life before entering into a legendarily successful marriage with Jacob F. Gates in 1880.

The list of Susa Young Gates’s activities is overwhelming, all the more so when we consider that for twenty years she was almost constantly pregnant or nursing. Furthermore, she was almost constantly mourning the loss of her children as well, since eight of her thirteen children died before reaching adulthood. These many births and deaths form an important backdrop to the 1880s and 1890s when Gates started the *Young Woman’s Journal* and wrote voluminously as a “home author.” A biographer notes that one of her favorite sayings was “Keep busy in the face of discouragement” (Person 208). Her prolific activities during these decades suggest that she must have literally followed her own advice.

Besides her work in the MIA, which I will take up in a moment, Gates also served prominently in the National Council of Women in the 1890s and early 1900s. She served as a delegate to this organization’s National and International Congresses, and for six years as Chair of the Press Committee. From these activities, Susa made the acquaintance of the leading feminists of the day, including Susan B. Anthony, who recognized her immense talent. When the conflict between her national and church duties became too intense, however, there was no question which took priority. As Susa herself told the story, “I had been told by Aunt Susan B. Anthony that they would make me
President of the National Council of Women of the U.S. if I would only drop my militant Mormonism.” She replied that “the price was too high.” Subsequently she was offered the national secretaryship, but again turned it down because of counsel from her leaders to use her talents in the church (Gates, “Hail and Farewell” 677). This decision proved a turning point in her public life.

It was around this time that Susa suffered a breakdown, physical and emotional, that left her incapacitated for three years. Her health had broken when she was returning from the Copenhagen 1902 International Council of Women’s Congress, and she had remained in Geneva “dangerously ill” for about a month before making her way to London, where apostle Francis Lyman gave her a blessing that brought her back from the brink of death. Susa narrates this story in typically dramatic style:

President Lyman began his blessing by dedicating me to the Lord, adding that I ought not to shrink from going on the Other Side for there was much greater scope for any gifts and talents I might have there, and that my father and the Prophet [Joseph Smith] wanted me there—then he paused and after a few silent moments he began again by saying there had been a council held over there, and it was decided that I should remain on earth to be a help to my husband and family and to take up a work that had not been done so far in the Church. I came home! (“Hail and Farewell” 677)

Later her recovery was completed when she was taken to the temple in Salt Lake City and began serving regularly as a temple worker, officiating there in the ordinances such as baptism and marriage that Mormons performed for their dead ancestors. Temple
service and genealogy, in fact, became for her the “work that had not been done” so far. and in her later years these were Gates’s consuming efforts. Besides founding and editing the Relief Society Magazine and serving on the General Board of the Relief Society from 1913-1922, she founded the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers organization and began its Hall of Relics. She also researched, perfected, and taught genealogical methods, training countless others in this emerging field of Mormon expertise. She wrote a History of the Y.L.M.I.A. and worked on a manuscript “History of Women” commissioned by church leaders but never published. The project she considered her greatest achievement was her Life Story of Brigham Young, which she co-wrote with her daughter, Leah Widtsoe. Published in England in 1930, it received favorable reviews on both sides of the Atlantic.

When she died in 1933 Susa Young Gates was eulogized as a woman of remarkable achievement. One often-quoted description of her was written by Estelle Neff Caldwell, her co-writer on the History of the Y.L.M.I.A.:

She is engaging and brilliant in conversation and possesses the repletion of sentiment which naturally accompanies an artistic temperament, this emotional nature being held in check by the saving grace of humor. Her mind is the versatile, imaginative type, keenly perceptive and philosophical. These qualities have enabled her to attain to the unique position which she occupies in the affairs of Church and State. All that is written of Mrs. Gates in her lifetime will be necessarily inadequate; it is only through the perspective of years that her achievements and dynamic power will be fully discernible. (Jenson 628)
Sixty-six years after her death, it still seems impossible to sum up the life and personality of so diverse and complex a woman as Susa Young Gates. Even in this day of seemingly limitless opportunities (and demands) for women, we can’t help but stand in awe of her energy and ability.

"Homespun".

Turning specifically to her literary labors, Richard Cracroft’s appellation of Gates as the “founding mother of home literature” (Home Literature Tradition) is one her contemporaries would have approved. She was perceived to have been called to this work by her father, as Caldwell records: “To uplift the youth of her people with her pen was a mission given her by Pres. Young. . . . She has a natural power of giving herself to humanity through her writings: they glow with life and on that account kindle fires in other minds and other hearts” (626).

Gates wrote widely for all of the church periodicals throughout her life, but it was her position as editor of the Young Woman’s Journal that established her role in the founding of Mormon fiction. As she later wrote, her purpose for the Journal was “to provide an outlet for the literary gifts of the girl members of the Church while presenting the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a factor in religious, domestic, social and recreational life through articles and stories, departments and editorials” (“Hail and Farewell” 678). While she undoubtedly wanted to encourage home literature in the broadest sense, Gates had a special interest in fiction, as evidenced by her own prolific
output and the substantial “Literary Department” that opened each issue of her magazine from the beginning.

Even though the Journal was the official organ of the already well-established YLMIA, it was an independent publication at first, meaning that the burden of producing and selling it rested mostly on Gates herself. As with many new publications, there was a struggle early on to collect enough contributions to publish each issue. Thus Gates frequently wrote a large share of what she published. “Plenty of good writers there were for the Exponent and Juvenile,” she recalled, “but it was some task coaxing them into the double duty of writing for two women’s periodicals. . . . All the main gaps I had to fill in with several pen-names . . . and often no name at all—just articles slipped in, nameless” (“Hail and Farewell” 677-78).

I have found no extensive study of Gates’s pen names. As her statement above suggests, there were too many to keep track of. But one name appeared on most of her fiction and seems to have been widely recognized as hers at the time—“Homespun.” Given Gates’s background, this name deserves a closer look. More than a simple pen name, “Homespun” carried quite an ideological charge. This term, after all, was the nineteenth-century colloquialism for the rough, plain fabric that was literally “spun” at home, providing clothing for the common people.

In Mormondom this term became emblematic of the Saints’ efforts to be self-supporting. Brigham Young and other leaders repeatedly counseled the people to wear homespun instead of sending their money abroad for imported cloth. “I see here, to-day,
many who are dressed in homespun, and they look comfortable and comparatively independent," Brigham Young told a congregation in 1862.

Some of the sisters I see, wear home-made shawls, and to me, they appear far more appropriate than do the gaudy trappings of foreign make. I cannot see why we should send to buy from strangers that which we can manufacture ourselves, if it is not to satisfy a disposition to please and pamper that power which is opposed to the kingdom of God on earth. (JD 9: April 6, 1862, 272)

Much of the responsibility for promoting home industries fell to the women, led by Eliza R. Snow, who was one of Young’s wives and undoubtedly the single most influential Mormon woman of the nineteenth century. Snow told her sisters that “each successful Branch of Home Manufactures [is] an additional stone in laying the foundation for the upbuilding of Zion,” and she taught that women who assisted in this effort were “doing just as much as an Elder who went forth to preach the Gospel” (Mulvay 255). Thus homespun became symbolic of the Saints’ struggle to remain separate from the polluting influences of the world, an outward sign of faithfulness and commitment to building the kingdom of God. Preaching the virtues of homespun was a prominent theme of the retrenchment movement, which, as discussed in Chapter One, evolved into the YLMIA, in whose behalf Susa would spend so much of her life.

When she adopted Homespun as her pen name, Gates also aligned herself with the tradition represented by that term in Mormon culture, and she implicitly claimed for her stories the cultural authority of the prophets and apostles who had established that
tradition. The home literature movement represented a natural outgrowth of the
retrenchment ideal, extending into the cultural realm what was becoming impossible to
maintain in the political and economic arenas.

Gates’s literary output in the first decade of the home literature movement was
voluminous. She kept serials going, sometimes in more than one periodical at a time.
while simultaneously writing “filler” stories, articles, editorials, and book reviews for her
Journal. This ubiquitous presence in Mormon periodicals made her fiction an important
influence in shaping the form and concerns of home literature in general.

The Thirteenth Apostle

Gates’s contemporary biographers show that her position as a daughter of
Brigham Young was an important factor in her prominence. “With a prophet’s blood in
her veins, she sought in every way to magnify and honor her parentage,” wrote the
Instructor’s eulogist (539), and the LDS Biographical Encyclopedia points out that she
inherited “many excellent qualities from her father” (626-7). Given the relatively
privileged position of her youth, it must have seemed natural for her to take a prominent
place in Mormon society. Her talents would have distinguished her in any event, but her
birthright gave her a natural entry into society that she did not have to earn.

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher's study of “The ‘Leading Sisters’: A Female
Hierarchy in Nineteenth Century Mormon Society” sheds much light on the elite kinship
network in which Susa Young Gates inherited a place. Beecher identifies a core of
women whose influence was immense:
[I]t was those ‘leading sisters’ who interpreted the doctrines and set the behavioral standards for their sisters; they discovered worthy causes and organized effective social programs; they made alliances and identified enemies. The corporate and often private lives of all Mormon women, however remote from the central Salt Lake Stake, were impacted by the doings and sayings of these few” (28-9).

This group of leading sisters, as with the priesthood hierarchy in the church, was characterized by an extensive kinship network—they were wives, mothers, sisters of the leading brethren and thus “derived much of their status from the men to whom they were connected” (29). They were also frequently related to each other, often as “sister wives” of the same prominent husband.

Beecher bases her discussion on a composite picture and accompanying book entitled *Representative Women of Deseret*. Published in 1884 by Augusta Joyce Crocheron, this book divides the leading women of Mormondom into leaders of women’s organizations, artists, professional women, and women whose importance transcended any specific church office. Under professional women, Crocheron includes four who were younger than the rest, “suggesting the ‘rising generation’ of leaders” (27). Susa Young Gates was just a little too young to be included in this list—the early 1880s were when she was beginning her Gates family and serving in Hawaii with her husband—but there is no question that her name would have appeared prominently had such a listing taken place ten years later.
This membership in the Mormon elite positioned Gates ideally to be a voice of authority through her writing. Caldwell’s biographical sketch of Gates, besides reminding us that her writing was a commission from her father, makes a point of mentioning that Susa had been “much encouraged” in her efforts by other luminaries such as Eliza R. Snow, Emmeline B. Wells, Orson F. Whitney, and “Pres.” (later Apostle) Charles W. Penrose (Jenson 627). An anecdote related by Gates is telling: “I was once jokingly referred to by one of the Church authorities as the Thirteenth Apostle. He told me that if he could just put breeches on me, he would put me in the quorum” (qtd. in Cornwall 63). She got close. Gates was the only woman to occupy an office in the Church Office Building on South Temple in Salt Lake City (Cornwall 63), and she was a close confidant of many of the men whose offices were there.

Gates’s relationships bridged the generations between the founding pioneers and the up-and-coming young Mormon leaders. Because of her father she had known Eliza R. Snow and most of the other leading sisters of the church, as well as the general authorities who served under Brigham Young, including future church presidents John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow. In Hawaii as a young woman she had become friends with Joseph F. Smith, Snow’s successor, and she was about the same age as Heber J. Grant, who succeeded Smith. In fact, one of Grant’s wives was Susa’s best friend. She knew the younger leaders as well—her daughter Leah married future apostle John Widtsoe, and her daughter Emma Lucy married another apostle, Albert Bowen. These familial connections, plus her own continued service on the general boards of
various church organizations, kept Susa widely connected among all ages of Mormon leadership throughout her life.

The enthusiasm of other Mormons for Gates’s fiction cannot be explained solely in terms of her semi-official position in the community. But there is no doubt that her writing was well-received by Mormons everywhere. As Caldwell enthused.

She herself has a natural power of giving herself to humanity through her writings; they glow with life and on that account kindle fires in other minds and other hearts... Sister Gates’ creative faculty makes all her work original. The interest element is sustained throughout by forcefulness. Simplicity of style, correctness and vivid illustration adapt her writings to popular audiences. (Jenson 627)

Cultural Discourse about Fiction

This last quote participates in the nineteenth-century discourse surrounding fiction and points up Gates’s connection to that tradition. Nina Baym’s important book, *Novels, Readers, Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (hereafter cited as *NRR*), recreates this discourse and shows the criteria on which nineteenth-century readers and writers judged fiction. She describes this discourse as “broad-ranging and widely circulated,” insisting that no person “writing or reading a novel in American in these years could have been ignorant of it, for it appeared, among other places, in those journals whose readership over the decades included millions of literate Americans” (*NRR* 270). This discourse took shape in those magazines as reviews of specific books often appeared
with, or turned into, commentary on the novel itself. This was. Baym points out, “the chief extant discourse about novels, since academic discussion of them . . . did not yet exist.” Baym’s discussion focuses on the antebellum years, but Gates’s fiction shows obvious traces of this discourse, suggesting it was still in force fifty years later.

As I quoted above, Gates’s friend Estelle Neff Caldwell praised her writing in these terms: “The interest element is sustained throughout by forcefulness. Simplicity of style, correctness and vivid illustration adapt her writings to popular audiences.” The key word in Caldwell’s statement is “interest.” This is not a term we use now to evaluate literature, but for Gates’s contemporaries it had a specific meaning. As Baym explains it, “interest” was the “complementary response in readers” to the power of a text. The concept of “power” was never adequately defined, but it was agreed that the most powerful texts created in the reader the greatest interest, “which at its height becomes enchantment, absorption, [sic] or fascination. . . . Interest refers less to intellect than emotions,” and is concentrated on “the story and its agents, who by virtue of their resemblance to human events and human beings have the capacity to create an interest beyond that of any other literary genre. Interest in the novel is a kind of excitement” (NRR 42).

Related to this concept of interest is Caldwell’s use of the word “forcefulness.” Baym reports that “the most common word of praise” for a writer’s style was “vigorou,” with its many synonyms, of which “forcefulness” is certainly one. This quality of prose was balanced by a desire for a “graceful” style, but Baym finds that “if reviewers had to choose between these two qualities, they preferred vigor” (NRR 131). Two other
complementary qualities of style were found to be balanced in good prose: “elegance blended with chastity.” Baym elaborates: “Elegance has to do with complexity and subtlety and implies a wealth of lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical resources; chastity is equated with simplicity and austerity. Where in choosing between vigor and grace reviewers preferred vigor, between elegance and chastity they chose chastity” (131-32). Caldwell’s description of Gates’s “simplicity of style” significantly aligns her with another important critical concept of the time.

I have noted that Susa Young Gates was a voracious reader, well-versed in the popular fiction of her day. Some of her own comments about fiction are revealing. In an 1894 editorial she wrote, “I think our own people are producing some of the purest and best literature. It may not be polished with the smoothness and elegance of rhetorical mastery; but it contains nothing that will injure and very much that will elevate and refine” (“Novel Reading” 498). To put this in the terms Baym outlines, Gates saw home literature as chaste rather than elegant—certainly a desirable association for cultural influences associated with anything “homespun.” In a backhanded way, this seemingly deprecating evaluation of home literature was actually quite a compliment.

In the February 1896 Journal Gates, writing under the name “La Bizarre,” moves from a review of Kipling’s Jungle Book series into a general discussion of novels and good reading. Developing a comparison of books to milk, she advises, “it certainly is a waste of one’s opportunities to read trashy novels—please observe the adjective, for there is as much difference in novels as there is in milk” (212). The cheap stuff that appears in certain weekly magazines and papers she characterizes as “milk sold to the poor in large
cities: half water, and full of disease germs that only await favorable soil to increase rapidly and spread the contagion of frivolity, unhealthy sentiment, and dissipation.” Her list of books that provide the “good, rich milk, with all the cream in it” reads much like the one I quoted in Chapter One: “Scott’s novels, George Eliot’s, Charles Dickens’, Thackery’s, Balzac’s, George Ebers’ and our own dear Hawthorne’s; also, and more especially for the young... Louisa May Alcott’s novels; ‘Ben Hur’ by Lew Wallace. Fenimore Cooper’s novels, and ‘Ethics of the Dust,’ by John Ruskin,” which she acknowledges is not actually a novel (212). Gates then goes on to identify the “pure cream” of literature as the essay, the plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Milton and Goethe, Dante, and Homer, and the “philosophies and classics of the world, whether in prose or verse.” and, of course, the Bible (212).

What is most interesting about his hierarchy is the middle category Gates identifies as the “pure skim milk, from which the cream has all been taken.” She says, “[T]his is very nice to drink on a warm summer day and will harm no one” but, she claims, “I, for one, do not care for skim milk” (212). To this group she assigns writers such as Mrs. M. J. Holmes. Marion Harland. Augusta Evans Wilson, and William Dean Howells. With the exception of Howells, these are the authors of the novels Baym has identified as woman’s fictions, the dominant genre of popular women’s writing in the mid-nineteenth century, loosely called “sentimental” by twentieth century critics.

The fascinating thing about this seeming dismissal of such novels is a comment Gates makes on the next page of her review. One day, she says, “I was longing for a novel of the ‘St. Elmo’ type to read” (213). *St. Elmo* was a hugely popular novel by
Augusta Evans Wilson, one of the authors on her list of “skim milk” — and yet Gates unselfconsciously speaks of “longing” to read such a book. Did she perceive some difference in this novel that made it superior to the rest of her list? Probably not. More likely she has here betrayed the difference between her sense of what she should say about novel reading and the more complex facts of what she actually enjoyed. True, she uses this example to show that she found a book of Emerson’s essays to be a superior alternative, but nowhere in the rest of her discussion of the merits of such reading does she use terms that evoke the powerful response suggested by the word “longing.”

Her closing advice to the girls unwittingly plays up the difference between the reading they want to do and the reading they ought to do: “Girls, it is not the amount of reading through which we struggle that will give us culture and a liberal education, but it is the quality which we select, and the study and thought that we devote to it” (214, my italics). Though they may have agreed that this is a true principle, her audience would no doubt have recognized that such terms would not be needed to recommend St. Elmo.

Whatever her professed attitude toward them, there is no doubt that Susa Young Gates had read and been deeply influenced by the popular fictions of her day and that her reading had made her conversant in the cultural discourse that surrounded fiction. Moreover, her implied criticism of the woman’s fiction authors is interesting in light of the fact that her own fiction borrows so freely from their conventions.
Home Literature, Popular Fiction

I have found it most useful to view home literature’s relationship to mainstream American fiction in the context of popular didactic fiction. In one sense “didactic” can be applied to virtually all nineteenth-century fiction. As Tompkins puts it, “The implantation of virtue was the primary goal of nearly everything nineteenth Americans read: textbooks, novels, poems, magazine stories, or religious tracts” (157). Women were seen to possess the moral authority of the culture, making them the primary audience for much of this didacticism.

While modern readers have come to regard these texts as artistically flawed, it is important to remember that they were taken seriously and read with pleasure by their contemporaries. Tompkins thinks didactic stories and tracts “had traction because the readers they addressed already understood life according to the principles that these directions are attempting to inculcate.” This didactic literature did not propose a theoretical design to which life was supposed to conform, “rather, it helped its original audience to put into practice the aims they already had at heart” (159).

Modern readers, accustomed to reading for recreation, generally perceive entertainment and instruction as mutually exclusive goals, but this was not the case in the nineteenth century. Baym concurs with Tompkins’ recognition that the didactic intent of this fiction was part of its appeal.

Instruction is not at cross-purposes with entertainment in this fiction, nor is entertainment the sweet coating on a didactic pill. The lesson itself is an entertainment in that the heroine’s triumph over so much adversity and so
many obstacles is profoundly pleasurable to those readers who identify
with her. (*Woman’s Fiction* 17, hereafter cited as *WF*)

In addition to its broadly descriptive use, “didactic” also defined a recognized
category of novels. Nina Baym calls this category the moral fable, and her description
could apply directly to any of Susa Young Gates’s stories:

The moral fable arranges events in an order that displays the ineluctable
operations of a principle; although the settings may be real, they are rather
implied than represented. Action and character are schematized according
to the principle that is being illustrated. Generally, this principle is
illuminated in two contrasting characters, one showing right and the other
wrong behavior. For each of these characters, good and bad results flow
inevitably and without impediment from good and bad actions. (*WF* 33-
34)

In particular, Baym notes, the didactic intentions of these novels were aimed at young
women for the purpose of forwarding “the development, in young, female readers, of a
specific kind of character. The protagonists represent instances of the character that the
authors want their readers to become, while the grippingly affective reading experience is
meant to initiate or further the resolve of readers to change themselves” (*WF* xix).

To this end, Tompkins observes that these novels look most like training
narratives. “They involve arduous apprenticeships in which the protagonist undergoes
repeated failures and humiliations in the course of mastering the principles of her
vocation” (176), which in mainstream fiction is the vocation of true, self-sufficient womanhood.

As these definitions make clear, the overriding purpose of didactic fiction was to show women how to live—that is, how to be true women. Baym notes that every novel featured women characters as major or central figures. In these texts “the highest examples of female characterization, according to reviewers, approximate the woman to a type. The ‘best’ women characters are not individuals, are not mixed, and certainly have no secrets to be laid bare. They are ‘Woman.’ (NRR 97-98).

Although many home literature stories were published in periodicals read by both men and women, even those with a presumably mixed gender audience still show themselves to be preoccupied with questions of female character. Most of Susa Young Gates’s stories were published in the Young Woman’s Journal, making their implied audience explicitly, if not exclusively, young women.

The overplot Baym identifies in her study of these novels, which she calls “woman’s fiction,” enacts the development of a young girl into a mature, self-sufficient woman. Typically “the heroine is thrust into life deprived of all the supports on which she might have expected to depend,” and instead of ease and luxury she finds herself amid harsh demands and hostile circumstances where her fate is far from certain.

“Happily, our authors said, the world’s hardships provide just the right situation for the development of individual character. The disillusionment, inevitable in any case, is an opportunity. If women rise to the opportunity they can master not only themselves but the world” (WF 278).
For Mormons, the type of independence young women needed was spiritual independence—in short, a testimony. And this testimony, in turn, would keep the woman safely within the parameters of the community, where she would find a good husband and a loving support system. To some extent, then, the Mormon version of female self-sufficiency is less radically feminist than that of the mainstream fiction. Or perhaps a better way to say it is that Mormon fiction’s view of independence lacked the concomitant message of material independence that preoccupied mainstream authors. This is ironic, perhaps, since so many articles in the Young Woman’s Journal urged young women to become educated and learn to support themselves.

Virtually all of these stories—Mormon or not—end with a happy marriage for the heroine. However, Baym insists that marriage was not really the point of woman’s fiction. Marriage is unsatisfactory as a goal because “neither its inevitability nor its permanence can be assumed,” and a commercial marriage is worse than none at all, a message “reinforced by the important background role played by unmarried or widowed women” (WF 39). This is one place where Mormon fiction diverges significantly from the mainstream because, as I have shown in the last chapter, marriage was a goal for Mormons—the goal, in fact. To the extent that Mormon fictions adopt the mainstream woman’s fiction plot, then, there is bound to be conflict between formal and ideological demands, as we saw in the case of Winnie in “Donald’s Boy.” Invariably it is the woman’s independence that loses out in this conflict.

While enshrining marriage as their ideal, however, Mormon stories concurred with mainstream ones on the importance of egalitarian relationships. As Baym notes, the
male lover’s role is not that of rescuer, since that would undermine the central theme of feminine independence. “When a woman turns to marriage or elopement as an escape, she finds herself enthralled to a tyrant even worse than the one she fled,” reinforcing the need for women to act rationally. Furthermore, in a theme adopted intact by Susa Young Gates, “almost no marriages represent rescues of the man by the heroine. . . . She is never taken in by the man’s promise that he will reform after marriage, or the bait that she can be the cause of his reformation” (WF 40-41). Winnie’s character in “Donald’s Boy” illustrates this message on both accounts through her disastrous first marriage and her later refusal of Stuart.

When seen in this light it becomes clear that the term “sentimental” as it has traditionally been used to mean excessive, shallow, or self-indulgent emotion and emotional display, represents a misnomer for these novels. In fact, these novels repeatedly identify themselves as anti-sentimental: “The plots repeatedly identify immersion in feeling as one of the great temptations and dangers for a developing woman. They show that feeling must be controlled, and they exalt heroines who have as much will and intelligence as emotion” (Baym. WF 25).

In Gates’s fiction, there is an unmistakable conflict between this ideology of self-control and the romantic view of love that drives the stories. For Gates love is something that just happens, a feeling and a force beyond the control of anyone who experiences it. This isn’t to say that people can’t control the way they act on their feelings—this is the essence of the didacticism—but when they do choose to suppress their desires, it is a monumental effort. Thus her job (as personified by the narrator) is to warn the young
people ahead of time and increase the chances that such feelings will occur only under the proper circumstances. Meanwhile, she tries to accomplish these warnings by means of stories that reinforce the very emotions she is trying to control.

"Seven Times"

Turning back to the Young Woman's Journal, we find that connections between mainstream fiction and home literature are ubiquitous. "Seven Times," which ran through volume five of the Journal in 1893-94, clearly shows its debt to popular didactic fiction, combining all the familiar elements of a woman's fiction story into a Mormon conversion narrative.

"Seven Times" is actually the precursor to "Donald’s Boy," which was discussed in the last chapter. The storyline is quite simple: Following her mother's death, Margery Stuart has come to Utah from Scotland to live in the country town of Sweetwater with her Mormon brother, Harvey, known as the Professor because of his good education and his service as the town’s schoolmaster. In Sweetwater Margery meets and falls in love with Donald Jones, a thoroughly committed Mormon who will not consider marrying outside the faith, even though he loves Margery. The rest of the story follows Margery through her conversion process, which involves her being tested, just as gold is purified "seven times," before she finally humbles herself and gains her testimony.¹

¹This is the source of the story’s title, but it seems more figurative than literal because I count at least a dozen incidents that could count as "tests" for Margery, and none are specifically identified. The expression that she has been tried, "like gold seven times" (575) does not appear until the end of the story, giving it limited usefulness as an interpretive framework. Perhaps, however, I am missing an allusion Gates and her audience would have recognized.
The characters in the story represent various positions on the spectrum of spirituality. Margery’s brother Harvey and Donald’s Aunt Ellen are the voices of absolute morality. They are never wrong, and their dialogue, especially Ellen’s, sounds more like sermon than conversation. At the other end of the spectrum is Donald’s father, who plays a rather melodramatic villain early in the story and then disappears. The wealthy, sophisticated (and non-Mormon) Horton family also represent the unconverted, and the son’s courtship of Margery provides a substantial sub-plot.2

In between these extremes are the young people. Donald is the strongest, but he suffers a great deal from his efforts to give up Margery. Donald’s sister Clara is weak and makes a bad choice in marriage, but she dies in full grace. Margery is proud and willful, and she becomes deeply offended at Mormon exclusivity, but the narrator makes it clear that she has a good heart. As an orphan who has been forced to move to a wholly unfamiliar setting and rely on the charity of her brother for her support, Margery’s circumstances are those of the typical woman’s fiction heroine, deprived of all the supports on which she would normally depend.

Aunt Ellen’s position enables her to act as the mentor figure to virtually everyone in the story. In fact, her only purpose seems to be to dispense advice in every situation, relieving the narrator of the necessity of voicing the story’s moral concerns. If, as Tompkins suggests, such stories resemble training narratives, Aunt Ellen serves as Margery’s trainer. Tompkins explains that the mentor-figure “initiates the pupil into the

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2 The young Horton son in this story is the father of the Horton who later courts Donald and Margery’s daughter Phylis in “Donald’s Boy.”
mysteries of the art, and enunciates the values the narrative is trying to enforce. The
trainer, who is simultaneously stern and compassionate, loves the protagonist most when
she is being hardest on her” (176). This describes Ellen’s function throughout the story,
though her mentoring is initially directed at Donald as much as Margery.

A few examples will amply illustrate this point. On their way to Salt Lake City
for a church conference, Ellen chaperones a group of young people that includes Margery
and Donald. She takes every opportunity to sermonize to the group about proper
behavior of the sexes. “When young people get into their teens,” she preaches, “they
ought to be taught that no young man has the slightest right to even put his hand on a
young girl’s arm or to touch her person in any way” (236). If mothers would teach their
boys this rule, she insists, the girls’ conduct would not be so loose.

Later, alone with Donald, she carries on a lengthy discussion about (what else?)
marrige and Donald’s feelings for Margery. Her advice is that Donald must pray to find
the woman who should be his wife. “You can have the wife designed for you before you
came to this earth, or you can get one which the Lord may permit you to have to teach
you lessons which you will not learn submissively,” she warns, obviously referring to his
attachment to Margery (242). You can’t change people by marrying them, either, she
insists.

After Margery has joined the church, it is Ellen who guides her as she learns how
to be a faithful Mormon. Stung by gossip questioning the sincerity of her conversion,
Margery confides in Ellen but receives little sympathy. You have been tried before, Ellen
tells her: “I want you to think back, and see if a great deal of your trial was not brought
upon yourself by your own willful pride.” This trial is easy in comparison. so use it to 
teach yourself patience and self control. “You will find there are many trials to bear 
which we do not bring upon ourselves, but which God permits us to suffer to refine us for 
His own use. But there is one thing about God’s trials, they are much easier to bear than 
those which we bring upon ourselves” (524). Here Ellen enacts the “tough love” 
described by Tompkins.

Ellen implies that most of Margery’s trials have been self-inflicted, the result of 
her stubborn pride, and the reader is meant to agree. These trials reveal most clearly the 
story’s debt to mainstream fiction. Margery’s story is the development of the feminine 
ego, to use Baym’s terms, in a spiritual context, with the testing of her femininity and the 
testing of her spirituality often indistinguishable. This becomes apparent in her first 
major test, the unwanted advances of Donald’s evil father.

From the beginning of the story, the narrator, aided by Aunt Ellen, hints that Mr. 
Jones is not a sterling character. His chief fault seems to be his interest in women. Aunt 
Ellen makes this clear when, shortly after the death of Mrs. Jones, she refuses to stay and 
help the children any longer for fear of his lecherous tendencies. “It was bad enough to 
be here with Marcus Jones hugging round me, and pinching my knees every time he sat 
down near me, when your mother was alive,” she tells Clara, “and now since your mother 
is dead and gone, and no one left to look to like for decency I won’t stay here” (117). 
Clara, although mortified by her Aunt’s statement, reflects that it is unfortunately true.

We next see Mr. Jones discouraging Donald from pursuing Margery on the 
grounds that she is not a member of the church. In an odd twist of narrative convention he
temporarily becomes the voice of morality, reminding Donald that “there is no greater sacrifice can be made than for our young people to sell their birthrights for a mess of pottage, as they do when they marry outside of this Church” (182). To Donald’s suggestion that maybe he could work on converting Margery, Mr. Jones replies, “But a man in love is apt to forget everything else, and he is in great danger of losing his own safeguard by thus temporizing with the devil.” Wait for her to accept the gospel, he advises, “Meanwhile, I myself will take a friendly interest in her, and will do what I can to bring her to a knowledge of the truth” (183). Instead, he tells his son, why don’t you try to convert the hired girl here at home?

At this point, the narrator interjects a one-sentence paragraph: “How easy it is to talk good talk!” This is all we need to confirm our suspicions of Mr. Jones’ true intentions, which are revealed in an almost comically melodramatic scene on Margery’s front porch when he comes one evening out of the blue and more or less in one breath attempts to convert her, propose to her, and fondle her. “I desire very much to see you accept the truth and to become one of our own faith,” he starts right in. “Can I not urge you to confide your doubts and thoughts to me?” This said, without warning, “The man boldly put his arm around her shrinking form, and so held down by fright and disgust was the spirited girl, that she felt as if a serpent had trailed its length across her, leaving her spellbound and helpless” (187). Undeterred by her attempts to pull away from him, Mr. Jones persists: “Again he took another liberty, and up under her arm slipped the arm of the man, and he squeezed her form as he leered into her face” (188).
As she continues to push his arm away, and he continues to replace it, he persists in proposing to her in a most unromantic way: “I will take you up to the city, and I will myself give you a name and standing in this Church by giving you my name and my heart” (188). Margery’s response shows her loyalty to the principles of propriety: “She was suffocating. With a gasp and a strong effort she jumped to her feet, and with a sharp snap of her teeth she said: ‘I would sooner marry wi’ the devil himsel’ than such as you.’ And she sprang into the door and closed it to with a bang” (188).

To modern readers, this scene is funny, and though we recognize the impropriety of it in its own context, it doesn’t elicit the outraged reaction Margery displays. Yet Gates describes this response in vivid detail for well over a page:

The girl paced the floor; she wept and at times she clinched her hands in the mass of soft brown hair and fairly tore it in the violence of her mortification. . . . [S]he had had too much good, moral training at home to permit her to allow one improper freedom from any man either in America or Scotland. And to think that such an insult should be crowded upon her by a married3 man—a father of grown-up children—and he, too, Mormon!

(188-89)

At first she thinks she will tell her brother of this scene with Mr. Jones, but then she realizes that she can’t because it would be too shameful. And, thinking of Donald, she becomes even more distraught.

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3This seems to be a slip by Gates. Mrs. Jones had died in the first installment. There are many such slips in this story; perhaps it was written in more than Gates’s usual haste.
How her eyes burned and her bosom heaved. Oh, her disgrace! In a sudden horror of it all, she tore her dress off and tread upon it, muttering.

‘I shall never wear you again, for you are defiled.’ (189)

After some more weeping, she goes to bed, resolved never to tell anyone unless forced, keeping it to herself just as a good heroine should because in the standards of nineteenth-century morality, she would be seen as a tainted woman, even though she had resisted Mr. Jones’s advances.

Margery’s reaction seems exaggerated, to say the least, but this is actually proof of her character. She has displayed her purity by becoming offended at even the hint of impropriety. Gates tries to turn this into a spiritual trial by having Margery equate Mr. Jones’s wickedness with all Mormons, therefore creating the bitterness that stands in the way of her conversion for the rest of the story. But this test is unmistakably a test of her femininity, just as similar scenes are a common device for proving the virtue of the heroine in other novels. In any case, the difference between femininity and virtue is nonexistent.

Margery’s greatest trial comes in the form of another widely used convention of popular fiction: the sick bed. Gates brings Margery’s story to a climax by blending this device with high spiritual drama, extending the emotion through two lengthy installments. Harvey’s young son Robbie, Margery’s special pet, is taken deathly ill with diphtheria, and Margery takes on an almost demonic personality as she repeatedly attempts to administer medicine to him, bitterly opposing Harvey’s reliance on faith instead of doctors. Finally, in desperation, after another confrontation at the height of
Robbie’s illness, Harvey turns from laying on hands to bless the child and attempts to exorcise the evil spirit he believes is possessing Margery:

‘Margery Stuart. I command you, in the name of Israel’s God. to cease from this folly. I do rebuke from you this spirit of evil and opposition. and I do this by virtue of the Priesthood which I hold. and in the sacred name of Jesus, my Master!’ (471)

This immediately silences Margery and, in obedience to Harvey’s command, she lies down on the couch in the sick room and sleeps soundly while her brother returns to the boy and continues administering to him throughout the night. The next morning some other men from the church come over, and together they give another blessing to the sleeping Margery.

In spite of these impressive events, Margery is not converted yet. When she awakens, she sees that the child is better but feels the first indications of the dreaded illness taking hold of her. As the disease takes over and threatens to kill her, Margery’s real conversion occurs through the intervention of little Robbie. ‘‘You are better,’ she whispered lovingly to him.

‘Yes.’ he answered blithely; ‘the Elders have prayed for me, and I am going to be well now.’

He looked at Margery steadily for a moment, and then asked suddenly:

‘Why didn’t you pray for me so that I could get well?’ (517)
This question leads to an emotional scene in which Margery recognizes the first stirrings of the Spirit in her heart.

‘Aunt Margery is a vera weeked person, Robin. She canna pray. she has forgotten how. Will you ask God to tak’ awa her hardness o’ heart?’

‘What makes your heart hard? Is it hard like my rubber ball?’

She sobbed again; his innocent words had someway touched her soul, that soul which had so long lain dormant within. . . . It seemed as if her very heartstrings were riven with her misery. Why had she never brought her proud spirit down like this before she wondered dully. What had her stubborn pride done for her? Had it ever brought her happiness, or ever simple content? (517)

Robbie is willing to pray for her, but he cannot because he doesn’t know the words, and here the low point of Margery’s humiliation is reached: “Oh the shame of it! She must speak her own prayer. She must even bring herself to the level of this little child, if she would have the comfort she felt so necessary just now.” Clearly, Gates’s phrase “the level of this little child” is meant to echo the biblical injunction by Christ that only those who become as little children can enter the kingdom. At Margery’s prompting Robbie manages a very simple prayer, and this begins Margery’s spiritual rehabilitation.

Immediately after this event Margery is seized by the illness again, and while she lies struggling for her life, we watch as she internally struggles for her soul as well.

Pondering on the death of Donald’s sister Clara, she fears death and wonders what will become of her soul in fits of remorse that take up several columns of text. Her physical
illness is an outward sign of her spiritual illness, made clear when the narrator describes
the lowest point of her illness: “She could not talk: it seemed to her that some awful
power had her throat, and was slowly but surely choking her, bodily and spiritually to
death” (521).

Once again Robbie comes to the rescue, urging her to allow his father to pray for
her, then praying silently himself at Margery’s request. At this point Margery faces
death:

At last her very spirit seemed rending from her body, and with a gasping
cry she moaned in a husky whisper:

‘Oh, God, be merciful to me, a wicked sinner! Send me truth and
light and life! Leave me not alone in my death agony. If I must die, let me
know Thee, whom to know is life eternal.’ (521)

This prayer is overheard by Harvey and Aunt Ellen, who has come to help with the
nursing, and they jointly hurry over to Margery’s side and begin laying on hands to bless
her, pleading for God to give her another chance at life.

Margery felt their hands, heard their prayers, and with her whole soul she
echoed every uttered word. As they ceased, and sought to raise their hands
from her head, she whispered eagerly:

‘Pray again! Pray again! Don’t stop, keep me, oh keep me. I will
serve God if He will spare my life. I covenant with Him that I will serve
Him.’ (521)
From this moment Margery begins to recover, and as soon as she is strong enough she is baptized into the church.

These intense emotional scenes draw on another favorite device of popular didactic fiction, which Baym calls the divine child. In many cases this is a child whose precocious spirituality marks him or her out for an early death—a powerful concept when we consider how many children of this period did not reach adulthood (16). Tompkins expands on this convention further in her discussion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, noting that “The power of the dead or dying to redeem the unregenerate is a major theme of nineteenth-century popular fiction and religious literature. Mothers and children are thought to be uniquely capable of this work” (128). Robbie in “Seven Times” and Moses in “Donald’s Boy” both spring clearly from this tradition.

Margery’s conversion takes place a few months after Donald has left for a church mission in England, leaving her to spend two years learning the gospel and waiting for his return, all the while, of course, not daring to hope that he will still be interested in her after her former wickedness. Margery has proven herself a true woman, and now she has the true gospel to guide her life. No experienced reader would ever have doubted the outcome.

Mediating Margery’s trials is the narrator. Susan K. Harris has written extensively on the function of the narrator in didactic fiction, and while such a detailed analysis is outside the scope of this study, it is worthwhile to examine the role of the narrator more closely because it is through this persona that Gates constructs the story and controls its elements in order to achieve her didactic purpose.
Harris notes that didactic novels are characterized by “narrators who sought the counterparts they inscribed in their texts, that is, their narratees, engaging them openly in a dialogue intended to teach them how—and how not—to live.” Through the narrator-narratee relationship, these novels severely restrict the interpretations of the story. This understanding that the narrator will guide the narratee’s interpretation is the “narrator-narratee contract” of the text, which Harris calls the “ontological bedrock” of didactic fiction (40). Harris later explains this further: “The dominant contract struck between the narrator and her narratee is predicated on the narratee’s weakness, her potential for error; the narrator’s function is to teach her how to maintain her virtue” (200).

In Gates’s fiction, the narrator-narratee contract is an extension of the correlation assumed to exist between Gates’s position of authority and the narrator persona she adopts to tell her story, and between the narratee, or implied reader, of the story, again assumed to correspond to the young women who were the primary flesh-and-blood audience. In keeping with didactic conventions, Gates’s narrator is a strong presence in the narrative. In fact, the narrator’s practice of speaking of herself in the first person and of addressing the reader directly constructs her as the primary personality in the novel. She is not an objective reporter who records scenes for the reader to enjoy and judge as she will. The narrator retains interpretive authority. In Gates’s stories, moreover, the narrator often adopts the first-person plural, thus reminding the reader of her membership in the community of beliefs for which the narrator is acting as voice.

For example, when describing Donald’s mission, the narrator emphasizes that his experiences were common to many Mormon men: “Donald Jones was gone, gone, just as
hundreds and thousands of *our* young men have gone,” she says, and in the next paragraph she repeats, “Donald was like many another of *our* young men.” Then, to make sure the reader gets the point, she addresses her directly: “What were his experiences? Ask your father, your brother, your husband what were theirs. Alike in spirit, differing only in the incidents and places, you can easily paint for yourself the three years’ experience which befell *our* friend Donald” on his mission (428, my italics). Even in describing the landscape, the narrator emphasizes collective identity: “Through it [the town] will run one of our own clear, mountain streams” (25).

Despite this controlling presence in the narrative, there are very few passages where the narrator steps in and delivers a lengthy sermon. Instead she makes her presence felt through her descriptions, using judgmental terms in the midst of otherwise straightforward narration to remind the reader of their common values. One extended example occurs in the scene where Donald, taken in by Margery’s pretended interest in the church, attempts to propose to her. Margery has been waiting for this to happen so she can humiliate him, just as she perceives he has humiliated her by refusing to marry her unless she converts. “‘Margery, dear, do you want to go with me, forever and ever?’” Donald asks.

   This was what she had waited for; this is what she had plotted for. With all the strength of her wicked purpose, assisted by the power of evil, to put from her the longing of love, which sought to pluck at her heart strings, she looked proudly and coldly up into the young man’s face. . . . (369)
In this scene “plotted,” “wicked,” “proudly and coldly,” and the phrase “assisted by the power of evil” are the narrator’s judgment on the scene she is delivering. Her purpose is to make sure the reader sees Margery’s actions as the narrator does, not as retribution for Donald’s self-righteousness, which is Margery’s perception.

This strategy is particularly effective at reinforcing gender roles by describing behavior in terms of absolute gender qualities. For this reason the exemplary characters embody both spiritual and social perfection. Donald’s calm reaction to Margery’s heated denunciation is unmistakably aligned with his manhood by the narrator: “Donald did not reel, nor shiver, nor faint, as perhaps a woman would have done.” Even Margery catches on: “The gentle words, the manly self-control, melted her as nothing else could have done. . . . She could have bourne his wrath, his scorn. But this dignified, manly renouncing of her heart, forever and forever, could she bear it?” (370). Donald’s response shows up Margery’s deplorable spiritual state, just as it should. But by phrasing his reactions in terms of “manliness” it also suggests that she is lacking in femininity, aligning gender with spirituality.

After Margery has converted and Donald has returned from his mission, this association is made explicit as Margery ponders the changes in Donald.

What a manly man he had become! Margery secretly wondered if every man returned from a foreign mission so improved as Donald had done. . . . She hated men who were weak. . . . She liked manly men, as she herself was, with all her faults. a womanly woman. (572)
Terms such as “manly” and “womanly” are taken for granted, part of a cultural discourse that clearly defined them in terms of essential natures and proper behavior. In this story such terms are further aligned with spirituality, tending to make spiritual propriety and social propriety the same thing.

Besides guiding the reader’s judgment of the characters, the narrator functions to create and control the emotion that accompanies the story. This involves blending all of the narrator’s other roles, as we see in the climactic scene between Margery and Donald. Here the narrator shifts between the minds of the characters, addresses the reader directly, and reinforces the alignment of proper gender roles with spirituality:

Margery loved him, and he was unspeakably happy. She loved him as he longed to be loved, with the depth and fire of a true woman. Not ashamed to show him the fullness of her loving soul. He knew that he alone had this right, the right to mark the inner beatings of her proud heart, and he was so happy to pour out to her the confidences of his own sensitive yet reserved nature.

Now that Margery has been converted, her love can be that of a “true woman,” whose soul is “loving,” just as we have already seen that Donald’s “reserved nature” is equated with his manhood and spirituality.

Next the narrator addresses the reader directly, delivering the moral lesson of the story: “What a walk that was! Is there such bliss on earth as to love your true mate and to be loved in return by him?” “Him” identifies the implied audience as explicitly female, and the narrator exhorts her readers. “God reserves this blessing for those [women] who
dare to wait His time, and to work that they may be worthy of it when it reaches them” (574).

Now we experience Margery and Donald’s first kiss with them, moving back and forth between their minds but always mediated by the narrator:

What joy filled him as he took her in his arms, knowing that he was her first and only lover! What thrills of exquisite bliss made her quiver with delight as the first kiss she had ever received or given to a man was pressed upon her trembling, red mouth by her noble lover’s eager lips!

(574)

Stating that Donald was “her first and only lover” reiterates the ethic of chastity and sexual self-control that informs the Mormon ideology of marriage, and the word “noble” subtly reminds the reader that it is their moral purity that gives such joy to this passion.

Passages such as this one, with its breathless, overblown emotion, draw attention to themselves and elicit chuckles and groans from modern readers. But the way the narrative is constructed makes such passages unavoidable. The narrator must retain control of the narrative, and so the love scenes must be told, not simply shown. Everything is filtered through the persona of the narrator, who can step in to keep the passion within its proper bounds by reminding the reader of the spiritual basis for it. The passion is necessary—without it there would be no story—but it must be controlled. This is perhaps the narrator’s most important role.
Conclusion

The basic structure of “Seven Times,” then, is borrowed from the popular didactic fiction that enacts the testing of the heroine, rewarding her for her self development with an egalitarian marriage to a good man. Drawing on the conventions of the lecherous villain, the divine child, and the female mentor, Gates adapts the storyline to Mormon themes by making the heroine’s tests spiritual in nature, with her conversion to the church, the ultimate expression of her self-development, paving the way for her marriage, which in Mormon theology was essential to her ultimate salvation. Margery’s trials ultimately prove her femininity as much as her spirituality, and it is in this theme that the echoes of mainstream didactic fiction are most evident. Throughout the story, Gates’s narrative persona retains control of the reader’s interpretation and guides her in properly identifying with the story’s heroine. Whether Gates actually considered woman’s fiction to be “skim milk,” her stories, as evidenced by “Seven Times,” show that she had certainly drunk plenty of it.
Chapter Three: Romance and Reality in “John Stevens’ Courtship”

Romance and History: Constructing the Past

“John Stevens’ Courtship”¹ is not about John Stevens. Though John is a major character in the story, and though it does end with his marriage, to say that it is about his courtship is to attribute more romantic action to him than he actually performs. Certainly he does love Diantha Willis, but his “courtship” of her consists of hanging around, silently waiting for her to develop into a “true woman” so he can claim her as his bride. The “courtship” culminates when John confesses his feelings for Diantha to the female mentor figure, who ushers him into her darkened parlor and promptly calls Diantha over and hustles her into the room with John, where their engagement can be effected with the proper amount of passion and very little conversation. In spite of its title, “John Stevens’ Courtship” is really Diantha’s story.

Briefly, its plot is as follows: Written for the Contributor, this story is set in 1857 Utah with the coming of Johnston’s Army to Salt Lake City to subdue the alleged Mormon rebellion in the territory.² The main characters are John Stevens, Diantha Willis, and Ellen Tyler. John has loved Diantha for years without reciprocation. He has

¹I have signified the title of the novel in this study with quotation marks in order to distinguish it from the self-contained novel of the same title, which Gates published in 1909.

²Known as “Buchanan’s Blunder,” this campaign resulted from reports to the President by federal territorial appointees that the Mormons were preparing to fight the U.S. Government and that they refused to acknowledge the government’s authority in their territory. The conflict was successfully mediated, largely through the efforts of the non-Mormon but sympathetic Colonel Thomas L. Kane. The army, however, stayed on for four years until the outbreak of the Civil War, by which time another military installation had been established in Salt Lake City. Though the army brought economic benefits to Utah, they also brought saloons, gambling, prostitutes, and other such unsavory influences. Looking back, the Saints remembered this event as the beginning of the end of their isolation and as yet another instance of official persecution of their religion.
also served as a trusted aide to Brigham Young, and in this capacity he is drawn into the conflict between the Mormons and the army. His overriding fear is that the “wicked soldiers” will attempt to “ruin” the Mormon women. Sure enough, Ellen is seduced by one of Johnston’s officers, and he takes her to Camp Floyd where she is murdered by his scorned mistress. Changed and chastened by Ellen’s death, Diantha decides she really does love John, and they are married.

In the last chapter I considered “Seven Times” in light of popular didactic fiction. In turning now to “John Stevens’ Courtship,” I want to emphasize that its debt to that tradition is likewise clear and pervasive. However, as Gates’s most ambitious novel, its didactic concerns interact with its formal requirements in much more subtle and complex ways. While retaining its essentially didactic purpose, “John Stevens’ Courtship” draws heavily on the conventions of another genre, the romance. Closely related to (and not always distinguished from) the historical romance made popular by Sir Walter Scott, this was one of the most popular genres of the nineteenth century. Gates again shows her immense debt to the many novels she had read in her thorough adaptation of romance conventions for her story. Baym describes these conventions in terms that could have been written specifically for “John Stevens”:

The romance . . . abstracts situations from reality, projecting them in heightened character types and rhetoric against a stylized background of the gorgeous and grandiose. Landscapes are sublime, domestic settings palatial, and action presented in the exaggerated vocabulary of stage gesture. Foiled villainesses gnash their teeth and tear out hair by the
handfuls; triumphant heroines roll their eyes and point heavenward; villains indulge in demonic laughs, sneering asides, and Machiavellian monologues. The romance in extreme moments looks like melodrama, but melodrama presents an old-fashioned view of women typed either as helpless virtue or foiled vice while woman’s fiction by contrast, whether fable, romance, or novel, believes in effective virtue. (33-34)

“John Stevens” meets these demands on several accounts. Conceived by Gates as a dramatization of Mormon history and presented for a wider audience than her Journal stories, this story features a larger cast of characters and a much more self-consciously literary style than anything Gates had yet written. The plot enacts the clash (epic to Mormons, at least) of the world and the Saints, and though the demonic villains and the shocking murder of Ellen veer toward the melodramatic, the central concern of the story is nonetheless with the efficacy of female virtue. That Gates intended her novel to be a romance is confirmed by the fact that when she published it in book form a decade later, it was subtitled “A Romance of the Echo Canyon War.”

The reviews and comments that accompanied this later publication of “John Stevens” give some clues to its contemporary reception. Even though the later version of the book is slightly altered, it is substantially the same story, and the readers quoted below were undoubtedly familiar with it. Therefore, their responses can be read as a commentary on the original version as much as the later one.
Gates’s contemporaries, first and foremost, admired the historicity of the novel. Reviewing the book for the *Young Woman’s Journal*, Osborne J. P. Widtsoe relates a story to vouch for the authenticity of “John Stevens’” events:

I handed the book once to an old gentleman who had lived the history of the Church from its early days. He started to read the book and did not lay it down until he had finished it; and when he read the last page, he closed the book reverently and said, ‘That is like living the old days over again. The pictures are as good and as true as if I were passing through them once more.’ So successfully has the author described the days of the past.

(157)

Likewise, in a promotional circular published with the book, prominent Mormons report that their enjoyment of the book is based on its historical accuracy. One of these “reviewers,” Mrs. Bathsheba W. Smith, long-time president of the Relief Society, even undertook to improve upon one of Gates’s incidents. “I wish there were a few words added,” she says.

For instance, I stood near the tent when President Young came out, there in Cottonwood Canyon, and he said, ‘Well, they’re sending an army to straighten us out; but if they get into these valleys, we’ll have to bring them in.’ Our young folks don’t know about those troublous times, and they ought to read that book and learn about them. The incidents and pictures are all true to life, and I greatly enjoyed reading about those old days. (*John Stevens’ Courtship*, promotional circular)
The modern reader, however, does not readily recognize the historical value in the novel. The details of the actual confrontation with the army are not extensive and not clearly distinguished from the fictional events portrayed in the plot, and at least one third of the story does not describe these events at all. Clearly, the historical appeal of the book was based on the shared experience of those who had lived through the events it depicted. For those readers, it evoked more memories than it actually portrayed.

It would be insulting to those many readers, and to the others who enjoyed the historical aspect of the story, however, to assume that they were unable to distinguish between their own memories and the events portrayed in the book. Indeed, Bathsheba Smith’s correction suggests that they were very much aware of this distinction. The historical appeal of the story more likely stemmed from its creating a certain picture of an earlier period in Mormon history.

The essence of this picture is suggested in another Young Woman's Journal review of the book: “Simple customs of pioneer days are held up to view in a way which makes that wholesome life quite attractive” ("Book Review" 514). The appeal of this story’s historicity, then, is its contrast with present times. This understood contrast rests on the idealized picture of those former days as a time of “simplicity” and “wholesome life” which has been lost as the times have changed. Johnston’s Army was the first permanent large-scale influx of outsiders into Mormon territory, setting up the non-stop cultural conflict between Mormons and “outsiders” which I described in Chapter One. The time before this “invasion,” from the perspective of later generations, looked idyllic and pure to those who were now worried that Mormons had become indistinguishable
from the rest of the world. In this light it seems much more than coincidental that Gates originally wrote and published this story during the same year that Utah finally achieved statehood, 1895-96. The construction of this idealized view of Mormon history becomes one of “John Stevens” cultural tasks. And removing the confrontation of Mormon culture with “outside” forces to the safe realm of fiction made it possible to grapple with that problem symbolically.

Just as Scott turned to the ancient origins of English society to allegorize the virtues he perceived as the foundations of England’s great empire, so Gates drew on the now-distant origins of her community to affirm its identity and dramatize its values in “John Stevens’ Courtship.” Like Scott, Gates framed her story as a romance, inherently positioning it in the highly idealized realm of cultural myth. Scott’s novels may have been less overtly didactic than Gates’s, and she would surely have rejected any serious comparison of herself to Scott on the grounds of inferiority, but the influences are unmistakable. “John Stevens’ Courtship” shows what Gates and her contemporaries valued artistically, and it shows the power of idealized history to shape group identity. It constructs a concept of marriage that connects to the doctrinal foundations of the community. Beneath the surface of this “tale,” Gates is busy at work, helping her culture to think about itself, proposing answers that would resonate in Mormondom for generations to come.
Artistry and Ideology: Description as Cultural Work

“John Stevens’ Courtship” clearly attempts to be more “literary” than Gates’s other early home literature efforts. Its devices stay well within the bounds of convention but are better developed than in her other novels where the plot and moral message are everything. Only in “John Stevens” do we find extensive passages of description for their own sake, and Diantha Willis is Gates’s most psychologically developed heroine. Unlike Phylis in “Donald’s Boy” and Margery in “Seven Times,” Diantha is fully committed to the gospel from the beginning of the story, and her connection to the church is never questioned. What she is lacking is, in a word, maturity, especially the self-knowledge that leads to humility and true charity towards others. Once again, Gates constructs her story to equate the development of these qualities with the achievement of femininity.

The extensive passages of description in “John Stevens” provide evidence for the claim that this is the most artistically ambitious of Gates’s novels. This description focuses most intensely on places and people, demonstrating the concepts of artistry that operated for Gates and her contemporaries and again showing her debt to mainstream models. More importantly, the descriptions of men and women become another aspect of the story’s cultural work, inscribing gender ideals in a way that equates them with spirituality.

Description was central to nineteenth-century concepts of literary artistry. In particular, landscape description appeared frequently. Baym explains that Sir Walter Scott heavily influenced this practice, as did persistence of the eighteenth-century notion of the sublime. Furthermore, “literary nationalism in America was associated with
landscape” (NRR 113). These explanations also hold true for Gates’s fiction. Scott, of course, was one of her favorite authors and undoubtedly influenced her perception of what was “literary.”

More importantly, the idea of “literary nationalism” has special application in Gates’s work. In the late nineteenth century, the idea of Utah as “Zion” was still very much a part of Mormon discourse. Gates’s fondness for canyons, mountains, and wildflowers therefore reflected more than the sensitivity to nature attributed to an artistic temperament. Love of the land was related to love of what that land stood for—namely the church. And the land itself was symbolic of all the hard work and sacrifice the pioneers had undertaken in order to tame the frontier for the benefit of their posterity.

Thus, nature description takes a prominent place in “John Stevens’ Courtship.” Gates uses it in two main ways. First, she uses specific description of Utah scenery as a transition between scenes or to enhance the realism of the action. For example, about halfway through the story when she needs to account for a lengthy passage of time between scenes. Gates brings in the device of the changing of the seasons. These passages are hard to excerpt because the sentences are so long and involved:

The early spring had begun to clothe the towering mountain steeps with spotted robes of brown, grey and green, and over the distant summits, the fleecy wind-clouds were draggled and torn as they trailed their white skirts over the sharp edges of the mountain tops.

Out on the hills peeped the lovely rare bulb, the pioneer children called buttercup. and here and there nestled the early, wild pink star they
called sweet williams; and rarer still, the tall, intensely blue bulbous
flower that was known as bluebell, hid its precious glory beneath the grey
walls of its shrubby friend, the sagebrush. Everywhere the sego lily
nodded with its golden brown heart and its delicate pouting lips of creamy
white. . . . (638-39)

This description continues for another full page.

Another passage where description enhances the setting comes late in the story
when John, Diantha, and Aunt Clara are searching for Ellen. The scenery complements
the apprehension of the characters:

As they flew along in the tender, young moonlight, the swift light summer
clouds anon parted and then banked up again, thus alternately revealing
and concealing the scene about them. . . . Here and there a startled rabbit
flew over the road, and disappeared into the brush, jumping with huge
leaps over the lower sagebushes, and losing himself in the faint moonlight
and the distance. The lake lay before them, and often behind them, like a
dark, purple shadow, its quiet ripples untouched by breeze, and unbroken
by even a bird. The dark mountains shut them in, and as they neared the
western rim, it seemed as if a wall of impenetrable gloom shut off further
progress. But a narrow defile led through the low hills, and on they sped.
(660-61).

The second, and more common way that Gates employs nature description is
metaphorically. This occurs in conjunction with character description so that ultimately
character and nature become one. Here, in fact, conventions of nature description become conventions of character description, pointing up the interdependence of these concepts. This device is often focused on Ellen’s character, as in the following passage:

One lovely afternoon, with the soft canyon breezes blowing down from the many clefts in the mountain walls to the east, while the bees were hummingly possessed of a desire to seize the sweets of every flower in her path, and the distant sound of the foaming river was just insistent enough to mingle with the rustling of the tall cottonwood trees over her head. Ellen strolled along the accustomed path, and with nimble fingers wove a wreath for her uncovered brown braids of wild grasses and the pale purple daisies which skirted every path in generous profusion. (371)

Does Ellen adorn nature, or does nature adorn Ellen? Where does nature end and Ellen begin? In passages like this one, the line is not clear, and it is not supposed to be. This device is part of a much larger system for describing women, which was in turn governed by a larger paradigm for describing characters, which Baym discusses extensively in Woman’s Fiction. The nineteenth-century view of gender relations was based on the observation that male and female bodies were different. “Women’s physical inferiority to men is the sexual difference that underlies, and for most of these women justifies, the asymmetry of the genderized political system” (xxvi), Baym observes. I would add that this difference justifies the asymmetry of the social system as well, supporting the belief that women need protection and men are obligated to provide it. This physical difference became the explanation for an essential spiritual and
psychological difference, as woman’s weaker body was interpreted “as signifying less
type of body,” which translated “into a sign of more spirit” (xxxvi).

This ideology, in turn, prescribed certain ways of describing male and female
bodies, based on the alignment of body with sexuality, which was expressly not spiritual.
Therefore, descriptions of women’s bodies de-emphasize sexuality and testify to a
“spiritual body, a non-body,” even though “the protagonist’s appearance is dwelt on
extensively.” Women were seen by others; their reality was in the eye of the beholder. 
Therefore, description is what makes them “real” (xxxvii). The differences in
representation of male and female bodies, Baym continues,

were relatively fixed in contrast between women’s more graceful, yielding,
tendril-like outline and the men’s more blocky shape. The male body
implies volume or density, the woman’s airy ethereality. This distinction
also associates women with the realm of the esthetic, denoted by curved
lines, and men with the realm of the mechanical, denoted by sharp angles.

Having made this gesture in the direction of male embodiment, the women
authors mostly modestly restricted their gaze to the man’s face, which they
anatomized for evidence of his probity or duplicity. The ruddy cheek, the
frank, manly, blue-eyed gaze, the high forehead, the clustering
curls—these denoted intelligence and trustworthiness in the male. (xxxvii)

Furthermore, the emphasis in women’s description is much more decorative, with
attention to differentiating among female bodies (xxxviii). The result of all these
conventions, as I have quoted elsewhere, is the construction of the ideal woman, the
approximation of woman to a type. “The ‘best’ women characters are not individuals. are not mixed, and certainly have no secrets to be laid bare. They are ‘Woman.’” (Baym. NRR 97-98).

In order to better understand how these conventions operate in “John Stevens’ Courtship,” I here conduct a detailed analysis of the passages of character description for the two main characters, John and Diantha. In a nutshell the differences can be stated as follows: John’s characterization is a function of his actions and his moral character, while Diantha’s is a function of her appearance. The reverse is also true: each character’s physical description is an indication of his or her moral character.

John Stevens. I begin with John Stevens because he is the title character and the only male character who receives extended attention in the narrative. There are 76 descriptive passages of John. This sounds like a lot, but the number is deceptive because the majority of those “passages” are very brief and incidental to other action. The overwhelming majority of these passages consist of single- or double-modifier noun phrases that appear in simple sentences or lone phrases within sentences not focused only on description. For example, early in the story, this is how John’s attempt to dance with Diantha is presented: “‘Are you going to dance with me?’ drawled John Stevens, through his long, red beard” (45). This is typical of the descriptive passages referring to John. One of the longest focuses on his eyes, allotting them a generous four adjectives: “those keen, kindly, piercing gray eyes” (433).

These descriptions of John Stevens are dominated by physical references. His physical appearance is mentioned singly or in combination with his character or emotions
a total of 67 times. This number, however, is somewhat deceptive because those physical references, in turn, consist of only a few key words: *beard, eyes, red (and synonyms), big, long, tall, hands/arms*. These key words are frequently collocated with each other, especially in reference to John’s beard, which is referred to as “red” seven times, as “long” six times, and as both “long” and “red” two times. In all, ten of the descriptive passages contain at least three of the key words listed above.

There are only two other key words used in describing John, and these refer to his moral character and his emotions. The most important of these terms is “quiet” and its synonyms of “silent,” “laconic,” “taciturn,” and “drawling,” which combine with the verbal form of “drawled” for a total of 39 references to create the dominant aspect of John’s description. This characteristic of “quiet” seems to fall somewhere between the physical and the moral. At first, I considered it a physical description, since its earliest references in the text seem to simply describe how he speaks. For example, the second descriptive passage in the story quotes him and says, “drawled John Stevens” (45). The next reference to this quality also uses this word: “drawled a lazy voice” (48), and the next two describe him as having a “slow-moving tongue” (125) and as answering “laconically” (128).

As the references to this quality begin to pile up, however, we sense that Gates intended this description of John Stevens as more than a physical characteristic. This impression is reinforced by the passages where the reference to John’s silence acts as a modifier for his name or a direct reference to him. For example, he is described as a “tall, red-bearded, slow-spoken man” (239); as “quiet John Stevens” (242); again as “big,
silent, red-bearded John Stevens” (637): and as “tall, silent John Stevens” (637). These passages occur in brief sentences that are loaded with collocations of all the key words applied to John and seem intended to sum up his character economically.

A couple of passages make the connection explicit between John’s quietness and his character. First, Diantha tells Ellen, “John is good enough, but he is so quiet; I believe he is too tame to really amount to much” (303). Here, the parallel structure makes “quiet” and “tame” synonymous. A later description of John as “slow to anger” (638) echoes the references of his being “slow spoken,” and another passage summarizes, “It cost John a little effort to answer, for he loved silence” (726).

So while the first and last references to John in the story use “drawling” as essentially a description of his manner of speech, in between we see that this reticence is the essential part of his personality. At this point it would be appropriate to point out how this aspect of his character affects the outcome of the story, but there doesn’t seem to be any significant consequence to this quality of John’s personality. That is, nothing particular in the story happens because of his quietness.

The other key word in descriptions of John is his “passion,” which is mentioned in 21 passages. Specifically this passion is usually expressed as anger at the wicked gentiles (or sometimes as love for Diantha). A multitude of synonyms are applied to convey this quality, including “rage,” “dread and alarm,” “agony,” “wrath,” “temper,” “hatred and suspicion.” Moreover, these words are frequently modified, as in “silent rage,” “silent agony,” “sudden, blind, passionate anger,” “silent yet mighty anger,” and “hungry, passionate longing.”
The passages that mention John’s emotions almost always include physical description as well. Clearly Gates is drawing on the stereotype of the “fiery red-head” so that references to “temperament” and “complexion” are practically interchangeable, but the connection between the physical and the emotional goes beyond this image. Each of the three passages that describe his passionate anger at length also includes a reference to his hands, creating a sense that John’s emotions are only realized through physical action: The first passage shows John struggling alone with his fears:

[He] trembled at the thought of strange and wicked men being brought into this peaceful valley, and left to corrupt and estrange our thoughtless and beautiful girls. He raised his hand in silent agony to heaven, and swore that his whole strength and life should be devoted to protecting and shielding them from such a terrible fate. (181, my italics)

Later, as John overhears some soldiers casually discussing their “interest” in Mormon women, John is again “seized with a sudden, blind, passionate anger” and he longs “to have one of them just now under his own clenched hands that he might strangle the pride and devil out of him” (242, my italics).

The third passage repeats this image when John faces down the evil Captain Sherwood, whom he has just caught in company with Diantha. This passage is the longest continuous description of John in the story, forming a paragraph of 32 lines. We are told that John has struggled with his temper throughout his life, but that now, “with both love and anger flooding his soul in such an overwhelming tide, he was still most powerless to even attempt to hold that temper in check. His hands kept clinching and
twitching in unavailing impotence” (434, my italics). This image combines with verbal nouns—“acquisition,” “fight,” “self-control”—strong verbs—“laboring,” “subdue,” “fought”—and intense modifiers—“passionate nature,” “his temper, that fierce, vicious thing,” “fearful apprehension and hot anger”—to create a strong sense of action in a passage that takes place entirely in John’s mind. And in all of these examples, the physical action is a key to understanding his moral character and emotional state.

Diantha Willis. There seems to be much more description of the heroine, Diantha Willis, than of John. However, upon closer examination we find that there are only 35 descriptive passages for Diantha—less than half the number for John. Once again, these numbers are deceptive, this time because the passages are intense and lengthy. Only 11 out of 76 passages maintain their descriptive focus on John for more than one sentence; meanwhile, 20 passages, out of only 35, go on and on about Diantha. Moreover, in those 35 passages, we find 61 single-modifier and 35 double-modifier constructions, significant numbers of three- and even four-modifier phrases, and a substantial number of predicate adjectives.

Numbers alone cannot fully convey the intensity of these descriptions. Here is an example from early in the story: “[Diantha] laughed and chatted merrily with the trio of young men on each side of her, her gleaming, small, white teeth giving a delicious contrast to the ripe, rosy lips that smiled and curved in tempting beauty” (44). This is a single sentence containing no less than ten modifiers referring directly to Diantha! Note, as well, how “lips” is modified both before and after, with “ripe, rosy” and “smiled and
ensuring... Gates uses this strategy frequently, ensuring the high ratio of modifiers to nouns throughout all the descriptive passages for her heroine.

Physical description dominates all the passages referring to Diantha, but unlike the descriptions of John Stevens, this physical description is not limited to a few key words and is not incidental to other actions. When Gates wants to describe Diantha, she stops the story and forces us to take a good look at her. This is not to say that certain images don’t stick out, however, as shown below by the breakdown of Diantha’s physical descriptions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Body, Limbs, and Attire</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Pink/red 24</td>
<td>• Dress 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>• White 13</td>
<td>• Form/figure 5</td>
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<td>• Arms 4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Heart 3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Waist 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parts of the Head</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cheeks/chin/complexion 15</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hair 6</td>
<td>• Beauty 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Neck 4</td>
<td>• Simple 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Head 2</td>
<td>• Handsome 2</td>
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<td>Face and Features</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Face 10</td>
<td>• Classic 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Eyes 6</td>
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<td>• Lips 5</td>
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<td>• Nose 2</td>
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<td>• Teeth 2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These intensely descriptive passages objectify Diantha by presenting her in static images. Whereas passages describing John manage to create a sense of action even when he isn’t doing anything, the passages describing Diantha make her seem static, even when we know she is moving:

Diantha’s cheeks were glowing, and her eyes looked like blazing stars of azure hue, while her lips were like the red balls on the winter wild rose
bushes. She floated around with a rhythmical grace, that was always so
bewitching an accomplishment of this queenly beauty. (554)

Here, even though the narrator acknowledges that Diantha is dancing, we see her in terms
of nouns—cheeks, eyes, stars, lips, balls, bushes, grace, accomplishment, beauty. This
same dynamic operates in the other passages of description. By taking her apart and
examining her feature by feature, each characteristic becomes another thing to look at and
breaks up her image so that we do not experience her as a whole person, but rather as a
compilation of features. Whereas nearly all of the lengthy passages describing John
maintain a sense of action, virtually none of the passages describing Diantha do. She
simply stands there to be admired.

This is part of a larger convention for female depiction that operated widely in
nineteenth-century popular literature. Susan K. Harris has observed that

sentimental language functions ritualistically, having set patterns of
imagery and rhythm that strive to re-envision women, to continually
project them in terms of universal patterns. Ultimately, what is created is
a Platonic image of the feminine that is intensely intertextual. Shot
through with allusions to nature, the Bible, classical mythologies, and
medieval literature, sentimental language is constantly referring to texts
beyond the boundaries of that in which it appears. (56)

Gates clearly uses this technique to describe Diantha, in passages that suggest she
is acting as a character in mythology or posing for a work of art, or both. For example,
the first lengthy description of Diantha occurs through the eyes of the first soldier to enter
the valley. Sent on a preliminary errand to lay out the government’s terms to Brigham
Young, Captain Van Vliet is permitted to spend a few days among the Mormons, in the
course of which he is introduced to Diantha and Ellen at Diantha’s home. This is how he
describes her:

For the elegant dignity of the girl’s carriage was fully warranted by the
superb outlines of face and form. Her head was crowned with a soft
weight of yellow hair, fine and curling; the neck curved grandly into the
loveliest shoulders and bust he had ever beheld; and these lines melted so
graciously into a full and pliant waist that he felt sure she could well pose
in marble for a perfect Hebe. Her face was not so beautiful as the brown-
eyed maiden’s, but it was so delicious in its details of red lips, deep,
thoughtful blue eyes, the richest pink cheeks and a full, strong pink chin,
that no one could withhold the need of admiration which this magnificent
girl demanded. (177)

The “neck curved,” the “lines melted”—these are words we might expect in
describing the composition of a statue or a painting, and then the art comparison is made
explicit by imagining her as a marble sculpture. The classical reference is to Hebe,
goddess of youth. A few lines later Van Vliet’s description of Diantha continues this
artistic/classical trope: “Dian’s [dress] hung in long, simple, classic folds from the short,
baby waist to the toe of her boots” (177). We note, first of all, the shortening of
Diantha’s name into the classical poetic form of the name for the goddess Diana. The
adjective “classic” applies here, as elsewhere, to her dress, but the reference to “classical”
mythology and all the imagery that implies is certainly deliberate. Finally, the use of the 
word “folds” further reinforces the statue image, sounding like a description of the 
“draperies” on a sculpture.

There is no mistaking that we are supposed to admire Diantha’s physical beauty, 
but Gates does develop her moral character quite extensively as well. Though fewer in 
number than the physical descriptions, there are also some key words relating to 
Diantha’s character: proud, sensible, noble.

Proud is another word that exists somewhere between the physical and the moral, 
and Gates uses it in both senses. The majority of the references to her pride occur in 
passages of otherwise physical description. For example, early on we are told that “her 
lovely neck just bared to show the proud lines which dipped in smooth beauty from ear-
tips to shoulders” (45). and, later, “the tender white throat rose up from her proud 
shoulders” (719). Elsewhere synonyms for pride are used to the same effect: “elegant 
dignity” (177), “somewhat cold expression and haughty air” (553).

In other references Gates makes it clear that this pride is Diantha’s chief character 
flaw:

Diantha Willis was always a reserved and a proud young woman. In her 
youth she had prided herself in the remotest recesses of her own heart 
upon her exclusiveness, and while never uncivil or haughty to even the 
most ignorant, she had still been cold, undemonstrative, and concerned 
only with life as it effected [sic] Diantha Willis. (716)
Unlike John’s drawling personality, however, Diantha’s pride does have consequences in the story. Her pride causes her to laugh at Ellen’s account of a miraculous dream another man has had that she should marry him, and this ridicule in turn leads to an estrangement between the girls that makes Ellen vulnerable to the initial advances of Captain Sherwood. Furthermore, Diantha discovers that Ellen had hoped John would fall in love with her but ignores her friend’s bitterness at being slighted by both of them. This coldness by Diantha leads directly to Ellen’s willingness to take up with the evil soldier and thus to her death.

Diantha’s character flaw, then, becomes an essential part of the moral of the story. The passage quoted above, coming right after Ellen’s funeral, continues: “Ellen Tyler’s death changed her nature, or rather, it taught her to conform her life more to the standard of Christ, and less to the promptings of a selfish heart” (716). This word proud serves as a key to Diantha’s personality, and, like drawling for John, blends the physical and the moral for Diantha. Unlike John’s drawling, however, this blending of the physical and the moral implies a weakness on Diantha’s part, which must be overcome in order to end the story successfully.

The difference in description for John and Diantha reveals the difference in conception of male versus female nature. Man is active, woman is passive. Men look, women are looked at. As our scholars have noted, this convention was by no means limited to Mormon fiction. Moreover, the fact that Diantha’s essential characteristic is a flaw that influences the outcome of the story gives her character more depth than John’s
and reinforces the story’s preoccupation with female virtue—another parallel with mainstream novels.

The Foils: Sherwood and Ellen. In further accordance with the conventions of her genre, Gates presents a foil character for each of her protagonists. The male foil is Captain Sherwood, who meets Baym’s description of the romantic villains who “indulge in demonic laughs, sneering asides, and Machiavellian monologues” (xxxvii). While the physical description of John is minimal, Sherwood’s appearance receives considerably more attention, in descriptive passages that sound like those for the women, most notably in the scene where Ellen first meets him:

How fine and silky the dark mustache was, which drooped so charmingly over the well-cut mouth. To be sure, the lips were pretty full, and the chin was not so handsome and well-cut as the mouth; but the nose was fine and the nostrils were delicate and arching, while the whole face was the handsomest she had ever seen. . . . (372)

We are still focusing on the face here, but it is a far cry from John Stevens’s “keen, gray eyes."

Such description presents Sherwood in terms that deliberately echo female description. This reinforces the equation of righteousness with manliness, the implication being that Sherwood’s wickedness disqualifies him as a true man. We are meant to grasp the contrast between John’s simple masculinity and Sherwood’s eloquent and elaborate but deceptive attractiveness.
Likewise, Ellen’s character is described in more elaborate terms than Diantha’s. Here Gates develops most extensively her intertextual and artistic tropes of description. For example, in the passage quoted above regarding Diantha’s “classical” appearance, Van Vliet also experiences Ellen in terms of mythological figures:

His interest grew into admiration as he noted the lovely brown eyes, and the waving bands of nutty brown hair, twined around the head of the sweet, fascinating Ellen Tyler. Her lips were full, red with life and beauty, and curved like a Grecian goddess’. Her sparkling charm was not alone in the regular and beautiful features, nor in the well-moulded yet dainty form; but in and through every glance, every word, there faintly bubbled an indefinable attraction which no one could resist. Women loved her, men adored her. And this stranger felt instantly the force of all her loveliness.

(177)

Besides the obvious classical reference, Ellen’s “sparkling charm,” her “indefinable attraction,” and the “force of all her loveliness” imply some kind of supernatural power such as a “Grecian goddess” might exert over a human observer. A few lines later, Van Vliet describes Ellen’s dress, in contrast to Dian’s “classic” one: “Ellen’s dress fluttered and broke into endless intricacies of bows, ribbons, flounces and rosettes” (177). This passage creates its intense description through the use of nouns—“endless” is the only adjective—and even the verbs—“fluttered” and “broke”—seem descriptive.

Such description of Ellen reveals wardrobe as personality. Ellen is described elsewhere as “vain, and consequently weak” (658), so it is no coincidence that her dresses
are always described as intricate and flouncy. In this passage particularly, we are meant to notice the contrast between Ellen’s “intricate” style and Diantha’s “simple, classic” manner.

The final long passage of description for Ellen combines the theme of wardrobe as personality and the trope of examining her as a work of art. Seen through Diantha’s eyes, we are told that “Ellen did look lovely.”

She had a new pink, print dress. . . . The skirt was made with dainty, flying ruffles, nearly to the waist, and edged with the prettiest of hand crocheted lace; while the waist, full and gathered into the belt, was fitted with bellowing, billowy sleeves of bishop shape. At the belt and near the left shoulder, were flying bows of pink ribbon: while peeping behind the right ear, a tiny bow of pink made the chestnut brown hair richer for its suggestive contrast. . . . (552)

Gates makes the artistic trope explicit when she adds, “Approaching Ellen at last, [Diantha] bestowed upon the soft, pale cheek, a small pinch, to give the dear chin and cheeks the delicate tint to complete the picture” (552). “Picture” once again reminds us that we are viewing a work of art. Such tropes of description combine with the many metaphorical references to Ellen—thirteen in all, which is more than for any other character—to make her seem unreal, even insubstantial.

I have dwelt on this aspect of “John Stevens’ Courtship” because it presents the strongest evidence for Gates’s sense of the artistic and because such description dominates the story. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that these conventions
functioned as more than convenient patterns for creating fictional characters. The idealized pictures of male and female they presented were believed to have literal application to flesh and blood people. Given the didactic intention of this fiction, such characterizations functioned to inscribe ideals that operated authoritatively to shape individual readers’ perceptions of themselves and of other people.

Under the Surface: Conceptualizing Marriage

This reification of gender ideals is one important aspect of the cultural work fiction could perform, and it points up the need to refine Tompkins’s theory to account for the different levels on which this cultural work functioned. To say that popular didactic texts performed work for their writers and readers is simply another way of saying that these people viewed fiction as an effective way of suggesting solutions to the problems their communities faced. They would have agreed with this wholeheartedly. But to modern readers it is clear that there is more going on in these stories than whatever message they are ostensibly designed to deliver. I would refer to the conscious intention of the text as its surface level or face-value cultural work. On this level home literature functioned to encourage young Mormons to stay faithful by dramatizing the consequences of sin and the blessings of staying faithful, with special emphasis on marrying within the fold.

In most of these texts, however, there is also a deeper level, which I call the “sub-surface” cultural work. This is what Tompkins means when she says that fiction provides society a way of “thinking about itself” (200). In “John Stevens’ Courtship,” one
important sub-surface function was to help Mormons reconceptualize marriage in the wake of the Manifesto discontinuing polygamy. Fictionalizing polygamy was a way of “talking about it” without *talking* about it, something that would have been awkward at best in 1895 when the truce with the government over polygamy was still fragile. Any mention of polygamy in home literature was very rare, making such instances all the more interesting. Two of Gates’s stories that I have used for this study, however, do mention it, both at some length. In order to set up the discussion of polygamy in “John Stevens” I will first have to backtrack a little and show how “Seven Times” deals with the subject.

In “Seven Times” this issue appears early in the story when Harvey Stewart proposes to Donald Jones’s sister Clara. The only problem is that Professor Stewart is already married and has two children. This incident shows the story to be set before 1890, probably in the 1860s or 70s when the practice of polygamy was less intensely disputed than after 1880, since everyone in the story (except Margery, the non-Mormon) seems to accept this proposal by Professor Stewart as an honorable and uncontroversial one.

Clara is taken aback by this proposal and seeks out her father for advice. His counsel is to put Brother Stewart off for a year, and if she hasn’t received any better proposals, to marry him then. During the course of the year, however, she takes up with a young man who is clearly a frivolous type, and they are married on something of a whim when they go to Salt Lake City to attend a church conference.

The polygamy theme seems dead at this point. Stewart is disappointed but resigned. Within a few months, however, Clara takes ill in the diphtheria epidemic, and
Harvey goes to help nurse her, playing the part of the spurned but nonetheless noble lover. His efforts are in vain, and Clara dies. Meanwhile her pitiful young husband has related to the professor how unsuccessful their marriage had been. On her deathbed, unable to speak, she dramatically signs a last message to Professor Stewart: she wants him to have her sealed to him so that they can be married in the next life. She repeatedly clasps her hands and acts as if weaving a chain, a signal to the older man of her meaning, which her husband does not comprehend.

[Harvey] felt that he knew what she was saying to him, over and over again. Weaving her chain, so anxiously weaving it, and ever and anon those silent appeals for his own recognizing answer!

He could bear it no longer! And with a slight bend of his head, he looked straight into the dazzling black eyes, deep into their very depths.

She understood, and closed her eyes as if in silent happiness. (467)

To a modern reader, this scenario seems utterly preposterous. Mormons do believe that marriages can be sealed posthumously and vicariously in their temples, but this is now done only when genealogical research has identified couples who were married during their lifetimes.

Theoretical justification for an arrangement such as Gates portrays had appeared in the Journal only a few months earlier. Entitled “A Suggestion to the Girls,” this is the article I quoted in Chapter One to show the perception that there were not enough worthy men for Mormon girls to marry. This writer suggests as a solution that Mormon girls
should find worthy men who are already married and arrange to have themselves sealed to those men after death:

    Supposing, for instance, a young woman, with no human prospect of a happy marriage here on earth, and no desire for any other union, becomes acquainted with a man already married, whom she can respect and love. National and Church laws forbid their union. But there is neither human nor divine prohibition of their being sealed for eternity after one or the other is dead. (279)

Ideally, she continues, the couple would come to an understanding and express their wishes in the presence of witnesses, as well as writing down their plans to be found among their personal papers after their deaths, when their loved ones could then fulfill their wishes through vicarious temple ordinances. Our author is conscious, she says, that men might hesitate to propose this arrangement to women; therefore, she would give the woman the privilege of making the proposal to the man. She concludes:

    If girls can adopt and console themselves with some such plan as this, they will be able to more profitably spend their time than many do at present, in vainly seeking to capture the affections of some noble youth, or, failing in this, to accept the first creature in the form of a man who presents himself as a suitor. (280)

Conveniently, this “Suggestion” offers no advice concerning the relation of the first wife to this proceeding. The practice of polygamy had required (in principle, at least) the first wife’s permission before the husband could take any more wives, but in this situation
there is apparently no such stipulation. We can only hope that the happy “lovers” would
courteously include her in their plans, and that she, in turn, would accept such plans in the
proper spirit. Such suggestions reflect how pervasive the Mormon sense of the next life
was during this period. For them, marriage relationships, no matter how difficult or
unconventional in this world, were meant to achieve their fulfillment in the eternities.
This other realm was a tangible presence in Mormons’ everyday lives.

What this most interesting little article and its subsequent appearance in fictional
form suggest is that polygamy was still very much a presence in Mormon minds, even if it
was no longer officially sanctioned. Of all the disruptions in Mormon culture during the
1890s, the abandonment of polygamy was the most profound and far-reaching. Most
everyone would have known a family that had been broken up when the husband was
forced to choose which wife to remain with, leaving the other(s) on their own. The
Manifesto must have also made a big difference in how young Mormons viewed their life
possibilities, particularly the young women. And there was theological uncertainty as
well. Mormons seem to have generally understood that they had given up the practice of
polygamy without giving up belief in the principle, but what did this mean in everyday
terms? If it had been a binding commandment from God, could they really just give it up
without incurring his disapproval? The Manifesto had not been worded exactly as a
revelation. Many, including some top church leaders, felt that it was not binding and
looked for other ways to practice polygamy. We can only speculate on the psychological
effects of this instability, but it is certain that they ran deep.
The “Suggestion” enacted in “Seven Times” represents a creative and serious attempt to retain polygamy in the Mormon thought system without violating any of the institutional boundaries that constrained marital practices. The problem is that, whatever its possibilities in real life, this suggestion does not fit well into a fictional love story. Romance, after all, is about this life. It is about physical and emotional gratification, intimacy, having someone to share life’s experiences with—regardless of what one believes about the possibility of marriage in the eternities. Even if Gates’s audience accepted her scenario as theologically sound, they would undoubtedly have recognized it as quite a stretch of the genre.

Gates’s use of polygamy in “John Stevens” occurs at a deeper level than in “Seven Times.” In the love triangle between John, Diantha, and Ellen, John wavers between his seemingly hopeless feelings for Diantha and his attraction to Ellen, who is much more willing to receive his attentions. At one point, in fact, it seems that he has resolved to marry her and forget Diantha. Aware of John’s feelings for her but thinking that Ellen would benefit from John’s strength, Diantha tries to step out of the way and make their relationship possible.

What all of these efforts ignore is the possibility that John could marry them both. This possibility is not just implied; it is suggested outright by Brigham Young himself. After John discovers the villainous Captain Sherwood attempting to keep company with his beloved girls, he reports this situation to the president, who counsels him: “‘Brother Stevens, why don’t you court one or both of those girls and marry them yourself? . . .”
sometimes think our Elders will be held responsible for the loss of our girls if they make no effort to give them a love worthy and pure’’ (498-99).

John does not respond to Young’s suggestion. We never see him consider it, and it is never mentioned again, not even amidst John’s regrets over Ellen’s tragic death. The story makes it clear that John does consider marrying each of the girls, but not both of them. Considering that the suggestion of polygamy is voiced by Brigham Young himself, and considering that the story is set in a time when polygamy was practiced more freely than at any other time, its repudiation, even in the realm of fiction, is unmistakable.

This is further evidenced by the other incident involving polygamy in the story. Through the first several installments Ellen is courted occasionally by a silly young man named Tom Allen. The only problem: Tom is already engaged to another young woman. At a gathering of the young people the subject becomes a joke between Tom and Ellen:

‘Nellie, [her nickname] I shall certainly have to take you for my second wife. You know that I am already engaged for the first time. But you shall have the privilege of coming in second. And second to none in the matter of doughnuts. Please, Nellie, give me another doughnut.’

‘Another plateful, you mean. I certainly shall not accept your offer, for if I did I should have nothing else to do the rest of my life but fry doughnuts for you and your first wife.’ (126)

This humorous treatment of the matter makes it difficult for the reader to take the possibility seriously, but it is mentioned repeatedly and finally becomes serious indeed.
A few months later Ellen relates to Diantha the story of a dream that Tom has had suggesting that she should become his plural wife:

‘Tom dreamed, or was carried away in vision, and thought he lay upon his bed, very sick and nigh unto death. As he lay there, pondering upon the past and the future, he said his door opened softly, and, surrounded by a bright light, and accompanied by soft music. Alice [his fiancee] and I entered the room, with our arms around each other, and between us we bore a banner, on which was inscribed: Polygamy or bust. Then the dream ended.’ (306)

Diantha’s response to Ellen’s story is surprising: she laughs. She laughs so hard, in fact, that she hurts Ellen’s feelings, causing the rift between them that leaves Ellen alone to take up with Sherwood. Diantha’s response is surprising because such a dream sounds no more unlikely than the many other folklore stories that were accepted as a legitimate messages from God. Again, the reason it is not taken seriously seems to rest in the social climate of Gates’s day when polygamy could not be publicly endorsed in any form.

Gates’s treatment of polygamy in “John Stevens” is thus as complex and ambivalent as its real-life position in the Mormon society of her day. On the one hand, she tries to portray polygamy as a natural part of Mormon life, unself-consciously working in references to it as part of her effort to dramatize pioneer life. On the other hand, she proves unwilling to follow through on those portrayals and make it a meaningful part of the plot, let alone a solution to the problem she has created. This time.
in fact, polygamy is not even endorsed theoretically. John Stevens’ courtship is of one
woman.

Replacing polygamy as the defining concept of marriage is the idea of a
“foreordained” mate, which appears in virtually every one of Gates’s stories. This
concept is based on the Mormon belief in a pre-mortal existence, a life before this one in
which the spirits that would be born on earth as humans lived and learned together in the
presence of God. Mormon scriptures describe how the more righteous spirits were
designated (Mormons say “foreordained”) to become God’s leaders in this world. From
this belief it was a short stretch to the idea of a foreordained mate, or the idea that each
person had known another spirit who was intended to be his or her spouse in this life. It
is this concept that Gates emphasizes.

Usually this idea is preached to the young characters by the older mentor figure; in
“John Stevens” Aunt Clara expresses it this way: “’John,’” she advises, “‘there is a
belongingness in love as in life. We are not married by chance. If that girl [Diantha]
belongs to you, you will get her. If not, you don’t want her’” (718).

This is an interesting way of dealing with the marriage issue in post-Manifesto
Mormondom. By setting her moral in the context of the original community, Gates’s
story enshrines the doctrine of the foreordained mate as the basis of Mormon beliefs
about marriage. This move retains the idea of marriage as the monolithic doctrine of
Mormonism but spins it to sidestep the question of polygamy altogether. There is nothing
about the way Aunt Clara explains this doctrine that would necessarily exclude the
possibility of polygamy, but it establishes the foreordained mate doctrine as the *essence* of Mormon beliefs about marriage, effectively subordinating any other teachings about polygamy. Because it functions within a story that concludes with a monogamous marriage, it also normalizes the ideal of monogamy, creating a space in which to imagine marriage in this in-between time of adjustment to new norms.

Because Mormon theology regarded marriage as essential to salvation, this “one and only” doctrine brings a sense of parable to home literature narratives: by assuring young Mormons that there is a foreordained mate for them somewhere in the world, these stories assure them that God has provided for their salvation. Popular romantic fiction of the nineteenth century usually involved marriage as well, but Mormon narratives give this convention a much deeper resonance by tapping into the doctrinal foundations of the community.

Under the surface, then, the cultural work performed by Susa Young Gates’s fiction was even more serious than the cultural work she set out to do on the surface level. The idealized pictures of male and female she inscribed through her stories looked pretty much like those held by the rest of nineteenth-century America. In Mormon culture, however, these gender characteristics blended with ideology of marriage and righteousness in ways that gave them staying power long after they had lost their force elsewhere. At the same time, the idea of a “one and only” or a “soul mate” was by no means a uniquely Mormon idea, but its appropriation at this critical time as a definition of
the Mormon concept of marriage represents a creative and effective reworking of polygamy in Mormon thought.

Two years after “John Stevens” first appeared, Nephi Anderson, an up-and-coming home author would take this idea and literally run with it in his novel, *Added Upon*, which became the first Mormon best seller, tracing the story of two lovers from the pre-existence through mortality and on into the next world, taking the mixture of Mormon doctrine and Mormon romance to new heights. The concept of the foreordained mate has never reached canonical status in Mormon thought, but the belief in a pre-existence is officially sanctioned, and its extension into the realm of courtship is widely accepted. While Mormons have not seen fit to adopt Gates’s original suggestion that they find ways of postponing romance into the next life, they have certainly found her idea of a pre-existent “one and only” a compelling romantic story.

“Silly Novels”: Mormon Fiction on Fiction

In spite of her success at invoking the Mormon past to enshrine the concept of a foreordained mate for the youth of her day, Gates ultimately finds herself in the same quandary that has marked her other stories. The demands of the fictional discourse and the demands of the didactic discourse cancel each other out. This is made explicit in the final installment of the story, as we watch Diantha fall in love with John and marry him, while in the background Gates attempts to preach against the very genre she employs.

Near the end of the story, as Diantha prepares Ellen’s body for burial, she reflects on what she has learned from this whole tragedy:
She felt how inadequate were the theories of the world regarding love and its proper place in our lives and she saw how the reading of silly novels rendered her conception of love fevered and romantic. She saw while sitting near the dead body of her friend with its pitiful lesson that love—that is, the romantic, unreasoning passion which is so often called love in novels and theaters—was nothing but a base counterfeit. (716)

This insight sets in motion Diantha’s realization that she really does love John and paves the way for her acceptance of him as her foreordained mate.

Such sentiments are commonplace in home literature. As we saw in the story quoted in the Introduction to this study, one of home literature’s most enduring cultural tasks was to define a place for itself in Mormon society. Whether defining marriage, idealizing womanhood, or warning against the evils of alcohol, these stories have shown that Mormons welcomed the power of fiction to grapple with the complexities of the cultural transitions they were experiencing. Under the surface, however, it is also clear that they retained some of the anxiety about fiction’s power that had led them to condemn it in the first place. Anti-fiction editorials continued to be printed occasionally in the church magazines well into the 1890s, but the home literature stories themselves took over this function and continued the commentary on fiction in just such passages as the one I have quoted above.

The problem with these inter-textual editorials about fiction is that they are subverted when Gates brings the story to its climax by drawing upon the very conventions she condemns. One brief scene will have to illustrate this general problem. Near the end
of the story, Diantha enters a dark room where John is waiting for her. Their arms brush each other, and they stand motionless for a few moments.

After a moment, he reached out, and finding her so near, he laid his arm about her waist, and as she said nothing, he drew her to him with a close, passionate embrace, and laying his own face down upon the soft hair, he held her to his throbbing heart in speechless bliss. (720)

The moment is pure passion, capped, of course, with the first kiss:

Words were too weak; he drew her face from his shoulder, and in the shadowy silence, he put his big, rough hand under her lovely chin, and thus drawing up her mouth to his own bent lips, he told her with that long, wordless caress, all the pent-up story of his life and its passion. (720)

Gates tries to remind us of the doctrinal Truth her characters are enacting by bringing in the idea of the pre-existence, echoing Aunt Clara’s earlier advice: “‘I think I must have loved you, sweetheart, when we sang together with the morning stars and shouted in unison with our companions when the foundations of this earth were laid,’” John tells Diantha (726). But when the story climaxes with a love scene that draws on all the conventions of a sensational romance, the reader isn’t thinking much about the theological implications of the love scene, no matter what the narrator says.

**Conclusion**

Such conflicts are perhaps what Geary had in mind when he observed that “Good fiction is seldom written to ideological specifications.” But such conflicts also provide
strong evidence for the state of the Mormon culture that produced these stories. Mormons had thoroughly embraced many aspects of mainstream American culture, and they were deeply ambivalent about it. The older generation, especially, worried that they were losing the younger ones to these influences, and everyone was faced with questions of how to define Mormonism in the wake of significant changes. Turning to fiction was part of their effort to preserve their vision of themselves as living “in” the world without being “of” the world. These stories provide a fascinating snapshot of a community in transition, turning, as we all do, to the power of stories to help sort out and subdue the conflicts of changing cultural and personal identity.
Conclusion: Fictional Power

However they measure up to current standards of literary quality, Susa Young Gates’s home literature stories are truly works of art. That is, they are labors, artistic actions shaping the world into manageable form. Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney has written about this relationship of work and art, drawing on the scientific definition of work:

[T]o work is to move a certain mass through a certain distance. In the case of poetry, the distance moved through is that which separates the historically and topographically situated place from the written place, the mass moved is one aspect of the writer’s historical/biographical experience, and each becomes a factor of the other in the achieved work.

(36)

Heaney’s experience is of the individual artist shaping individual experience, but the principle he defines applies equally to an author like Gates who writes on behalf of an entire group. For Mormon writers, the mass being moved is the disparity of ideals and real life—the tension between principle and practice.

The actual movement takes place through the use of a lever. This is “the principle of moments, the principle in operation when the claw hammer draws out the nail or the crow-bar dislodges the boulder. In each case, what is intractable when wrestled with at close quarters becomes tractable when addressed from a distance” (46-7). The diminishing faithfulness of Mormon youth, questions of community boundaries and collective identity, definitions of marriage--these complex problems become tractable
when wrestled with from the distance of fiction. The narrative form itself becomes the lever that performs the work. Down in the trenches of everyday life it is easy to identify problems and hard to find solutions. When removed to the realm of fiction, however, the messiness of life can be more successfully controlled because narrative focuses its attention on only those events, ideas, and people who move its purposes along, encouraging readers to construct their own personal and social identities in terms of principles, providing a framework from which to deal with the inevitable clutter of life.

As Walter Fisher has pointed out, “The operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation” (68, his italics). Fisher explores the rhetorical power of narrative—its ability to persuade us and thereby to shape our sense of identity. This power of identification is what enables us to get lost in the world of the story. As we listen to (or read) a story, we envision ourselves as part of the world it creates—we “try on” various identities—and we return from this fictional world with a stronger sense, or perhaps an altered sense, of who we are, and who we want to be. When the story is fictional, its very artificiality adds another dimension to its power by placing it in the realm of the possible, not limited by the contradictions of the present and opening our view to the realm of the ideal.

When communities tell stories about themselves, the power of identification operates on two levels: the narrative at once defines the collective identity of the group and conveys the individual’s sense of how he or she must act in order to be part of that group identity. Narratologist J. Hillis Miller describes this process well: “[F]ictions may be said to have a tremendous importance not as the accurate reflectors of a culture, but as
the makers of that culture and as the unostentatious, but therefore all the more effective, policemen of that culture. Fictions keep us in line and tend to make us more like our neighbors” (69). If identification is the operative principle of narrative on an individual basis, then idealization is the operative principle on the collective level.

But this power of idealization in narrative is also its danger, exponentially increased when the narratives are invested with cultural and moral authority, as in the case of home literature. The flip side of the “work” these narratives perform—besides grappling with the issues themselves—is that it gives a definite shape to the answers it provides for those problems, and these answers resonate with the power of moral imperative. Thus these texts become agents of social control. But the re-translation of those idealized narratives back into people’s lives is bound to require that they, in turn, disregard the “messiness” of their own lives. The result can easily be guilt or disillusionment when life doesn’t unfold according to the narrative.

While we tend to be suspicious of such idealizations today, nineteenth century readers and writers saw this ability of fiction to simplify and idealize as what made it a valuable moral agent. Fiction showed people how morality should look. It gave them goals to strive for and models to emulate. This power was a given; the concern was that such power be harnessed constructively. This view of fiction was of course not unique to Mormons, but by drawing on the already available discourse about fiction and morality they were able to define a place for it within their community, which had formerly resisted its acceptance.
If the images idealized in these early Mormon stories are unsatisfactory to us today, that should not diminish our awareness of their power for their original audience. And reading texts in this way should make us more sensitive to the uses of fiction in our own setting. Rather than viewing popular texts as artistic failures, we should recognize them for what they are—works of art that powerfully shape our experience and construct our identities.
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