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Separate and Unequal: A Comparison of African American and White Women in the 1850's, as Seen through *Ruth Hall* and *The Garies and Their Friends*

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Abstract

In the decade preceding the American Civil War, American authors Fanny Fern and Frank J. Webb wrote Ruth Hall (1855) and The Garies and Their Friends (1877), respectively. Although both novels feature female characters determined to better their lives, Fern's lens focuses on white women while Webb's is set on African American women. In analyzing these two texts, this essay defines race as Webb does: not simply as skin pigmentation, but as the combination of ancestry and communal identity, spawned from centuries of ingrained social morays interpreted as truth. These "truths" may appear arbitrary, but in fact carry tremendous clout in determining the lifestyle of everyday women. This essay examines the differences between those lifestyles, particularly in terms of how the women living them navigate the standards of womanly propriety and its economic implications. Comparative analysis demonstrates that white women like Ruth Hall have a greater burden placed upon them to behave "properly"—that is, to act demurely and follow a man's lead—which disables most from entering the work force and earning money. However, because white women can marry white men (who are adequately paid) they have an overall higher standard of living (in economic terms, at least) than their African American counterparts. By contrast, African American women (who are not enslaved) join segregated communities that negate much of

White Propriety's influence. In addition, African American women are required to join the work-force, because the men are undercompensated; however, this grants them agency denied to white women.

The year was 1855; the month, February. Across the United States, scholars and journalists were atwitter about a book that had been published three months prior called *Ruth Hall*, coming from the pen of the nation's most prolific newspaper columnist: a woman who called herself Fanny Fern. Believing herself to be protected by the anonymity of a pseudonym, Fern, aka Sarah Payson Willis, had written a blistering semi-autobiographical tale in which her family members and former employers were depicted as cold-hearted and tyrannical. She could not have guessed that her publishers, in an effort to build intrigue and sell copies, would reveal the book's autobiographical roots, thus unmasking the authoress and unleashing a Pandora's Box of disapproval at her harsh account (Grasso 253).

Even within the feminist community, opinion was divided as to whether or not Fern was warranted in openly displaying her anger; perhaps her greatest supporter was the outspoken Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who, in February of 1855, wrote an article in the Women's Rights newspaper *Una* staunchly defending *Ruth Hall*. One of the tactics she employed in doing so was to equate it

to a slave narrative; she concluded by asking of her reader, “What are the strokes, the paddle or the lash, to the refined insults, [*sic*] with which man seeks to please or punish woman?” (Stanton 30, qtd. in Grasso 255). However noble Stanton’s intentions may have been, this line of thinking presents two immediate quandaries: the first, whether she is justified in likening her own experiences so completely to those of a group whose world she has seen only transient snippets of; the second, where black women fit into a comparison between women and black slaves. Indeed, both Stanton’s concluding sentence and the examples of slave narratives she lists (*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Twelve Years a Slave*, both written by men) make abundantly clear that the status of African American women is something that even the most avid feminists of the age did not consider.

However, this does not mean that their voices went completely unheard. In his novel, *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), Frank J. Webb does an admirable job of depicting a myriad of African American women, both slave and free, and the complexity of their struggles. He also demonstrates that race extends beyond skin tone, as three of the book’s “black” characters are, in appearance, white. Rather, race is a blend of ancestry—knowledge of even one African ancestor, no matter how far removed, is enough to be labelled “black”—and communal identity, which is the product of the attitude and behaviors of one’s acquaintances and is premeditated by ingrained social morays. It is primarily from that book, as well as *Ruth Hall*, that I draw inspiration for this essay, in which I pick up where Stanton left off to dissect the differences between living as a “white” woman and living as a “black” woman in 1850’s America. Fettered by propriety, economy, and the intermingling of the two, both groups of women grappled with achieving stability and self-sufficiency in distinct ways, but neither could obtain them without an elusive combination of perseverance and luck; a damning truth which chal-

lenges the notion of American Exceptionalism and the American Dream.

1. *Ruth Hall*

The work of disenfranchisement begins at an early age, as Fern demonstrates in *Ruth Hall*. At its core a bildungsroman, the story begins with Ruth recounting her childhood years, which she spent yearning for love. At first, she pines for the love of her family, especially that of her critical and foppish brother, Hyacinth, whom “the world smiled on” for his looks and talent for writing, which could grant him “fame, and what was better, love” (Fern 4). However, her attempts to gain his affections through menial work—“righting” his papers and preparing him lunch—are resolutely ignored and discarded (4); indeed, the only time he pays attention to her at all is to inform her that she is “very plain” and “awkward” (4). In so doing, Hyacinth sends a strong message: that physical attractiveness is her only means of agency. The quality and constancy of Ruth’s work yields her nothing but dismissal; she must be beautiful to be heard.

Her adolescence, spent at an all-girls’ boarding school, only solidifies the reality of her brother’s implied opinion. From the start Ruth, much like her brother, displays a natural flair for writing; however, this quality does not grant her privileges as it does Hyacinth. Instead, the other girls use her acumen and desire to please others to convince her to write their compositions for them, which affords them the time to flirt with and gossip about the young men that they hope to date (5-6). Although her initial “plainness,” in Hyacinth’s words, at first disqualifies her from participating in this pursuit, in time she unconsciously sheds her awkwardness, becoming quite striking and flush with suitors. Of the moment Ruth realizes this change, the narrator writes: “She had arrived at the first epoch in a young girl’s life—she had found out her power!... *She*, Ruth, could inspire love! Life became dear to her. There was

something worth living for—something to look forward to. She had a motive—an aim.... History, astronomy, mathematics, the languages, were all pastime now” (6). There is a subtle, but significant difference in tone between the omniscient narrator and the narrator who speaks for Ruth—a difference that reveals a deeper truth than Ruth yet understands. According to the narrator, the source of Ruth’s joy is simply the hope that she is now attractive enough to find somebody who will love her—and that she will love in return. However, the narrator also sees beyond Ruth’s romanticism and defines her good looks as her “power”—one that is eventually realized by all young girls. This “power” enables them to achieve their ultimate goal: finding a husband. Of course, sadly, it does little else; beauty does not lend its subject wisdom, perseverance, or any other positive qualities. Indeed, if anything, it seems to hinder their development; after her revelation, Ruth perceives her studies to be a hobby, rather than a serious endeavor. Even still, the fact that she continues to study at all is baffling to most of her classmates, as “all the world knew that it was quite unnecessary for a pretty woman to be clever” (7). Marriage, in the eyes of a young woman of Ruth’s complexion and standing, is the only way to achieve happiness and fulfillment; intellectual capacity and marketable skills are detritus, doomed to be swept away once she becomes a wife and her husband assumes the role of sole income provider.

Indeed, for a married woman to assist her husband and family financially by taking up the working mantle was not just “unnecessary,” but scandalous and shameful for all parties. Ruth comes to understand this directly after her beloved husband Harry dies of illness, leaving her to provide for their two daughters, Katy and Nettie, singlehandedly. Left destitute by her relentlessly cheap and uncaring relatives, she scrambles to find employment, but finds the doors shut in her face time and again, both by strangers and friends. One such friend is Mr. Tom Herbert, who, in chapter XL, makes his first and last appearance in the

book. For three pages, he and his wife, Mary, discuss a most curious event that occurred earlier that day at work; Ruth had arrived, asking to be hired. He laments, “[A]ll I could think of was, what Harry (poor fellow!) *would* have said, had he ever thought his *little* pet of a wife would have come begging to me for employment” (97). Herbert sees Ruth’s attempt to earn her own wages as shameful, rather than responsible or commendable, and expects that Harry would have seen it the same way. Referring to her as “his little pet of a wife” underscores his understanding of middle-and-upper-class women: to him, they are like small animals to be looked after and provided for, who cannot be expected to fend for themselves.

Of course, he establishes (albeit indirectly) that he feels differently about lower-class women when he admits that the type of work that Ruth is looking to do is typically “done by forty hands, in a room directly over the store,” and is mortified when she offers “to come and sit among those girls, and work *with* them” (97). In his mind, for a woman of good standing to work—especially alongside the economically disadvantaged—instantly lowers her; it is debasing, his horror implies.

His sentiments are, to no one’s surprise, echoed with far less sympathy by Hyacinth Ellis. When Ruth sends him samples of her writing in the hopes that he will employ her, he callously replies that she has no talent and that she should “seek some *unobtrusive* employment” (147). The italics say what he does not; that her efforts to support herself financially are shameful, and he does not want word of them to reach him or his colleagues.

Critic Karen Weyler explores this subject in her article, “Literary Labors and Intellectual Prostitution: Fanny Fern’s Defense of Working Women.” She posits that Fern is sympathetic to the plight of prostitutes because she sees them as the product of a system that does not properly compensate women for so-called “honest” work; prostitution is a last resort in the face of abject poverty

(Weyler 108). The topic is briefly breached in *Ruth Hall*, when, as Ruth's eyes scan the unfortunate neighborhood that she and her children have been forced to inhabit, they land on a "pretentious-looking house, the blinds of which [are] almost always closed" (Fern 112). There, in the windows, she occasionally spies women whose faces are "never without the stain that the bitterest tear may fail to wash away" (112) and empathizes with their struggle to survive a world of loneliness and poverty. Both Ruth and the prostitutes are at the mercy of men who moralize about how a "proper" woman ought to behave without ever having ever had to suffer the sting of discrimination, the ache of abandonment, or the harsh reality of an empty pocketbook.

Ruth's connection to prostitution is further developed in a seemingly innocuous conversation between two servants of her wealthy and niggardly cousin, John Millet. Every now and then, over the course of the book, Fern shifts away from Ruth's perspective, instead listening in on conversations held *about* her by characters of little or no consequence to the plot; one such example is the chat between Betty and Gatty, two women whose only tie to Ruth is their awareness of her tragic circumstances. Betty opens the discussion by mentioning that she has seen Ruth "bending over the wash-tub, and rubbing out her clothes and her children's, with my servants, till the blood started from her knuckles" (101). I would be remiss not to point out the sexual implication of Ruth "bending over," or the double-entendre of "rubbing"; but even more compelling is the description of her hands. The fact that they bleed—no doubt, because they have never been subjected to such rough treatment—evokes the vaginal bleeding that occurs in some women the first time they have intercourse, caused by the breaking of the hymen. Ruth's "virgin" hands, which are a part of her body, are similarly splintered and sold out—"prostituted"—for the sake of survival; though Ruth is not a literal prostitute, the degradation of her body and spirit nevertheless permeates the

pages.

Yet even more insidious is the strain that Ruth's sorry circumstances places upon her adherence to the standard of womanly propriety she most ardently endeavors to uphold: to be a mother capable of emotionally supporting her children. In Ruth's previously prescribed life path, which ended when Harry died, her role was clear: to see to the day-to-day needs of her husband and children, as well as to the upkeep of the household. (The importance of the latter qualification, however, is debatable; as a man of wealth and good standing, Harry was able to hire servants and cooks to take care of day-to-day chores.) Free from the toil of maintaining a steady job and income, a "proper" wife is meant to be blithe and becoming; she aids her family by providing moral support and making the most of the available means. If she is agitated or unhappy, she does not show it; and, indeed, Ruth follows this doctrine to the letter. When Harry's mother cruelly and ceaselessly berates her out of jealous spite, she resolves to remain silent, lest she cause him distress (15), and proves to be an empathetic and loving mother, able to tell that her first child, Daisy, is seriously ill before anybody else can (42), and frequently frolics, happy and carefree, with Daisy across the grounds (26).

However, after Harry dies, things change. Despite her best efforts, Ruth is unable to keep the scope of her sadness secret from her two remaining children. She becomes aware of her failure when, upon receiving a bouquet of flowers from an old acquaintance of hers and Harry's, she begins talking about the times they shared together; Katy, "with eyes brimming with joy," commands, "Tell more—tell more; smile more, mamma" (103-04). Katy's overwhelming happiness at so small a gesture as a smile speaks volumes to the deep concern she harbors for her mother.

No doubt, this concern is worsened by Ruth's declining health, and inability to find work. The young widow's grief and stress manifest them-

selves corporeally, as she begins to suffer from debilitating migraines that appear quite frequently. Their persistence is alluded to when Katy, at Ruth's behest, goes to her maternal grandfather (that is, Mr. Ellet) to ask him for money; peeved, he demands to know why Ruth did not come herself. Katy replies that her mother is sick, to which Mr. Ellet quips, "Seems to me she's always sick" (108). Due to her condition, Ruth cannot be the source of strength and emotional support that she wants to be for her daughter; indeed, she is not even aware of her father's growing displeasure, or that he takes it out on Katy, until the child finally confesses, in tears, that she is afraid of him (113). Where before Harry's death Ruth had the ability to sense when something was wrong with one of her children, she is now unaware of what they are thinking and feeling. Although her devotion to them is obvious, as they are the motivating force behind her increasingly degrading job search (123), it is clear that she cannot simultaneously attend to their physical requirements (providing food, clothing, and shelter) and anticipate their emotional needs—a fact that troubles her greatly, and that she is powerless to change.

Overall, what is perhaps most arresting about Ruth's struggle to obtain the acceptance of White Society is that almost none of the dissent she encounters is triggered by factors within her control; rather, the insinuation that she is "improper" is the direct result of others' misdirected anxiety and economic misgivings. Ruth's family dismisses her because of the economic burden she represents; Harry's parents vilify her because they are unwilling to cede control of their son to anybody; and the "friends" and acquaintances who deem her actions after Harry's death shameful do not fully grasp (or outright ignore) the financial and emotional burden that is the impetus of her search for employment. Ironically, her desires (to be a good wife and mother) and comportment (of pious self-discipline), which are displayed prominently in wake of their collective rejection, reveal her to be perfectly suited to the role of a "proper"

woman. Sadly, Ruth, and women like her, neither invent nor enforce the criteria of propriety, and so, ousted and penniless, she is compelled to cease chasing this impossible standard altogether in order to survive.

2. *The Garies and Their Friends*

However, as Webb makes clear in *The Garies and Their Friends*, prospects are quite different for young women of color. The most immediate distinction is that there is no shared standard that binds them; while nearly all white women are expected to marry and run their husband's household, African American women have vastly different life experiences and expectations depending upon where they are raised—specifically, whether they are raised in the North or in the South.

Although Webb's narrative focuses primarily on the "free" North, where the majority of the novel takes place, it begins in Antebellum Georgia, where the Garies originally reside. On a sprawling estate in the Savannah area live the kindly (if clueless) Mr. Clarence Garie, Sr., and his "wife," the beautiful Mrs. Emily Garie. Mr. Garie is white and owns a host of slaves; among them is Emily, who is a mulatto (half-black, half-white). However, he treats them compassionately, and genuinely loves his "wife" (who, because of anti-amalgamation laws, is his wife in name only); loves her enough, even, to give into her pleading and surrender his eminently comfortable lifestyle, moving up North to Philadelphia so that she and their children might be free. Truly, he is the South at its most gallant; and her life is the greatest ideal a Southern black woman could aspire to. In the South, nearly all women of color are slaves, which automatically sunders their autonomy; they must therefore rely on sympathy from powerful white men to alleviate the burden of chains.

University of North Carolina professor Jennifer Larson writes extensively on this dependency in her article, "Renovating Domesticity in *Ruth Hall*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,

and *Our Nig*.” Looking at these texts through a feminist lens, she finds in all three male failure to protect the female protagonists; in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, this failure is put in the context of slavery. The “slave girl” in question, Linda Brent, tries to escape the lecherous cruelty of her owner, Dr. Flint, by taking another white man, Mr. Sands, as her lover. She hopes that in so doing she will save not only herself, but also her future children, from slavery; that he will emancipate them, as Mr. Garie does. Sadly, Mr. Sands does not fit the ideal of Mr. Garie; by the end of the narrative, they are all still enslaved (Larson 547). It is a chilling ending that emphasizes the exceptionality of Emily Garie’s situation; the fact that her (Emily’s) owner is softhearted enough to consider her feelings and take legitimate action to assuage her concerns is the product of little more than good fortune. Ultimately even Garie, a perpetual optimist, sees this, when he must, in preparation for his departure, select an overseer to monitor his business. Recalling the men who volunteered for the position, he “sickened... and as he listened to their vulgar boastings and brutal language, he blushed to think that such men were his countrymen” (Webb 92).

One might draw a comparison, then, between the slave women who seek to further their prospects by accepting the advances of white men and the white women who desire to secure their futures through marriage (often to those same men); however, regardless of the similarity of intent, reality renders such a comparison moot. In this time period, all white men of a certain age are expected to marry a white woman of similar social standing and raise a family; therefore, the expectation of said women to be married is reasonable and quite likely. By contrast, the records show that it is a truly exceptional man that treats his slave mistress as an equal, and does what she asks of him; furthermore, any hope of shared assets is impossible, since interracial marriage is illegal. This cold reality is acknowledged in *The Garies* when, having heard about Garie’s plan to move

to the North, Garie’s “kind-hearted” (124) Uncle John comes to visit his nephew and to offer unsolicited advice. He beseeches Garie to remain in the South, as relocating would make it “difficult to shake [Emily] off... in case [he] wanted to marry another woman” (125). When Garie responds that he would never do such a thing, as Emily is as much his wife as his (white) mother was his (white) father’s, Uncle John rejoins, “Hush, hush; that is all nonsense, boy; and besides, it is paying a very poor compliment to your mother to rank her with your mulatto mistress” (126). Despite John’s claim that he likes Emily a great deal (126), and the “marked kindness and respect” he appears to show her (124), it is clear that, from his perspective, she does not merit the same considerations as a white woman would in her position.

Moreover, this attitude extends beyond Uncle John; indeed, what qualifies Mrs. Garies’ life as both charmed and exceptional is that, within the confines of Mr. Garie’s estate, she behaves as a “proper” white wife would. She is by his side as he entertains guests (90) and is assisted by servants in caring for her children (including a nurse (49), and a potential governess (46)). However, the world outside of Garie is largely unwilling to recognize her efforts; when delineating to him her rationale for wanting to leave the familiarity and luxury of the South, she cites a lack of female friends, explaining, “The white ladies of the neighborhood will not associate with me, although I am better educated, thanks to your care, than many of them” (90). Significantly, it is the white women whom she attempts to befriend, as she considers them her social equals, rather than the black female slaves who undoubtedly surround her daily—despite the fact that she technically counts among their ranks. She tries to assume the role of a Southern Belle, but her racial ancestry bars her from obtaining the privileges of that society, like respect and solidarity, beyond her homestead; and even there she is not always safe from scorn. In the same paragraph, she admits that most of the white “gentlemen” who come to visit Garie

“look down upon and despise [her] because [she is] a coloured woman” (90). Furthermore, her education as well as her status as Mr. Garie’s wife separate her from her fellow slaves within the boundaries of the estate, leaving her almost totally isolated. This duality defines her character as one of mixed messages; she is at once a symbol of hope—a beautiful, intelligent, educated young African American woman who exhibits great influence over her wealthy, white husband—and a reminder of the fruitlessness of so being in the context of Southern society.

For free black women, on the other hand, expectations are quite different. Without the institution of slavery forcing co-habitation between blacks and whites, Northern society is far more segregated, and the influx of African Americans in the workforce often breeds panic and resentment among white workers who fear for their economic stability. For that reason, black workers are unanimously relegated to unglamorous, ill-paying, blue-collar jobs, regardless of their qualifications. Uncle John explains this reality to his nephew as well; amalgamation, though common in the South, is dangerously divergent in the North (125). Thus, in the Free states, there is a sphere occupied by blacks, and a sphere occupied by whites, with clearly defined boundaries separating the two, as opposed to the shared spaces and hazy lines of the South. As a result, the doomed competition between black and white women for status and security is nullified; in the North, while white women, like Ruth’s boarding school peers, continue to flirt and scheme, black women, liberated from the watchful eye of white male expectation, forge a new standard and a new, black (female) propriety distinct from its white counterpart.

This upheaval, according to *The Garies and Their Friends*, is rooted in the economic disparities between the two communities. The example held up for consideration is the Ellis family. There are five members in total: Mr. Charles Ellis, Sr., a “thrifty mechanic,” originally from Savannah (64); Mrs. Ellen Ellis, the household ma-

triarch, once a servant of the Thomas family, who makes and mends clothes for cash; their eldest child, Esther, “a girl of considerable beauty, and amiable temper” (56) who assists her mother in her work; the middle child, Caroline (“Caddy”), “a most indefatigable housewife” (56) and fellow assistant who is prone to irritation; and finally the youngest child, Charles Ellis, Jr., aka “Charlie,” who is bright but impetuous. Mr. Ellis’ occupation as a mechanic, though respectable, is insufficient to support of a family of five; only with his wife’s additional income can the family stay afloat. During a chat with her (white) former employer, Mrs. Thomas, whom she reveres, Ellen Ellis admits as much: “Husband’s business, it is true, has not been as brisk as usual, but we ought not to complain; now that we have got the house paid for, and the girls do so much sewing, we get on very nicely” (63). Alongside work, African American girls also attend school—though in reality there is little opportunity for them to make practical use of their education (63-64); due to lack of options, most girls ultimately become maids, cooks, or seamstresses, and continue to earn wages even after marriage.

However, this state of affairs is not entirely burdensome, for while menial labor nearly ruins *Ruth Hall*, who is excoriated and belittled by most of her acquaintances for participating in as uncouth a practice as earning a living, it seems to strengthen the women of the African American community, who gain influence and autonomy through their contributions. As Larson notes:

[M]ale failure may cause or deepen oppression—an oppression rooted in patriarchal power—but in the end, there is some, if not complete, triumph and independence. This triumph is found through work and manifests itself in a renewed domesticity that is both satisfying and implicitly matriarchal. This emphasis on work challenges the roles and spheres that domestic discourse prescribes for women. Work is not just an

economic necessity for these women; it becomes an avenue through which they can explore their identities and their oppressions (Larson 549).

Indeed, there is little doubt that in the Ellis family the women reign supreme. This is made obvious from the moment the family is introduced, in a chapter titled “A Glance at the Ellis Family.” It begins as Charlie, having taken longer than necessary to run the errand requested of him by his mother, is unceremoniously dragged home and literally shoved in the door by Caddy, who announces that she found him playing marbles instead of heading home (55). His mother then orders him to bed, which sparks a debate among the three women as to whether he should be allowed to eat supper that night (57-58). Mrs. Ellis references her husband precisely once, and only to announce that he will be arriving home late, telling Caddy to save him a slice of cake (57). She obviously feels no need to consult him on how best to discipline Charlie, and Charlie makes no effort to rebuff his mother’s decision, simply slinking off to his bedroom silently. Because she is an equal contributor to the family’s income, she has a control over the household’s inner workings that at least equals that of her husband—a control that is partly shared by her daughters who help her in her work.

Of course, as Anna Mae Duane rightly points out in her article, “Remaking Black Motherhood in Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends*,” Webb’s depiction of the African American family directly challenges much-cherished stereotypes about African American women. The ideal of the kindly, patient, and maternal black housekeeper—the Mammy—is parodied by Caddy, who is constantly stressed and aggravated at those who bring mess into the house; Charlie, in particular (Duane 207). Her anger is even more interesting considering the fanfare surrounding *Ruth Hall*, and the “‘manly’ wit and the sarcasm of a soured soul” (Dall, qtd. in Grasso 256-57) Fern applied to her writing. As a white authoress, the reading public deemed Fern’s bitterness inexcusable; by con-

trast, Caddy’s family generally accepts her temper. Mr. and Mrs. Ellis never scold her for constantly disparaging Charlie, and when she mistakes their houseguest, Winston, for a beggar, and hits him over the head, the incident is treated as a joke, rather than a serious cause for concern (Webb 81-82). Even when her rage leads to an accident that nearly costs Charlie his life, Mrs. Ellis instantly forgives her, and in fact instructs Esther to be kinder to Caddy, who is inconsolable with remorse (117). Moreover, Caddy feels no shame in expressing her feelings; never does she attempt to soften her tone, or avoid harsh words, as Ruth does in the face of her mother-in-law’s spiteful attitude towards her (Fern 15).

Neither, for that matter, does Esther. From the outset, the eldest sibling is outspoken, especially in her defense of Charlie, but the full measure of her defiance is not revealed—even to herself—until a white mob stages an unprovoked attack against the black residents of Philadelphia. Mr. Walters, an African American man of considerable fortune and influence, gathers those who might be targeted (including the Ellises) into his house, which he has converted into a makeshift fortress, lined with weapons and barricaded windows. While Mrs. Ellis is nervous about the danger, Esther is simply angry; she tells Walters heatedly that she wishes she were a man, because then she would be able to kill their attackers. When Walters expresses admiration at her bravery, she requests that he teach her to load a pistol, so that she may fight on the front lines. Mrs. Ellis is horrified at her daughter’s words and actions, which she deems “unwomanly” and “unchristian” (Webb 213-14).

This incident marks the only occasion in which the notion of womanly propriety is attributed to any of the Ellis women. Significantly, the reprobation comes from Mrs. Ellis, who had worked, from girlhood (60) until marriage (64), under the vain but well-bred Mrs. Thomas, whom she considered “a miracle of wisdom” (64), and who is a “proper” lady; moreover, in fairness, the

subject of murder (even in self-defense) is grave enough to reasonably warrant some alarm. Nevertheless, the language Ellen Ellis employs in expressing her concern directly echoes the rhetoric of some of Fern's most outspoken critics. One in particular, Caroline Dall, a self-avowed feminist, was appalled by *Ruth Hall*; she reasoned, "Resistance may be a duty, but not that which consists in warlike defence [*sic*]—only that which abides in noble self-restraint" (Grasso 256). Had Dall also read *The Garies*, she would have no doubt agreed with Mrs. Ellis' assessment of her daughter's exuberance in protecting herself and her community, a commitment that constitutes the very definition of "warlike defense," far beyond any guised slights Fern lobbed at her relatives and ex-bosses.

However, unlike both Fern and her protagonist, who were nearly undone by the restrictive power of scrutiny, Esther is completely unaffected by her mother's dismay, thanks to the timely and effective intervention of Mr. Walters. He is neither intimidated nor unnerved by her passion; instead, he finds it both honorable and attractive. After Mrs. Ellis' panicked reprimand, he tells Esther, "You are a brave one, after my own heart" (Webb 214). Then, when Esther requests to be taught how to shoot, Mrs. Ellis again attempts to take charge, ordering her to desist; however, Walters intercedes and agrees to be her teacher, quieting Ellen's objections (214).

Walters' words and actions in this scene do more than facilitate Esther's growth as a woman and as a character; they establish a new standard, a new propriety, for free black women. In rejecting the old white standard espoused by Mrs. Ellis, and instead treating Esther as someone just as capable—and with just as much right—to anger and action as himself, he validates the position of black women as equal to their male counterparts. This affirmation is further extended when Mr. Walters proposes marriage to Esther and she refuses to accept his offer until her family can generate more wealth, for fear that others will say that she is taking advantage of his consider-

able fortune (268-69)—and he respects her decision. This entire scenario would be almost unthinkable in the world of white womanhood depicted in *Ruth Hall*, wherein the entire purpose of a young woman's life is to find a husband—ideally one who is wealthy and/or has a high social standing. The fact that Walters ticks off every conceivable box for prime marriage material and Esther still tells him "no" proves that marriage is not her top priority. More incredible still is that, despite the economic uncertainty they face after Mr. Ellis is injured in the mob attack and put out of work, her family does not put any pressure on her to accept his proposal; her mother purportedly tells her to "act just as [she] feel[s] is right" (269). In contrast to Ruth's relations, who are obsessed with making money off her, the Ellises emphasize that Esther think independently of them to decide what is best in her own life.

3. Synthesis

In the end, thankfully, Ruth does eventually find a sympathetic benefactor in a newspaper editor called Mr. Walter, who values both her work and her resilience; however, that is only after suffering much hardship and mistreatment for her attempts to become independent. Indeed, unlike Esther, the only time *Ruth Hall* is truly able to speak her mind is when she writes under the penname "Floy," the anonymity of which allows her to escape persecution. Nevertheless, Larson counts her among those women who "triumph" over patriarchal oppression; yet I question the extent to which that is the case. After all, her success is only possible because she hides her identity; in fact, at the beginning of her career, many doubted that "Floy" could possibly be a woman, given the intelligence and pointedness of her prose. Despite the substantial financial capital she has garnered by the end of the book, at no point does Ruth ever have the privilege of free expression in her daily life that Caddy and Esther so thoughtlessly exhibit.

And yet, it would be equally presumptuous to

claim that Caddy and Esther are in a privileged position. Though they are not as strictly bound by propriety as Ruth is, they are undeniably shackled by poverty; for while they have the opportunity to make money, the wages they would earn in the jobs available to them are middling. In truth, it is only by necessity that they work at all, because African American men are also chronically under-compensated; structuring a dual-income household is most often the only way to ensure that the bills are paid. In comparison, white women are generally able to rely on their husband's income to support them both, and as a whole enjoy greater financial security. Ruth's early life is a testament to that; while her husband was alive, her existence was charmed. Ultimately, however, the somewhat depressing truth is that while each of the characters mentioned in this essay achieve some form of victory over the restraints of the Patriarchy, none of them can completely separate from it. At the end of the day, *Ruth Hall* still relies on her amicable editor (who is quite possibly in love with her), Mr. Walter, to publish her work, while the Ellis women continue to work hard for very little money. Worse still is the recognition that these are the exceptional cases; the hundreds of thousands of women across the country that "towed the line" during the 1850's did not get novels written about them. Nevertheless, the fact remains that both *Ruth Hall* and *The Garies and Their Friends*—books about women, both white and black, who fight fearlessly for what they believe in—were written and published at a time when slavery was still legal and women could not vote. Even the fact of their existence speaks to a willingness to question what defines propriety, how women should behave, and whether we can truly call America "exceptional" if such a large number of its citizens are kept from realizing their potential because of their race and/or gender.

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