

## Introduction

# Domestic Literacy and Social Power

---

---

*He diligently read to her his lessons.*

Lydia Sigourney, *The Faded Hope*

---

---



In the introductory pages for her 1865 *Looking Toward Sunset* anthology, Lydia Maria Child reflected back on her long, prolific writing career. Child used her preface to position her book within a far-reaching circuit of exchanges with readers, while characterizing herself as a congenial manager of others' domestic literacy. "I occasionally meet people," she confided, "who say to me, 'I had many a pleasant hour, in my childhood, reading your *Juvenile Miscellany*; and now I am enjoying it over again, with my own little folks.'" As a motherly teacher of these domesticated readers, Child suggested in her self-characterization, she had established their personal literature-reading habits in ways that were later replicated when they became parents themselves, with their "own little folks." The power of this cultural reproduction process was relatively easy—and perhaps strategically important—for Child to downplay: "Such remarks remind me," she declared, "that I have been a long time in the world; but if a few acknowledge me as the household friend of two generations, it is a pleasant assurance that I have not lived altogether in vain."<sup>1</sup>

Despite Child's modesty about her print texts' guidance of others' family literacy, such stories about domestic teaching merit more careful scru-

tiny than has been given to them so far.<sup>2</sup> As a cultural history, then, *Managing Literacy, Mothering America* explores what it meant to the nation, to visions of American motherhood, to middle-class women readers, and to writers such as Child herself for numerous nineteenth-century women authors to construct themselves as “household friend[s]” teaching multiple generations. Drawing upon an archive of narratives by authors whose writing was more influential in its own day than appreciated in our own, this study examines social composing processes, recurring internal traits, shared reading practices, and educational values associated with a body of narrative literature about domesticated literacy. These texts, using plots focused on guided literacy acquisition, provided middle-class women with indirect yet influential avenues into a political culture from which they were legally excluded, from the beginning of Constitutional government in 1789 until they were finally given the vote in 1920.

This flexible genre circulated in a variety of publishing venues in the United States during the long nineteenth century. Through interactions with children and adult readers, these narratives contributed to the formation of an idealized “American” moral identity to be guided by feminized, home-based literacy practices. The core premise of *Managing Literacy, Mothering America* is that sustained management of a particular brand of literacy (in particular, for studying literature) was promoted by a long line of authors depicting middle-class maternal teaching through print text as essential to leading the nation. Exploring how this adaptable narrative form addressed socially significant teaching goals, this study emphasizes connections linking middle-class home reading practices; shifting literature production and consumption models; gender-, race-, and class-based educational agendas; and sociopolitical issues facing the United States at different times in the genre’s developmental history.

At the heart of this analysis are stories that appear to be quite transparent: narratives showing maternal figures teaching young Americans to read, write, and learn about the world through oral and written language, thereby giving them an idealized moral character to benefit their national community. The very simplicity of this recurring plot is surely one cause of its functional influence—as well as its literary significance—having been underexamined for so long. This study counteracts that neglect by situating literary analysis more directly within the interpretive framework of literacy studies and by viewing home education through an American studies/cultural studies lens. This interdisciplinary move is particularly necessary since the genre in question—the domestic literacy narrative—itself por-

trayed American literature as living at the center of nineteenth-century home-based learning. That is, in its then-familiar scenes of mothers and children discussing stories together, this genre valued literature not only as an aesthetic product but also as a source of social knowledge and improvement—for the characters successfully learning within the narratives and, by extension, for the circle of readers outside that fictive world yet presumably reenacting its values.

A review of Emma Willard's 1830s *Journal and Letters* in the *Ladies' Magazine*, an early and enthusiastic promoter of the form, demonstrates how overtly such writing could be bound to motherly teaching. The reviewer praises Willard for taking on "the improvement of her own sex" and observes that addressing this goal had "enabled her to do so much in the work of education." To define Willard's character, the *Ladies' Magazine* describes her as going ever "'onward, and upward,' in the career of morals and literature." Conflating the book with the author's own identity, the reviewer links both print text and writer to "the relation of *mother*," with its "high aim, of training . . . children for a life of goodness and usefulness," then imagines an extension of Willard's example to other American women, until "we should have no doubt respecting the destiny of our Republic."<sup>3</sup>

Whether an "aim" attributed to authors like Willard, or a role being enacted by the imaginary maternal characters in these narratives, managing literacy involved guiding learners' interpretation of social messages embedded within print texts. In either case, the "literacy management" being achieved was closely aligned with gender- and class-related strategies for acquiring community-wide influence. As a gendered activity, the literacy management depicted in these narratives assumes that the maternal teacher's political power was mainly indirect, achieved through her guidance of others' (her children's, and primarily her son's) literacies. By directing their reading, writing, and oral language acquisition, she also shaped their public behavior and thus, eventually, their influence on the nation. At the same time, this purposeful "management" enterprise was closely associated with middle-class status. Cast as a parallel to the evolving model of male middle-class management in the workplace, the middle-class mother figure in these stories directs learning by managing the use of print text. Like the male middle-class manager, this motherly administrator depends upon the physical labor of other classes (such as the domestic workers who free her up for fireside teaching). Assuming the nationwide generalizability of her daily activities and their associated value system, she promotes self-validating pat-

terns for social interaction while reinforcing the very class divisions her work requires yet pretends not to see. The ideology of maternal domestic literacy management, therefore, caused social power to accrue to middle-class (primarily white) women at the expense of others, while claiming to serve the national welfare.

On both an internal and an extratextual level, domestic literacy narratives advocated the type of literacy they portrayed—one defining middle-class reading/writing practices as ideally home based or at least home inflected and affirming the special responsibilities (and powers) of maternal teachers. At the same time, this vision of guided domestic literacy contributed to contests over the nature and social position of American literature in a nation bent on defining itself and preparing moral citizens, at least in part, through communal literate activity. Accordingly, this literary genre's managers of literacy were, on one level, the mother figures *in* stories about domesticated literacy development. But they were also an extratextual group of readers, since the stories' maternal characters served as accessible role models inviting women (or some women, at least) to see themselves as part of a community, undertaking a shared educative enterprise.<sup>4</sup> Along the way, by associating good citizenship with mother-managed literacy, the narratives gained advantages for both the print-constituted middle class (being nationalized through its own norm-setting literacy practices) and the genre's authors (who self-identified as active members of this same class).

Perhaps no better example of the domestic literacy narrative's social positioning of the mother-teacher and her instructional program exists than Lydia Sigourney's *The Faded Hope* (1853). A memoir of her son's literacy development, the book blends her biographical narration with edited entries from his voluminous journals.<sup>5</sup> Sigourney published this text in the 1850s, when white middle-class women writers' domestic literacy narratives were already well established as a literary genre. Serving both as sentimental eulogy and as didactic model for other mother-teachers, *The Faded Hope* synthesizes three important identities for Sigourney—writer, mother, and teacher—in ways that are sometimes difficult for twenty-first-century readers to appreciate. Throughout the biography, Sigourney uses Andrew's own writing and her sentimental anecdotes about him to emphasize that their shared literacy molded his character, one she presents as an ideal for other American youth to emulate. In the process, as is typical of the genre, Sigourney celebrates her own maternal management of reading and writing while seeming to concentrate on praising the well-educated son. In its

treatment of mother-led literacy within a complex social context, *The Faded Hope* embodies both the empowering vision and the troubling limits typical of domestic literacy narratives.

For instance, Sigourney devotes one section of the memoir to a close reading of Andrew's early attempts to write, himself, for a juvenile audience, as he was observing his mother doing on a regular basis. Although she admits his "childish simplicity" in these efforts, Sigourney stresses the care that he gave to entries for "his little volume" and his "pen and ink pictorial illustrations"—products that he hoped would make "a useful contribution to juvenile literature" (111). Even as she is lauding the energy devoted to these "simple pages," however, Sigourney evidently cannot resist underscoring her own influence on the enterprise. She records his tendency to write "I will wait, and ask my mother" in places where he was not certain of his wording or idea (112). Similarly, rhetorical strategies evident in his early efforts at authorship are clearly modeled on her work. For example, Sigourney fondly quotes his closing address to readers in a February 1839 piece for children whom he imagined as being in need of his nine-year-old wisdom:

And now, dear children, I am about to end this  
 little book, and to bid you farewell.  
 May you have gotten some good from it.  
 Farewell! Farewell, little reader!  
 May this short book do you much good. (110)

Here Andrew's text clearly echoes his mother's educative voice by imitating scenes like those in "The Little Girl That Could Not Read," one of Sigourney's own domestic literacy narratives from an anthology (*Songs for the Little Ones at Home* [1852]) published by the American Tract Society. (See figure 1.) Andrew casts himself as a feminized teacher, a motherlike manager of literacy even beyond his home, just as his mother was through her own publications.

At the same time, of course, his literacy use reaffirms her social belief system. Thus, for example, a key argument of Andrew's "short book" is to show that life after death will be a "happy land," with "no pain, nor sorrow, nor sighing"—a place of "perfect joy" with God. Innocuous as such flowery verbiage may seem today, we should note connections between its content and the values of the white New England middle class, whose close ties to Protestant religious life were reflected in and supported by the kind of communal literacy Andrew mimicked from his mother's writing. In this passage, like other sons in narratives throughout the century, Andrew en-

dorses the efficacy of his mother's domestic teaching, thereby also exalting the cultural power of her gendered and class-linked values.

Similarly, Sigourney's description of Andrew's increasing involvement in her authorial career as he grew older and became a better writer himself casts their shared literacy as reciprocally beneficial.<sup>6</sup> In this case, Sigourney relates how Andrew's tendency to "industry" in "writing and reading" became supportive of her authorship as he asked to "take charge of any arrangement with publishers that she might feel disposed to depute to him, and rendered her essential aid as an amanuensis" (198). Besides handling business dealings, Sigourney's well-trained son provided material for direct interpolation into her texts. For instance, because he had great "power of retaining dates and numerical statements," she would often "appeal to him on these points as to unerring authority" (199). Andrew also assisted her writing with details from his vast knowledge of "history and chronology," wherein "his precision and readiness were remarkable" (199).

Even if we assume that Sigourney was simply reporting straightforwardly, we need to realize how appealing these scenes would have been for other white, middle-class women readers. Balancing anecdotes about the contributions he made to her books with parallel details portraying her encouragement of *his* literacy development, Sigourney reconciles her initial advantage as an adult mother controlling a child's access to literacy-oriented activities with her son's eventual ability to call on knowledge from educational experiences that were not as directly available to her. For example, on an occasion when she was "wishing a few nautical terms" for a piece of her writing, "he poured them forth in such profusion" that she wrote out pages of terms "with explanations, which were afterwards arranged in the form of a lexicon" (199). Relating such collaborative writing back to her earlier home teaching, Sigourney admits: "It was sweet to her, that the hand she had guided in infancy, to form the letters of the alphabet, should bring forth its pen so willingly and skilfully [*sic*] when she needed its aid. Large portions of the manuscript of two or three volumes were copied by him, in an incredibly short time. . . . Indeed, it was difficult to keep him supplied with work, so rapidly did he bring sheet after sheet, not only without error, but if either omission or obscurity existed in the original, they were sure to be rectified and rendered lucid" (199). This anecdote confirms authority for both participants in the domestic literacy management relationship. Although at first Andrew merely copies her words, in the end he can rewrite—to correct "either omission or obscurity [that] existed in the original," so that it is "rectified" and "lucid."



THE LITTLE GIRL THAT COULD NOT  
READ.

I don't know my letters, and what shall I do?  
For I've got a nice book, but I can't read it  
through;

O dear, how I wish that my letters I knew.

I think I had better begin them to-day,

'T is so like a dunce to be always at play:

Mamma, if you please, will you teach me great

A,

And then B and C, as they stand in the row,

One after another, as far as they go?

For then I can read my new story, you know.

Songs.

9

Fig. 1. "The Little Girl That Could Not Read," from *Songs for the Little Ones at Home* (1852). Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library



But what does this rewriting entail, in terms of shared cultural power and influence over others? And how does the maternal literacy manager react if/when her youthful charge asserts a rewriting that is not in accord with her own values? Sigourney's *Faded Hope* depicts a specific case of this complex issue, one revealing the limited social vision often, unfortunately, evident in these maternal teaching narratives. She recounts the episode in a maternal voice unconcerned about how her depiction of a domestic worker's situation might reflect upon her own moral sense. For the doting mother, in fact, the character at the center of the story is still her son, and she writes primarily to praise his generous teaching impulses, presumably learned via the home education she has provided:

He found a delight in knowledge which he was desirous of imparting, not only by written, but by oral teaching. There was a colored servant in the family, somewhat advanced in years, whom he endeavored to allure to become his pupil. He diligently read to her his lessons, —and was grieved when he found her employments of such a nature, as to preclude her bestowing on him undivided attention. He sometimes expressed a childish indignation that she should have so many labors to perform, and be so much fatigued as to fall asleep when he wished her to study; and proposed that we should have fewer dishes at table, that her cookery need not interfere with her intellectual prosperity. As she retired early, he would take a seat near the entrance of her bed-room, and read in a clear, distinct voice his lessons, or repeat and simplify portions of them for her especial behoof. If his labors, as not unfrequently [*sic*] happened, were repaid by echoes of that heavy breathing which denotes undoubted sleep, it only aroused him to more earnest efforts at the next period of instruction. "I am determined," he would say, "to improve Ann's mind." (117–18)

The story opens with a sentence reconfirming connections between middle-class children's mother-directed literacy acquisition and their desire to constitute themselves as teachers of others. Andrew, in particular, has a "delight in knowledge" that he longs to share through both "written" and "oral teaching." To this point, and even through the next few sentences identifying his favored pupil as "a colored servant in the family," we would probably find relatively little with which to charge Sigourney (or, more precisely, the maternal narrative voice behind the story). However, once she classifies as "childish" Andrew's frustration that Ann's duties get in the way of the servant's potential learning, we see an uncomfortable distance emerging between the speaker's view of the deserving recipients of domesticated literacy and Andrew's. While the maternal teacher (Sigourney) depicts as humorous his wish for "fewer dishes at table" so that his would-be pupil could have more time "to study," and while she similarly portrays as laughable



his determined oral reading outside the door of the sleeping “colored servant,” we are left with a cluster of unanswered questions. Why does this mother-teacher assume that the “undivided attention” of her servant would be inappropriately devoted to study? Why is no attempt made to determine the servant’s wishes in regard to her own literacy? Why does Andrew’s mother make no effort to remedy the conflict between his wish “to improve Ann’s mind” and the faithful servant’s exhausted sleeping? What are the “lessons” that, from the mother’s perspective, are rightfully “his”—that is, necessary for the white, middle-class boy (and his mother) but not the for the “colored” domestic worker? How does that same servant’s ongoing labor, which continually leaves her “fatigued,” make possible the privileged mother’s teaching of her son in the first place?

These questions must stand at the heart of any effort to recover the domestic literacy narrative for American literary and cultural history. That is, even as we assemble a story of the genre’s positive constructions of (white) middle-class American motherhood, we must take equal note of its tendency to constrain others’ uses of literacy. Along with analysis of ways in which the genre exalted motherly teaching, therefore, *Managing Literacy*, *Mothering America* will highlight its moves to exclude some Americans from full participation in national civic life.

Taken together, the book moves from the dawn of the narrative form’s development in Americanized versions of Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s primers, to its apex of political influence in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to the near-twilight of its activity on the American literary scene. The opening of *Managing Literacy* explicates the early history of the genre, emphasizing its close connections to the ideology of republican motherhood, debates about women’s education, white women’s social activism, and the emerging print marketplace for women’s writing. After this limning of the genre’s history in broad, interdisciplinary strokes, I juxtapose extended readings of two important midcentury literary texts (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Frances E. W. Harper’s *Minnie’s Sacrifice*) that have, up to now, been underinterpreted as educational initiatives tied to domestic literacy management. Then I examine the genre’s usefulness for more imperialistic (if still purportedly “benevolent”) teaching designs in white women’s turn-of-the-century missionary literature. Finally, I show how echoes of the genre through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first bear traces of a challenging question: is it possible for writers and readers to use this flexible narrative form to claim social influence without constraining others?

Whatever the specific era of composition and use, *Managing Literacy, Mothering America* sees the domestic literacy narrative as shaped by individual women writers' rhetorically astute efforts to make literature serve their personal teaching goals. At the same time, however, this study positions these authors' composing processes within a dynamic cultural context and thus also interprets authorship, audiences, and texts as socially constructed. Overall, while connecting the development of this resilient narrative form with shifting conceptions of literary value and purpose, I present a view of this genre as grounded in social literacies; I rewrite American literary history to include enhanced emphasis on its gendered education goals; and I revise understandings of middle-class American motherhood to highlight its nation-building agenda.