Stories Not Easily Told:

Reclaiming the Literary Spinster

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IV
Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the literary figure of the spinster. The spinster character has historically occupied marginalised roles, consistently defined by negative characteristics. This thesis links this representation in literature to sociohistorical circumstances in order to explore how ideologies of gender and sexuality have affected the portrayal of the spinster. The spinster term itself is essential to the thesis, as it will be argued to be the best term to describe women standing outside heteronormative social structures. Judith Roof’s queer narrative theory from *Come As You Are* (1996) functions as the theoretical groundwork. By considering the spinster character as queer, and thus in the same position as the figures Roof writes about, this thesis uses queer narrative theory to explore the spinster’s limited position in literature.

The three primary texts are Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s ‘A New England Nun’ (1891); *The Whole Family* (1908), a collaborative novel edited by William Dean Howells to which Freeman contributed the chapter ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’; and Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Lolly Willowes; or the Loving Huntsman* (1926). In addition to considering how ideologies of gender and sexuality affect portrayals of spinster characters, this thesis emphasises the genre the spinster exists within. The motivation behind this study is an aspiration to find an opportunity for non-normative analyses of non-normative characters, which is a possibility the spinster character embodies. This thesis argues that the spinster character is always defined first and foremost by her singleness, not her personhood. Furthermore, that her singleness affects both the plot and the structure of the story she inhabits. Nevertheless, this thesis suggests that subversive narratives deconstructing heteroideology might contain a possibility for resistance.
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Table of Content

1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................  1
   The Spinsters ..............................................................................................................  2
   Queering the Spinsters and Other Non-Normative Approaches ...............................  4
   Narrative Theory and How It Affects This Thesis ....................................................  7

2 ‘A New England Nun’ and Narrative Dependency on Heterosexuality .............. 10
   Louisa; or the (Premature) Old Maid ........................................................................ 13
   The Pervasiveness of Heteroideology ....................................................................... 15
   The Short Story Genre’s Implications for Narrative .................................................... 19
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 21

3 The Whole Family: The Spinsters as a Threat to Narrative ............................ 23
   The Reliability of the Attractive Old-Maid Aunt ......................................................... 26
   Claiming Space: Resistance and Loss ......................................................................... 29
   The Novel Narrative and the Perverse Threat ............................................................ 33
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 37

4 Lolly Willowes; or the Loving Huntsman as a Perverse Narrative .................. 39
   Spinsterhood and Other Identity Disorders .................................................................. 41
   Ideological Projections and Self-Realization ............................................................. 44
   The Spinsters’ Subversive Narrative .......................................................................... 48
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 52

Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 54

Works Cited ...................................................................................................................... 57
Barbara Pym, a patron saint of spinsters of sorts, wrote in her diary in 1972 that ‘the position of the unmarried woman – unless, of course, she is somebody’s mistress, is of no interest’ to the ‘modern reader’ (qtd. in Hodgkins 523). Although she would end up using this statement in a novel (about an unmarried woman) Pym appears to be onto something. Novels mainly about unmarried women resolutely remaining that way have historically been oddities. This might be due to the tautology of narrative, which has instructed readers, and thus writers, that certain stories are not worth telling. The stories of unmarried women seem to be among these. Considering the few women characters that do exist and fulfil the requirement of remaining unmarried, the need for an exact term to denote these specific women seems useful. If not obvious yet, the following will advocate for the perhaps slightly anachronistic term ‘spinster’. Using this term may at first appear demeaning. It is in many ways an out-dated and seemingly patronizing term. Yet this thesis will demonstrate that it really is the ideal term to describe a certain kind of woman, and a certain kind of literary figure.

Barbara Brothers furthers Pym’s opinion when she suggests that ‘spinsters (…) have no place in the social structure and no role in fictional plotting’ (198). It is worthwhile to note the emphasis Brothers maintains on both social structures and fictional plotting. The literary spinster is characteristically static; because of her representative singleness there is no room for development, or so it seems, considering the few literary spinsters available. This appears to be one of the reasons she is rarely cast as a novel heroine. The novel in its exhaustive complexity typically requires love of some sort to function. What could a single woman, not looking for a husband, possibly experience that is interesting enough to fill a novel?

In her time, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was considered the ‘chronicler par excellence of the New England old maid’ (Campbell 127). Freeman is represented in this thesis by two texts; the short story ‘A New England Nun’ (1891) and her contribution to the collaborative
novel *The Whole Family* (1908), a chapter entitled ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’. Both texts are significant because they rebel against the social structures that disqualify the spinster from fictional significance. The spinster characters in these stories serve to highlight both the problematic nature of defining women as any one thing, spinsters included, and how women’s insubordination can take very different forms. The period around the last turn of the century is fascinating considering the spinster, as the ideologies of gender and sexuality were changing fast. Sylvia Townsend Warner is a representative of the ‘Old’ England. Although less well-known today than Freeman, her literary work on the spinster is groundbreaking and unconventional. Her first novel *Lolly Willowes: or the Loving Huntsman* (1926) contains a spinster so defiant she becomes a witch. By resorting to having its protagonist make a deal with the Devil, it asks: can the spinster ever escape the social structures that define her?

Based on these titles, a tendency to define women by their statuses as old maids, nuns, and aunts is discernible. *Lolly Willowes* might appear to break from this pattern, but the reader will soon learn that Lolly is the ‘aunt name’ of the novel’s main character, Laura. So what, one might ask, is the point of adding the signifier ‘spinster’ to women such as these? Is it worthwhile to underline that they derail from the norm? Both questions are fundamental for this thesis; while the answer to the former is quite complex, the latter can be answered with a quite simple ‘yes’. Derailing from the norm is inevitably what defines these women as spinsters, whether in their success or failure. Therefore, it seems necessary to explore the structures that make it so, in order to gaze beyond them.

This thesis explores the spinster’s position in literature, considering the three texts specifically, the discourses adjoining them, and the narrative they exist within. Judith Roof’s book *Come As You Are* (1996), and the queer narrative theory presented in it, is used throughout the thesis as the theoretical foundation. To provide a contextual understanding of the texts in question, there is a focus on both the historical spinster term, and contemporary sociocultural ideas about gender and sexuality. This thesis purports that the genre the literary spinster exists within might have consequences for her position and possibilities. As the spinster’s literary purpose is affected by the genre of her tale, emphasis on it might provide useful clues to gaining an understanding of how narrative works.

**The Spinster**

While ‘spinster’ has carried numerous connotations over the past 700 years, the term originates from a person spinning wool. Unmarried women would usually occupy this position, and between the sixteenth and nineteenth century ‘spinster’ came to signify ‘the
legal designation in England of all unmarried women from a viscount's daughter downward’ (Etymonline). This period coincides with the industrial revolution, when spinning was moved into factories. The position of unmarried women drastically changed in this era, partly as a result of the mentioned revolution. As Ian Watt explains in *The Rise of the Novel*, ‘the idea that the “old maid” was a ridiculous if not obnoxious type seems to have arisen in the late seventeenth century’ (144). By 1719, ‘spinster’ defined a ‘woman still unmarried and beyond the usual age for it’ (Etymonline). Watt points to literary characterisations in the work of Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, among others, to support his arguments. He further maintains that the spinster term suggests the ‘major cause of the decline in the status of unmarried women’, as the term highlights that ‘unmarried women were no longer positive economical assets to the household because there was less need for their labour in spinning, weaving and other economic tasks’ (145).

The change in the societal position of unmarried women, from being a resource to being superfluous, is essential to interpretation of the literary spinster in this historical context. Sheila Jeffreys investigates the ‘total contempt for women who failed to perform their life’s work of servicing men, which the Victorian spinster had to confront’ (87). She quotes W.R. Gregg who suggested forced ‘emigration’ (87) as the best solution to the spinster problem in 1885. The definition of the ‘spinster’ is the same today as in 1719, but the dictionary has found it necessary to place ‘disparaging and offensive’ before the term (Dictionary). It becomes quite obvious that the spinster label, usually, is not a desirable one. It is also clear, as Laura Doan writes in her anthology *From Old-Maids to Radical Spinsters*, that ‘the designation spinster, then, is most certainly socioeconomic and historical’ (4, emphasis in original). The relevance of the spinster term’s history becomes evident when considering how the word affects interpretations of the literary characters it defines. The term indicates where the woman stands in public opinion, and consequently what roles she can play as a literary character.

In 1891, the year ‘A New England Nun’ was published, the greatest issue facing women remaining unmarried was the notion that they would never be complete or fulfilled without a man. Trisha Franzen explains that for women at the turn of the century ‘marriage generally marked the emergence of an adult woman’ (67). She expands her point to highlight how, at this time, ‘cultural critics (…) were less concerned with women’s virtue than with their reproductive capacities’ (59). This is not to say that their virtue was of no importance, rather that it was taken for granted. Ellen K. Rothman further explains that ‘it was not just a matter of completeness; marriage also signified normalcy and health’ (252). By the time
Lolly Willowes was written, the situation was somewhat altered. The First World War and the first sexual revolution heralded by Sigmund Freud lead to fundamental changes in the ideologies of gender and sexuality. This is visible in what Jeffreys defines as ‘the eroticising of the married woman’ (166), which started in the 1920s. Marriage was no longer enough to signify ‘normalcy and health’; virginity itself became a sign of the abnormal. Because ‘heterosexual intercourse’ was considered ‘the only path to human maturity and fulfilment, the spinster, by definition, must be sexually retarded and psychologically subnormal for life’ (Oldfield 99). Thus, whether from failure to marry, to become a mother, or to lose one’s virginity, the spinster has historically been what Brothers describes as an ‘embarrassment and a threat’ (198). The spinster is an embarrassment, because she has failed to pursue the one meaningful way of living life, and a threat, because her position outside the marriage institution places her, potentially, outside patriarchal control.

All these associations are visible in literary representations of the spinster, typically caricatured as stuck up, straight-backed, dry, scrutinising, meddling, scheming or oblivious, man-hating or desperate for affection. There is always something wrong with her; the story of the spinster always seems to underline precisely how the woman came to be in her spinster state. There are basically no stories in which a woman just happens to be single; she is first and foremost defined by her singleness. Consequently, her spinsterhood is essentially always her defining characteristic and often a plot concern in the story itself; it affects every choice she makes and action she performs. The rare portrayals of spinster protagonists often play with stereotypes stemming from stories where the spinster is marginalised, something that is visible in all three texts studied in this thesis. So, how can one write about the literary spinster, without re-enforcing the negative cultural associations attached to the term? This thesis suggests taking the term, deconstructing it, and including a consideration of additional implications that might provide a greater understanding of how these literary characters have come to be defined the way they have. This may provide clues to a greater understanding of whatever might be hidden under the caricature.

Queering the Spinster and Other Non-Normative Approaches
Tone Hellesund, in her article ‘Queering the Spinster’, argues ‘that the spinster as a cultural category, in the same manner as the homosexual, can be considered queer’ (22). Hellesund’s reason to ‘queer’ the spinster is that ‘like the homosexual, the spinster has played a role in undermining and destabilizing the heterosexual cultural matrix’ (22). This fear of the spinster’s undermining abilities is portrayed in Jeffreys, who presents the arguments of
Charlotte Haldane, a well-known feminist in the 1920s, explaining that ‘spinsters were dangerous (…) because they had interest which were not identical with those of men’ (175). Hellesund links the spinster’s undermining powers to an absence of normalcy, which can be seen as dissimilarity from normative patriarchal society. Hellesund’s queer claim is disconnected from sexuality defined by sexual acts or preferences; it merely accentuates a disconnection from the heteropatriarchal narrative. In ‘The Queer Short Story’, Axel Nissen argues that ‘queer allows us to discuss deviance, sexual indeterminacy, and nonreproductive, nonheterosexual sexuality and eroticism without having to use potentially anachronistic labels about phenomena (…) Queer is maybe more an absence than a presence – an absence of or deviation from whatever is the normative sexual or gender behaviour or identity’ (182). Deviation from the norm already defines the spinster; the very term indicates that she has taken a different path than most. Subsequently, the queer spinster fits perfectly with this thesis’s mission of exploring spinster narratives in which the ideologies of sexuality and gender are challenged.

Like Hellesund, Susan S. Lanser studies potential queerness in unmarried women. She maintains that ‘never-married women have been (…) sidelined’ in literature (275). The distinctive aspect of Lanser’s argument is her focus on queerness in the form of asexuality. Inspired by Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks’ call for the inclusion of asexuality in feminism and queer studies, Lanser suggests that ‘a critique of heteronormativity that can integrate a positive, theorized asexuality may open new “hatches” in our understanding both of individuals (…) [and] cultural and social practises’ (286). The queer spinster in this thesis will be considered in light of this suggestion, and accordingly as established outside heterosexual practices, though not necessarily as partaking in other sexual practises. Endeavouring to open as many ‘hatches’ as possible in the three primary texts, no non-normative alternative will be ruled out. In order to see the spinster as far removed from the heteropatriarchal narrative as possible, all aspects of narrative will be questioned. Lanser’s question of whether it is possible ‘that propriety itself is so heteronormative that we can consider impropriety, even in a seemingly straight context, a queer formation?’ (283, emphasis in original) is additionally relevant here. This thesis argues that it is indeed possible. It is furthermore desirable when dealing with spinsters that are reportedly heterosexual, but who still break with propriety.

Cerankowski and Milk highlight in their article ‘New Orientations’ the ways in which pro-sex feminism resulting from the second sexual revolution in the 1960s can be limiting for the feminist movement as a whole. This goes back to the 1920s and the pathologization of
‘frigid’ women. Cranky behaviour, anti-socialness, and many of the spinster stereotypes from the turn of the last century stem from the characterisation of these ‘frigid’ women. Cerankowski and Milk problematise how pro-sex feminism tends to consider women either ‘empowered or repressed’ (656), and further highlight the consequences this can have for queer lives. The tendency to focus on repression or suppression in literature where women are not (heterosexually) active can lead to closing hatches that could reveal non-normative lives. Interpreting all spinsters as repressed or suppressed, and thus as failing to acquire heteronormative lives, rules out the potential that they might lead non-normative lives. This can lead to a ‘straight-washing’ of queer narratives. Readings focusing on repression or suppression typically, if unintentionally, imply that there is something wrong with the woman by suggesting that she really wishes to be a part of the heteronormative scheme of things.

‘A New England Nun’ s Louisa Ellis, The Whole Family’s Lily Talbert, and Lolly Willowes’ Laura Willowes share more than the first letters of their names, most significantly they share their status as women who end up alone. While the first two are never referred to as spinsters in their respective texts, the third one is. Roof’s narrative theory, which will be explored in detail shortly, discusses the possibility of innocent language. She reasons that ‘meaning and value are not semantically innocent but ideological and narrative from the ab quo start’ (54). This includes the meaning of specific terms, such as ‘spinster’. While the word ‘spinster’ might now be defined as ‘disparaging and offensive’, no other terms denoting unmarried women completely avoid problematic implications. Any term including ‘maid’ implies the woman’s virginity. While the term might appear less problematic than ‘spinster’, it really is not, for the same reason ‘unmarried woman’ or ‘singleton’ is not. ‘Unmarried women’ does not contain the same notion as ‘spinster’, regarding the unlikeliness that the marital situation will change. The term ‘unmarried woman’ tells a story, but not one that excludes the marriage plot. Therefore, the term embodies a temporality. This temporality indicates that the woman in question is incomplete, as it suggests that she can still reach womanhood and fulfilment by getting married. The spinster term carries semantic implications, and this thesis aims to tease out even more. While not always used in the primary texts themselves, the term spinster appears in critical articles on all three texts. So the discourses created in retrospect are marked by the implications of the word. By stressing the spinster term this thesis hopes to assist in the development of a non-normative understanding of non-normative lives. Rather than having the term denote a limited position, it includes queerness of all kinds, which hopefully can help open up literary hatches.
Narrative Theory and How It Affects This Thesis

Franzen suggests in *Spinsters and Lesbians*, that ‘our language offers no expression that easily positions [spinsters] to be viewed in a positive light’ (1). Furthering her point, she highlights how our ‘culture’s vocabulary for never-married women forces us to start from characterizations of them as negative, inherently deficient, or even perverted’ (1). That language affects the character traits applied to the literary spinster appears obvious, yet to speak about ‘culture’s vocabulary’ suggests implying a larger scheme behind every story written. Roof’s book *Come As You Are* is a queer narrative study focusing specifically on the connection between the ideology of sexuality and that of narrative. In her book, Roof argues that ‘narrative and sexuality inform each other’ (xxii). Roof’s theory explores the cultural vocabulary and uses this to highlight how sexuality and narrative ‘somehow jointly engender and reproduce a heterosexual ideology’ (xiv). Heterosexual ideology, or heteroideology as it is shortened to, implies an understanding of the world where heterosexuality is the fundamental moving force. Heteroideology is not simply based on sexual acts or preferences; it is, according to this theory, the structuring force in society as a whole. That is to say that everything in society is shaped by heterosexuality and its reproductive demand. Therefore, capitalism, for example, is a symptom of heteroideology. Spinsters, and queer figures, do not fit into this structure because they typically cannot contribute to it.

Franzen’s description of spinsters as ‘deficient’ and ‘perverted’ goes in accordance with Roof’s characterisation of queer individuals. Furthermore, the element of inherently negative characterisations – stressed by Franzen, Jeffreys, and more – dominates Roof’s assessment of the female queer. Roof argues that ‘the reciprocal relation between narrative and sexuality produces stories where homosexualities can only occupy certain positions or play certain roles metonymically linked to negative values within a reproductive aegis’ (xxvii). Because of the way sexuality and narrative function, non-reproductive characters, such as the spinster, are limited to marginalised positions. This is visible in narrative, and exemplified through literary fiction in this thesis. The positions spinsters can occupy are usually too stereotypical, too flat, too marginal, to allow for her to be a protagonist. Additionally, spinster lives are empty, or at least considered to be so, because of the way society has instructed its members only to consider things that are in accordance with heteroideology as valuable. The things considered valuable are connected to reproduction; this includes capital, profit, marriage, and children. While Roof operates within the heterosexual/homosexual binary, this thesis will consider a spectrum of queerness representing opposition to the heteronormative.
According to Roof’s theory, spinsters cannot be novel protagonists because the novel requires a reproductive end that can only be achieved through marriage or a comparable coupling. The reader’s desire for this reproductive end is so pervasive that it will colour any interpretation of a text. In Roof’s framework, the queer characters are ‘perverts’, a signifier with numerous consequences. The perverse is that which goes against the normative, and the perverse is both a threat against and a requirement of heteroideology. The perverse is all that is non-productive and non-reproductive. Perversion must be defeated towards the end of the story to guarantee a rightfully reproductive end. The perverse character typically succumbs after they have completed his or her function as a challenge to the story, which works to prove the rightfulness of heteroideology. As Roof explains: ‘perversity belongs to narrative as the instance of its potential dissolution’ (xxiv). To the question of whether there can ever be a narrative where the perverse can persist, Roof theorises that the answer would be in the ‘perverse narrative’ (xxiv). Perhaps this is the narrative for the spinster? The perverse narrative, according to Roof, ‘would be a narrative about narrative dissolution, a narrative that continually short-circuits, that both frustrates and winks at the looming demagogue of reproduction’ (xxiv). What stories can do this? And, who are motivated to write stories such as this?

Roof asserts that ‘narrative and sexuality operate within the preproductive and/or productive, metaphorically heterosexual ideology that also underwrites the naturalized understanding of the shape and meaning of life’ and literary narratives (xxvii). What this suggests is that heteroideology naturalises a certain perception of what the meaning of life is, and concludes that all lives that do not conform are essentially meaningless. This is replicated in narrative, and accordingly in literature. The spinster’s life, then, has no meaning within the heteronormative. If reproduction is the only end, the spinster’s life is endless. The sameness implied in endlessness is equalled in Roof’s work with death, reproduction’s opposite. The heteronarrative is Roof’s definition of the narrative available in a heteroideological society. Heteroideology, and its heterovocabulary, is inevitable because it has the power to define the very vocabulary accessible. Roof highlights how one must evoke the heterovocabulary even (perhaps especially) when writing about these ‘perversions’; that is, the instances that might stand outside the system. This resonates with the debate regarding the best word to describe the spinster, and underlines that no term can be empty of inherent meaning. This thesis contends that ‘spinster’ is the best word available to designate the women this thesis works to depict. Roof asks: ‘if lesbian sexuality is entirely a construction of the discursive fields that define it, is it possible to represent the lesbian differently and still have either a recognizable
lesbian or a discernible narrative?’ (xxvi). Lesbian is here interchangeable with ‘queer’, and therefore ‘spinster’. This thesis will ask whether the spinster character is a spinster, if she differs from the spinster narrative?

Nissen, in addition to advocating for the queer term, challenges Roof’s lacking concern for literary genre in his article ‘The Queer Short Story’. In it, he asks whether ‘the short story and the novel might be differently implicated in the perpetuation of heteroideology’ (183)? While a focus on genre will be accentuated throughout this thesis, it is particularly essential in the first chapter on ‘A New England Nun’. Being a short story, it emerges as the ideal starting point considering the thesis’s combined focus on genre, narrative theory, sexuality, and gender. An intersectional perspective is central, which is why the ideologies of gender and sexuality and their effect on the spinster term, in addition to the spinster term itself, and Roof’s narrative theory, have all been thoroughly accentuated. Through a consideration of all the above, this thesis aims to illustrate how heteroideological structures are especially visible in the spinster’s narrative.

To make such an exploration possible certain questions must be asked. The literary spinster almost always exists to aid the plot, whether she helps the protagonist, or functions as a comparative element and a worst-case scenario. The spinster’s own stories emerge as meaningless, and her life is characteristically empty. In chapter one, on ‘A New England Nun’, this thesis asks what actions and habits, which lives, have meaning and worth? The same issue occurs in another form in chapter three on Lolly Willowes, specifically related to genre. The chapter asks what actions and happenings are considered to have ‘novel-worthy’ meaning? Chapter two, discussing The Whole Family also considers the novel genre’s effect on the literary spinster. The spinster is routinely categorized as nun, aunt, witch, and other similar, negative characters. What room is there for resistance within these categories? Queering the spinster seems necessary to see the character as she is, rather than as a participant in a system that she stands outside of. The asexual queer perspective is especially beneficial in the investigations of Louisa and Laura, the first and last spinsters in this thesis. In the case of Lily, Lanser’s suggestion to include impropriety in the queer definition is central. First up for consideration is Freeman’s short story, ‘A New England Nun’; it is followed by an interpretation of The Whole Family accentuating the consequences of ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter; and Warner’s Lolly Willowes will be the grounds for the final enquiry. The concluding questions become whether everyone needs to deal with the heteropatriarchy, one way or the other? If so, can a literary narrative with a successful queer spinster exist?
2 ‘A New England Nun’ and Narrative Dependency on Heterosexuality

If I am to disclose to you what I should prefer
if I follow the inclination of my nature, it is this:
beggar-woman and single,
far rather than queen and married!
Queen Elizabeth I

‘On waking, she felt like a queen who, after fearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her position’ (Freeman 1628). Such is Louisa Ellis described on the final page of her short story. At the same time, Louisa bids farewell to the reader sitting ‘prayerfully numbering her days, like an unceloistered nun’ (1628). It is this image the title ‘A New England Nun’ (1891) alludes to. A queen is a figure signifying power, dominion; the nun is an image of obedience, selflessness, and celibacy. The title appears to give the nun portrayal more authority than that of the queen, however, this chapter will argue that ‘A New England Nun’ problematises the very dichotomy that purports that a woman must be one or the other. The prefix ‘New England’ makes it quite obvious that Louisa is a metaphorical nun. A metaphorical nun, then, sits ‘steeped in peace’ (1628) after learning that her ‘queendom’ is secure. The ambiguity in this final scene, and throughout the story, is often interpreted as a reflection of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s personal uncertainty about marriage. The level of disagreement regarding what the story is really about, underlines an ambiguity, yet it appears a fallacy to define it as the author’s own. Whether it is a story about self-sacrifice, which aligns with the motif of the nun, or of self-realisation and victory, which rather leans towards the motif of the queen, is much debated. What is certain is that ‘A New England Nun’ involves a woman and a man who are engaged, and by the end of the story they are not, apparently because the woman breaks it off.

‘A New England Nun’ is probably Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s most analysed short story. Over the years, two camps of critics have formed, one focusing on celebration of female autonomy, and one reading Louisa as neurotic and repressed. It should be noted that members of the first group often include a focus on supressed sexuality. As discussed in the introduction, there is a clear tendency in scholarly work on female characters, and their sexuality, of prioritising heteronormative understandings. Ideas of suppression and repression
in all narratives where there is no explicit heterosexual expression of sexuality are signs of the tautology of the heteropatriarchal narrative; something few critics take into consideration. The idea that Louisa Ellis is eager to be left alone is not precisely new thinking in scholarly treatment of ‘A New England Nun’. The nature of this solitude, however, is typically analysed through a heteronormative perspective, which will be problematised in the following.

Emphasis on form and genre has seemingly not been done in criticism of ‘A New England Nun’. However, there is a specific reason why ‘A New England Nun’ proves a good starting point for a study on the spinster and narrative, and it is directly connected to its genre. Judith Roof’s *Come as You Are* and its theories regarding the ideology of narrative and queer sexuality were presented in the introduction. In this chapter, queer narrative theory will be used to highlight how ‘narrative and sexuality inform each other’ (xiv) in ‘A New England Nun’, and the consequences this has had for interpretations of the spinster character. This is connected to the limited positions available for the queer figures that Roof’s theory accentuates. In order to consider the genre of this specific narrative, attention will be given to the problem Axel Nissen points to in ‘The Queer Short Story’: how Roof does not consider the implication genre can have regarding the preservation ‘of heteroideology’ (183) in literature. This is a key question, especially in the last part of the chapter, where the links between Roof’s narrative theory, short story theory, and a close reading of ‘A New England Nun’ will be considered together.

William Dean Howells once praised Freeman by stating that the short story genre had become ‘distinctly the short story in the hands of Miss Wilkins’ (qtd. in Campbell 119). As a genre-defining author, in Howells’s eyes at least, Freeman seems an apt writer to explore in a genre context. The position of the spinster in literature was surveyed in the general introduction, and her unlikeliness as a protagonist underlined. Yet, it appears this position might be different in the novel and the short story. That short stories can do something novels cannot is not new thinking. Short story author Nadine Gordimer argues in ‘The Flash of Fireflies’, that ‘both novel and short story use the same material: human existence. Both have the same aim: to communicate it’ (263). Nevertheless, the short story appears to Gordimer ‘better equipped to attempt the capture of ultimate reality’ (264). This is both because of qualities inherent in the short story genre, and because the novel ‘cannot and does not convey the quality of human life’ (264) as its narrative has too much ‘consistency’ (264) that does not exist in real life. Some questions arise already: can the short story and the novel communicate the same human existence? Can any narrative portray ‘ultimate reality’, and
can this reality be valid for all? Finally, can the short story avoid some of the heteroideological restraints of the novel?

Even though Louisa is engaged, it seems that the most fruitful view of her is as a queer spinster. As there is a slippery slope between reading to open up a text, and reading to confirm an opinion, her queerness will not be explored explicitly. Rather than opting to create a new, more fitting sexuality for Louisa, this analysis will attempt to use the conventions of the heteronormative to see beyond it. Susan S. Lanser’s encouragement for performing asexual readings of historical literature was presented in the introduction. She maintains that ‘while it is of course truism that most early modern women participated quite directly in heterosexual economies, when we ignore lives and representations that transgress or exceed, and thus arguably delineate those systems, we fail to understand the stakes and contours of the normative itself, and of course we learn nothing about resistant spaces of queer practise’ (276). This chapter will focus on the resistant spaces and potential transgression present in ‘A New England Nun’, by analysing the inherent heteroideology. Establishing Louisa as a non-normative character opens up for an interpretation of her ‘actual’ character, and the position she has in the narrative. Rather than attempting a sexual diagnosis it seems necessary to ask: what if Louisa is simply focused on being? On existing on her own terms? Not motivated or repelled by sexuality, but by a wish to simply exist in a prolonged – and permanent – state of solitude?

This chapter argues that ‘A New England Nun’ is an illustration of how some stories might appear cut short, but that it is only so in the eyes of society and its limited interpretations and understanding of non-normative characters. Furthermore, it argues that ‘A New England Nun’ challenges the ways ideologies of sexuality and gender have taught readers to comprehend certain characters in a certain way. The ideology of narrative only allows for Louisa to be considered a nun, but if one attempts to look beyond this, one might see a queen. As exemplified in the introduction, heteroideology does not accept characters that do not contribute to reproduction. Louisa, who prefers being alone, and spending all her time on non-productive projects that only serve herself, is heteroideology’s worst nightmare. That everything Louisa does, except her engagement, is considered peculiar, insinuates how only reproductive actions and lives are worthwhile subjects for literature. This thesis maintains that ‘A New England Nun’ problematises the way heteroideology presents itself as the only provider of meaning and value in life and narrative.
Louisa; or the (Premature) Old Maid

As mentioned, ‘A New England Nun’ is about a woman who is engaged and by the end is not. The narrator is extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, and mostly covert. These factors contribute to a rather vague judgement of Louisa’s character. The narrator leaves Louisa’s motifs opaque, and the story as a whole ambiguous. Except the knowledge that her neighbours ‘whispered about’ (1621) how she uses her best set of china even when eating alone, the reader knows little of how Louisa is perceived by others. Critic Mary Reichardt calls the story a ‘masterpiece of ambiguity’ (91) in her book *A Web of Relationship*. This point is extended in *Mary Wilkins Freeman: A Study of the Short Stories*, where Reichardt argues that ‘in probing both Louisa’s character and the exigencies of the situation, the narrator declines to judge conclusively but builds a strong case for the desirability of her remaining single’ (34). It appears that the ambiguity can have multiple functions, still, it appears first and foremost to remind the reader that they do not, and will never, know anyone’s full story.

Louisa’s fiancé, Joe Dagget, has little to say in the story. Nevertheless, critics like David Hirsch and Ben Couch dedicate a lot of space to his character, and place a lot of emphasis on his role in the story. This thesis will not imitate this trend. Actually, if anything, it will suggest that Joe functions as no more than a tool to illuminate Louisa’s character. For once, the male character has no role in the story except functioning as a magnifying glass for the protagonist; which is historically a function in literature largely performed by women. There is no actual romantic courtship in ‘A New England Nun’. The engagement is justified by how Louisa ‘had seen marriage ahead a reasonable feature and probably desirability in life’ (1623). The consequence of this is that nothing is organic about their romantic connection, and that Joe as a partner appears essentially arbitrary. When the reader learns that her mother had given Louisa her ‘views upon the subject’ (1623) and Louisa has ‘accepted [Joe] with no hesitation’ (1623), it appears a perfectly logical (if not romantic) choice. The engagement does not reflect love or attraction; it is an illustration of the period’s marital ideology, rather than an indicator of Louisa’s heterosexuality.

Louisa is first pictured as ‘peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window’ (1620). Words such as ‘peaceful’, ‘methodical’, ‘carefully’, ‘precisely’, ‘patiently’, ‘unquestionably’, ‘pleasantly’, ‘pleasure’, ‘delight’ are consequently used to describe Louisa’s actions and her mindset – when alone. Louisa loves solitude and busies herself with tasks such as stitching, cleaning, and preparing luxurious food for herself, all the while surrounded by objects that have become ‘a very part of her personality’ (1620). When Joe comes to visit or is thought
about, the vocabulary changes. Suddenly Louisa is marked by ‘mild uneasiness’, ‘mild
stiffness’, and ‘sorrowful reflectiveness’. The narrative thus discloses, without spelling it out,
that Louisa is uncomfortable with her fiancé.

Eventually the narrator voices Louisa’s reluctance to marriage explicitly, in what
proves to be one of the most revealing descriptions in the story. The narrator explains that
‘for Louisa the wind had never more than murmured; now it had gone down, and everything
was still. She listened for a little while with half-wistful attention; then she turned quietly
away and went to work on her wedding dress’ (1624). While this statement is marked by
ambiguity, it decidedly states that Louisa is not attracted to Joe, perhaps not to any man. Like
the narrator explains, in the 15 years that have passed since their engagement, Louisa ‘had
never dreamed of the possibility of marrying any one else’ (1623). Rather than suggestion
everlasting love and dedication, this might suggest a general disinterested in the other sex. It
is no wonder words such as ‘pleasant’ and ‘delightful’ dominate the narrative of her singular
life; it is all she has and all she wants. This underlines how Louisa’s motivation for getting
married is that it seems the only desirable future, which emphasises how the ideology of the
time necessitated heterosexuality for a desirable life. By voicing Louisa’s hesitance ‘A New
England Nun’ problematises the rightfulness of the necessity for women to marry.

Reading Louisa in light of Joe, or the other way around, implies a naturalisation of
considering man and woman as fulfilling each other. Nevertheless, there are elements of their
relationship that shed light on the story as a whole, so it can be worthwhile. The narrator,
focalising Louisa, notes that Joe ‘seems to fill up the whole room’ (1621). While this is just a
short comment, it carries numerous implications. That Joe takes up the whole room illustrates
that there is no room for the two of them together. Louisa’s rooms are too small, something
that in all likelihood will not change when she moves into Joe’s house. Hence, it could be a
metaphor for how there is no space in Louisa’s life for a partner. This is not the only instance
where lack of space is suggested. In a more explicit scene, the narrator reveals that the
‘greatest happening of all’ in the 15 years Joe has been gone was ‘a subtle happening which
both were too simple to understand – Louisa’s feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe
under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving, that it could only meet a check at
her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side’ (1623). Though ‘too
simple’ to understand this, it is obvious that Louisa is marked by a disinclination towards
marriage. However, she seems to know that while she might consider her path ‘too narrow’
for anyone to join her, society considers a single woman’s life ‘too narrow’ to be worthwhile.
The Pervasiveness of Heteroideology

Louisa is defined in the story by her seclusion from society, her cleanliness, and joy in ‘pretty but senseless old maiden ways’ (1624) like embroidery and distilling essences. These ‘senseless’ hobbies and habits prove to have tremendous metaphorical value in the story. This is visible both in the story itself, and in its critical reception. An intriguing element is how most scholarly interpretations of the metaphors appear misguided. Hirsch was one of the first modern critics to read ‘A New England Nun’ and found it a ‘case study of obsessive neurosis’ (3) in 1965. While Hirsch’s old-fashioned approach has long been disregarded, the focus on repression as the cause of Louisa’s tidiness and refusal of Joe has been maintained in scholarly work. Joseph Csicsila, in 1998, still considers ‘A New England Nun’ a study of isolation and the negative effect this has on people. He argues that everything Louisa does is merely to ‘kill time’ (7), denoting that Louisa’s ‘maiden ways’ are essentially worthless.

Csicsila and Hirsch are far from the only critics to consider the narrator and moral of the story as passing judgement on Louisa. Something that appears contradictory, as the ever-ambiguous narrator never passes judgement of this sort. Quite the opposite, Louisa is described as having ‘throbs of genuine delight’ (1624) from observing her finished work, likewise, the narrator explains that she had the ‘enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home’ (1624). While it might not be worth much in the grand (heteronormative) scheme of things, Louisa’s ‘senseless old maiden ways’ provide her with great gratification.

Csicsila argues that just because ‘[Louisa] continues to enjoy sewing, distilling, and cleaning’ this ‘cannot justify nor excuse her continued indulgence in them’ (7). Csicsila does have support in the text that Louisa’s habits are not widely acceptable. But where he sees a critique of Louisa, there is actually an underlying critique of why these things cannot be justified. The narrator conveys that Louisa ‘dearly loved to sow a linen seam, not always for use, but for the simple, mild, pleasure which she took in it. She would have been loath to confess how more than once she had ripped a seam for the mere delight of sewing it together again’ (1624). She would loathe this confession because she knows it will lead to ridicule, that her future mother-in-law and husband would consider it a ‘foolish comfort’ (1624). It seems obvious that a union with Joe appears to Louisa as nothing but an obligation, while life alone is pleasurable. ‘A New England Nun’ thus problematises a society in which a woman’s plight – marriage – is more important than her happiness. Louisa’s habits cannot be justified when she is engaged because they do not contribute to production. The negative considerations of her stitching also illustrate the pervasive trend of devaluing traditional
women’s artistry, such as the art of embroidery. Furthermore, it seems that the spinster’s habits cannot be justified in the end, because she ultimately prioritises them over marriage. And of course there has to be something wrong with a woman who renounces marriage to sit alone and sew ‘a linen seam’.

Louisa’s solitary happiness is contrasted by glimpses of her potential future with Joe. The narrator explains how she has nightmare like visions of ‘coarse masculine belongings strewn about in endless litter; of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony’ (1625). Louisa’s future with Joe, rather than being filled with the expected cherub faced babies, appears a chaotic dystopia. Ellen K. Rothman argues in *Hands and Hearts* (1984) that in this period ‘it was marriage, and only marriage, that completed and fulfilled a woman – a notion recognized even by women who defended and enjoyed the benefits of singleness’ (252). Nevertheless, Louisa ‘thought about her approaching marriage and trembled’ (1626). She knows that her life will not be considered fulfilled unless she marries Joe, and this is the only thing that keeps her working ‘on her wedding dress’ (1624).

The biggest motivation for Louisa to enter marriage, according to Reichardt, is how her ‘solitary existence is completely self-centred, her work socially useless’ (*A Study* 34). Yet, married life is defined only by its negative consequences in ‘A New England Nun’, such as ‘forebodings of Caesar on the rampage’ (1626). Her life after breaking with Joe, on the other hand, appears a utopia for the lover of solitude. Left alone she can ‘sew linen seams, and distil roses, and dust and polish and fold away in lavender, as long as she listed’ (1628). Reichardt’s interpretation of Louisa ultimately argues that her life, filled with the things she loves, does not have inherent value. The reason Louisa’s habits are not perceived as being worthwhile, both in the story and in the way they are interpreted by critics such as Reichardt, is their lack of surplus value. The stitching and distilling are not for commercial use; they do not contribute to Louisa’s income, nor that of anyone else. Louisa thus fails to partake in the two ruling forces of her time: capitalism and marriage. Because she does not enter either sphere, her life has no value. While this is portrayed as a crisis in Reichardt’s interpretation, the narrator portrays it as anything but: ‘if Louisa had sold her birthright she did not know it, the taste of pottage was so delicious. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself. She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent’ (1628). This is a perfect illustration of the ambiguous element of ‘A New England Nun’.

While Louisa’s habits are defined as unnecessary, her life is portrayed as pleasing and happy.
'A New England Nun’ thus seems to problematise the heterosexual ideology that determine which lives and habits are worthwhile.

The given reasons for considering ‘A New England Nun’ a casework of either repression or suppression vary greatly, yet it will be shown that the motivation behind is largely the same. Leah Glasser, for example, argues for a biographical reading, maintaining that ‘Freeman seems to be addressing her [own] choice to remain unmarried in order to protect her work life’ (32). Glasser considers ‘A New England Nun’ a ‘story about spinsterhood and the suppression of sexuality’ (32). She further argues that ‘Freeman’s story also explores Louisa’s buried sexuality and the necessity of that burial’ (36). In Glasser’s opinion, Louisa dooms herself to a life of unhappiness because her ‘passionate self, the sexual “monster”, will remain locked within her nunnery’ (37) leaving Louisa’s sexuality ‘unrealized and useless’ (36). Feminist critics such as Glasser tend to focus on suppression, which allows for an active choice made by the spinster. Repression, on the other hand, implies no choice, as it is an illness that the sufferer cannot address. The implications of considering a woman repressed is therefore that something is clinically wrong with her.

Couch, in a somewhat original line of argument, maintains that ‘Louisa lives out her sexual fantasies by masturbating’ (196). The masturbation is the result of how ‘Louisa represses her sexual urges creating the monster of barrenness inside’ (194) during the 15 years Joe was away. In an interpretation like this Joe is at the heart of the repression, and thus plays a key role in the story. This underlines the tendency of interpreting all possible sexual acts as male oriented, underscoring a fundamental heteroideology.

Considering the historical context of ‘A New England Nun’, it becomes somewhat absurd to claim that Louisa is supposed to be an example of repression or suppression. The monsters of barrenness and sexuality really appear to be monstrosities projected into the story by critics partaking in an inherently other discourse than ‘A New England Nun’. In the period in question, Freeman would obviously not assume her reader to be familiar with ideas of suppression and repression. Trisha Franzen explains how ‘middle-class, Euro-American women supposedly had no pleasure based sexual desire’ (59). Consequently, while readers at the time might recognise a motif of non-confirmative longing towards something they could not have in ‘A New England Nun’, it seems highly unlikely that they would react to Louisa’s lack of desire for her fiancé the same way modern critics have. While an analysis such as this might be interesting from a modern perspective, it does little to open up the text itself, nor does it seem a fruitful approach to discover what the story is truly about. Louisa, at least in
the context of having no explicit sexual desire for her fiancé, would have been the expected norm.

All the critics mentioned so far who focus on repression or suppression share a heteronormative perspective. ‘A New England Nun’ contains a spinster who appears to have chosen a non-heteronormative life style. What the critics recognise is the concept of a ‘faulty’ sexuality, and accordingly they perform interpretations of the short story where something is wrong with the protagonist. While sex positive feminism has done great work to remove stigma and shame from female sexuality, in instances like this it might actually contribute to a ‘straight-washing’ of non-confirmative sexualities. Lanser points out that readings such as these can function as ‘a heteronormative veil over non-heteronormative arrangements’ (280). Sex positive feminists are of course not alone in performing reductive studies like this, as Freudian analysts have done it since the 1920s. By assuming that any character that is not explicitly expressing heterosexual desire is repressed or suppressed, one leaves out the possibility of other paths, or paths ‘too narrow’ to have room for a companion. What all this adds up to is a fundamental belief in the necessity for a heterosexual plot for a story to have meaning. This reflects the way in which queer lives, such as the spinster’s, are often seen as valueless and meaningless. Because they cannot contribute to the heterosexual narrative of love and procreation, their lives cannot have meaning. Louisa, when letting go of Joe, lets go of the element that can make her life meaningful – at least in the logic of the ideology of narrative, gender, and sexuality.

This has all been to say that when one observes the critical reception of ‘A New England Nun’, and many spinster stories like it, it becomes evident how readers struggle to find meaning and value in lives and narratives that stand outside the heteronormative. While the narrator definitely does air the possibility that Louisa’s life could be considered wasted, it is only so if one accepts the heteronormative narrative as the only happy one. This explains why most interpretations appear to insist that there is heterosexual attraction in the story, and consequently that the story is really about deviation from a correct heterosexuality. Analyses such as these ultimately comply with the heterosexual narrative, and use it to provide meaning to a narrative where it does not necessarily belong. The preceding sections have attempted to show how heteronormative readings can be reductive rather than productive, because readings like these may claim to explain, while they really conceal potentially non-normative stories. This ultimately limits the potential for a happy life for the spinster in literature, as stories about finding gratification outside the marital institution are interpreted only in light of their failure to reach heterosexual fulfilment.
The Short Story Genre’s Implications for Narrative

‘A New England Nun’ voices a discontentment concerning the way society does not grant meaning to lives that do not revolve around the opposite sex and marriage. The discourse and critical reception of the story has been proven to show how heteroideology necessitates heterosexuality to provide the spinster’s life and habits, and thus the stories she inhabits, with meaning. This goes in accordance with Roof’s claim that queer characters can only occupy specific positions based on their placement on the negative end of the reproductive aegis. So, there is little doubt that ‘A New England Nun’ is permeated by heteroideology. However, there are some contesting factors present in the short story that make it worthwhile to explore the arguments Nissen makes in ‘The Queer Short Story’.

In the essay, Nissen compares the binary of short story/novel with other binaries, most relevantly the hetero/homo one. Nissen underlines that ‘while the short story is often seen to be minor, fragmented, underdeveloped, superficial, immature, and simple, the novel is considered major, whole, fully developed, exhaustive, mature, and complex’ (181). It is astonishing how the terms used for the short story overlap with traits consistently applied to the spinster character. Roof underlines how narrative is dominated by ‘representations of the lesbian as temporary, immature, and titillating’ (xxxiv). ‘Lesbian’ can, in this instance, be replaced with ‘spinster’. Just as the coupled woman is above the single in the hierarchy of gender and sexuality, the novel towers above the short story in the hierarchy of genres. Like Nissen argues, the ‘two halves are not on equal terms, so to speak; they do not carry the same authority, nor do they have the same claim on normalcy or cultural centrality’ (181).

The ways ideology of sexuality are visible in literature, even in the absence of overt sexual acts, have been illustrated by how some habits and lives are considered useless because they are non-reproductive. If this is certain, how can genre possibly make a difference? Immediately, the answer seems connected to what stories the genre can, and typically does, tell. This resonates with convictions voiced by short story theoreticians such as Mary Louisa Pratt, Brander Matthews, and author Nadine Gordimer. While none of them focus specifically on sexuality, per se, the notion that short stories contain different stories than novels is persistent. The novel proper, at least the realist one dominating the turn of the last century, was very much dependent on a romantic plot. While Gustav Flaubert might have dreamt about writing novels about nothing, most of his novels are marked both structurally and plot wise by the narrative demand of the marriage plot and heterosexual romance.

Short story scholars using the novel to define the short story typically end up underscoring the hierarchal system of literary genres, even when writing ‘in defence’ of the
short story. This reminds one that language cannot be innocent, and how one is dependent on the cultural vocabulary available. Nissen underlines in his essay how short story scholars have suggested that the absence of a love demand is one of the aspects differentiating the short story and the novel (183). Matthews, a contemporary of Freeman, maintains that ‘while the Novel can not get on easily without love, the Short-story can’ (qtd. in Pratt 98). Matthews explains this quite simply by underlining the genre’s brevity: ‘the Short-story, being brief, does not need a love-interest to hold its parts together’ (qtd. in Pratt 98). The shortness of the genre does indeed seem relevant, and it is interesting to consider that ‘A New England Nun’ can avoid a reproductive marriage plot, or ending with love, because it can simply ‘end’ when love departs. However, there seems to be more to it. The concept of the short story’s brevity raises an interesting connection to Roof’s claim that ‘abridgment only has significance in relation to the “normal”’, that is, ‘we only know the story is cut short because we know what length the story is supposed to be’ (xi). Merely interpreting the short story in light of it being shorter than the novel seems limiting. It appears more relevant to ask whether there are further similarities or conditions inherent in the short story that leaves it suitable for the spinster character?

Pratt points out in her essay ‘The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It’, that ‘we do not see the poem as incomplete with respect to a long poem’ (100). This underlines the illogicality of measuring two completely different units up against one another. Still, one does it often without considering the effects. This seems inherently connected to the argument just presented by Roof. A queer life might be considered wasted and abridged, because it does not contain what a normal life contains. The spinster’s ‘future days strung together like pearls in a rosary’ (1628) seem empty compared to the life she could have had with a husband, filled with children and productivity. Of course, this point of comparison is motivated by the underlying ideology informing the reading subject of normativity, which in this case is reproductive heterosexuality. The days seem empty and the life abridged because they break with normalcy. Just as the short story is only essentially short compared to a longer work like the novel. In another comparison of the short story and the novel, Pratt furthers the opinion that because ‘the short story is not a “full-length” narrative it cannot narrate a full-length life’ (99). The notion that the short story cannot contain a ‘full-length life’ resonates with the idea that a non-reproductive life cannot be of a good and worthy life.

There are observable intrinsic qualities in the short story genre that are not defined by its shortness. The short story is a genre, according to Pratt, where ‘marginal experience [has] some tradition of being at home’ (108). This resonates well with Katy Mezei’s way of...
defining the ‘spinster protagonists’ as ‘socially marginal, yet potentially transgressive’ (103). Is the short story perhaps where characters of abridged narratives belong? In this genre, Louisa’s life is enough to fill the story, both with regard to length and her limited possibilities of development.

Roof’s argument that ‘without the expectation of an ending, we have difficulty discerning a story’ (3) appears central in connection to ‘A New England Nun’. When Louisa is engaged to Joe, her ending and thus her story is predictable. The novel narrative depends on this, hence, when this ‘natural’ ending is altered, so is the story as a whole. To further this point, Roof’s argument that ‘the nature of narrative depends upon an unwitting estimation of narrative’s proper (re)productive end’(xxxiv) seems relevant. A story only has meaning because the reader relies on an estimation that the story will come to a reproductive conclusion. This estimation is not met in ‘A New England Nun’, which obscures the story as a whole. The ‘ending’ of ‘A New England Nun’ is not a reproductive one, at least for Louisa, and thus not an ending the heteroideology approves of. Because of this, the reader has problems with ‘discerning a story’ and is left motivated to come up with explanations that function within heteronormativity – illustrated by all the critics interpreting the story to be about Louisa’s lacks and failures.

A study capable of answering Nissen’s question of heteroideology and the short story would necessarily extend beyond the limits of this thesis. Nevertheless, it does seem like the short story genre is a suitable genre for the spinster, and thus the queer character. That the heteronarrative is so visible in ‘A New England Nun’ does not discredit such a statement. On the contrary, the short story efficiently illustrates how a link can be made between queer narrative theory and the short story genre. This additionally suggests that there should be a focus on genre in debating the effect of heteroideology in works with spinster protagonists. While heteroideology functions within all plots, short story conventions leave the genre suited to telling certain stories that a novel would be too long for.

**Conclusion**

Louisa, although engaged for most of the story, appears a model queer spinster. In addition to thriving in her own company, blissfully alone in her home, she chooses to remain this way faced with the threat of social stigma. That critics in the years since have seen her as repressed and suppressed, neurotic and eccentric, only goes to underline how the character should be read as a spinster. Perhaps it is the critics’ knowledge of the end, or lack of one, that makes it seemingly impossible to see Louisa as anything but a – prematurely – old maid.
A remarkable consistency considering the ways the spinster character and the short story are described has been underlined. This is why it is important that Louisa to an extent fulfils the spinster criteria. As mentioned earlier, Gordimer disputes that both the novel and short story wishes to convey human experience, but that the short story is better equipped to convey ‘ultimate truth’. How the novel genre deals with notions of ‘ultimate truth’ and general realism will be a key element in the next chapter on *The Whole Family*. For now, through Roof’s narrative theory, one can see how the heteronarrative does not communicate all types of human experience. Actually, it consequently portrays certain experiences in an exclusively negative way, because of the seeming impossibility of writing certain characters without defining them as suffering from the absence of the normative.

Ultimately ‘A New England Nun’ problematises the ways in which heterosexuality is indispensable for meaning and value. The ideas of wasted opportunity, meaninglessness, and uselessness underline the way in which narrative of capitalist, heterosexual reproduction pervades the way one sees the world. ‘A New England Nun’ opens up for the possibility that value might be found right under one’s nose, if one is capable of overlooking the ruling ideology for a moment. This is illustrated in the story itself, and fittingly underscored in the critical discourse. The likening between queer narratives and what the short story is known to do was underlined to illustrate how the spinster’s narrative of abridgement fits the short story’s genre. Additionally, this chapter argues that the ambiguity in the story should not be limited in interpretations to Freeman’s personal qualms regarding marriage; rather, it should be interpreted as an illumination of the variations existing in marginal positions.

Freeman’s realism challenges the notion that a restricted amount of people can know what constitutes reality for everyone. While there are a limited number of narrative positions and plot lines available for the spinster, the precise nature of the spinster life in these stories are characteristically not what they seem. ‘A New England Nun’ opens up the spinster stereotype by featuring a happy and content one, and ultimately challenges the idea of a tautology regarding single women’s value. A final problem arises. If the spinster is so perfectly suited for the short story, can a spinster short story be defiant? Characters like Louisa challenge the heteronormative by ignoring the limitations that narrative places on them. Do the truly subversive spinster characters own their spinsterhood, and inhabit a place in a genre in which they seemingly do not belong? Is the place to look for spinsters who challenge the heteronarrative, perhaps not in the short story where they are evidently at home and thriving, but in the universe of the novel?
3 The Whole Family: The Spinster as a Threat to Narrative

Being an old maid is like death by drowning, a really delightful sensation after you cease to struggle.
Edna Ferber

‘Here I am the old-maid aunt. Not a day, not an hour, not a minute, when I am with other people, passes that I do not see myself in their estimation playing that role as plainly as if I saw myself in the looking-glass’ (Howells 30). With these words, Aunt Elizabeth ‘Lily’ Talbert reflects on her existence in her brother’s home. It is made clear from the beginning that Lily occupies a very specific role in her family. It is also apparent that this role does not coincide with the way in which she sees herself, and claims that everyone outside the home sees her. Prime mover William Dean Howells had rather stern direct ions regarding where he wanted his collaborative novel The Whole Family (1908) to go. The twelve authors who agreed to participate in the venture were, in order of appearance in the finished book: Howells himself, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Mary Heaton Vorse, Mary Stewart Cutting, Elizabeth Jordan, John Kendrick Bangs, Henry James, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Edith Wyatt, Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews, Alice Brown, and Henry Van Dyke. All were assigned a character, men writing men, and women writing women. The exception from the rule being children’s author Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews, who was allowed to bridge the gender gap and write ‘The School-Boy’ chapter. Howells envisioned that the novel would be a ‘realistic portrait of a typical American Family’ (qtd. in Glasser 88). According to John W. Crowley, Howells wanted the novel to ‘exemplify the principles of Howellsian realism’ (96), and pitched it to Elizabeth Jordan, then editor of Harper’s Bazaar, as a way to ‘show off’ Harper authors’ (qtd. in Crowley 96).

Freeman, the established authority on New England old maids, was assumed to be the perfect candidate to write the aunt’s chapter. However, it turned out that Howells was in for a surprise. Donna M. Campbell explains that Freeman was ‘stung by Howells’ limited vision of the spinster’ (127) after reading his directions for ‘her’ character, which motivated Freeman to write a chapter ‘to show the “old maid aunt” as she really was’ (127). That Howells’s idea of literary realism did not coincide with Freeman’s is visible in the completed novel. This
raises the question of whether an ‘old maid aunt’ can be shown as she ‘really is’? Is there one ideal way to be a spinster? Finally, is a spinster a spinster, if she differs from the stereotype?

What is clear is that the chapter ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ contains a spinster who defiantly goes against traditional spinster character traits. Lily, rather than being a mean/jealous/bitter/sad/pathetic/tragic aunt, presents herself as an attractive woman. In the few pages Lily has at her disposal, a plot twist is revealed: her niece Peggy’s fiancé is really an old flame of Lily’s, and he might still be in love with her. Consequently, Lily is revealed as the main object of desire in the novel. Albeit, this position is limited to the chapter ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, as the later narrators will fiercely contest her reliability. Lily distorts the otherwise ruling ideologies of sexuality and gender as ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter derails the novel’s expected romantic storyline. As a character, Lily transgresses both as a sexual object and subject; furthermore, she challenges novel narrative itself by claiming to be the key character in the book.

It is obvious that the ideas of realism that shaped The Whole Family did not allow for ‘spinsters’ or ‘old maids’ to be sexually desirable, or to have sexual desires of their own. Campbell explains how ‘in creating Lily/Elizabeth, Freeman strikes a blow against a kind of realism that limits as it defines. Her action points out the inherent paradox of realism: that it, too, can become solidified into a mass of preconceived notions and prejudices’ (130, emphasis in original). This accords with Karen L. Kilcup’s argument, that ‘Freeman’s Aunt Elizabeth embodies not only sexual freedom but also freedom of speech’ (8). While Lily undeniably embodies free speech in her own chapter, this thesis chapter will make it clear how the ‘correct’ realism of the time functioned as a muzzle throughout the novel as a whole. This chapter will suggest that The Whole Family’s novel form, in addition to its multiple authors, makes it impossible for Lily to succeed in her gratified spinster quest. This resonates with ideas put forth in my concluding words on ‘A New England Nun’. It will be made clear how the limited vocabulary and few narratives available form the path of the spinster. The Whole Family is a novel; yet, it can also be seen as a series of short stories. Accordingly, it appears a logical point of departure when debating the possibilities for the spinster when she leaves the safety of the short story and enters the novel. The main focus will be on Freeman’s chapter ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, but a consideration of The Whole Family as a whole is necessary to see how the spinster figure is subdued and resolved by the narrative of the novel genre.

Scholarly attention to The Whole Family has almost exclusively been dedicated to Freeman’s chapter on ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ and the effect it has on the novel as a whole.
Dale M. Bauer’s contribution to Laura Doan’s *From Old Maids to Radical Spinsters* (1991) is dedicated to this specific ‘old maid’. It is telling about the scholarly consensus that the book it is placed in the section for ‘Excellent Women’ (the title is from a novel by Barbara Pym), rather than the section on ‘Old Maids’. Bauer, Campbell, and Kilcup all read Lily with a feminist perspective, emphasising her opposition to patriarchal norms. Something they fail to consider is how Lily ends up as, but does not start out as, a spinster. Her story might not be that of an old maid, nevertheless she emerges as one by the end of the novel.

Bauer argues that ‘Mary Wilkins Freeman, for one, disrupted this whole familial configuration, this totalizing picture of “the American family” by introducing a sexually vibrant and transgressive spinster. The spinster delays the conventional marriage plot and thereby forces us to confront the alternative plots for women offered in *The Whole Family*’ (108). This transgressiveness will be both explored and problematised in the context of the novel. This chapter asks whether the novel might have a greater influence over the spinster, than the spinster has over the novel? Bauer further states that ‘Freeman’s spinster need not be sexually proper – or sexual property – because she does not look for a husband’ (109). This interpretation might be valid for ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter, but it appears a simplistic interpretation of the book as a whole. As expressed earlier, Lily is irrevocably problematic in the narrative of the novel, precisely because she is considered both sexual property and as sexually improper. While Lily might claim that she is not looking for a husband, the heteronormative novel narrative does not allow for that.

First, there will be an analysis of ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter without emphasis on the rest of the collaborative novel. This is mainly an attempt to read the spinster’s version of events, in order to see her in and of herself. As the spinster almost never gets to play a novel protagonist, it is important to highlight it when she does. In this case, it is especially interesting because the spinster character claims to be a main character, but will be revoked from this position by the end of the story. The second part moves out of the chapter on ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, and takes the other characters’ interpretation of Lily into consideration. This is done to underline the difference between the ‘spinster narrative’, that is the chapter that works almost as a short story, and the narrative of the novel as a whole. Lastly, the ideas of the spinster’s womanhood and sexuality will be linked to Judith Roof’s narrative theory. Unlike Roof’s work, this thesis will contextualise the text in question, and *The Whole Family* will be considered in light of the historical period and its literary genre.
The Reliability of the Attractive Old-Maid Aunt

A more detailed overview of ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter seems useful, perhaps because it is so short, and yet so eventful. The chapters in The Whole Family are all narrated by extradiegetic, homodiegetic narrators. Consequently, Lily and the other character’s claim to reliability can be questioned. Lily herself reflects on this, but ends up stating that ‘I do not think I deceive myself’ (30). She expands her thoughts on the matter, asserting that ‘I know it is the popular opinion that old maids are exceedingly prone to deceive themselves concerning the endurance of their youth and charms, and the views of other people with regard to them’ (23). One of the issues of the narrative in The Whole Family – as a complete novel – is the obscurity of the narratee. Lily’s chapter appears to be recorded as the events unfold, reminiscent of eighteenth-century novels such as Samuel Richardson’s Pamela. Other chapters and authors approach the narration differently: Henry James’s ‘The Married Son’ is written like a diary; ‘The School-Boy’ has been told by the family to write his story down in retrospect, in order to make sense of things. This contributes to the authenticity of the narrators, as it adds a layer of disparity between the chapters, which comes on top of the different character-narrators.

After Lily confesses her discomfort with being labelled ‘the old aunt’, she explains how ‘my hair is as red as Peggy’s, that I am still quite as slim, that there is not a line on my face, that I still keep my girl colour with no aid, that I wear frills of the latest fashion, and I look no older than when he first saw me’ (33). ‘He’ is neighbour Ned Temple, who was in love with Lily in adolescence. After reflecting on this, Lily goes downstairs to meet Peggy’s fiancé and learns that it is ‘poor Harry Goward’, who ‘turn[ed] so pale’ (35) upon seeing her. Lily reveals that the two have had ‘a thing’, even though ‘flirtations between older women and boys always have seemed to [her] contemptible’ (35). Lily and Goward had been ‘engaged for – for the week, anyhow’ (130) some time back. Thus, the love triangle is announced. Harry Goward flees the country home without explanation; Lily is the only one who knows why. In addition to this drama, Ned Temple’s wife finds out that the two have shared a past after Lily and he just happen to meet on the street, and are observed walking home together. In a fit of jealousy, the neighbour confronts Lily, but Lily uses her ‘feminine virtues’ to console her. Later, in a melodramatic manner, Lily receives a letter from Goward. In the patriarchal home, there is no privacy, and as a result the whole family is aware of their correspondence. Lily must make up a lie about the contents, before she goes into town to reply, claiming that she does not wish to interfere and that she hopes her family will never
learn the truth. Nevertheless, as she underlines in the finishing sentence of ‘her’ story: ‘I
cannot tell how it will end’ (59).

The details of the plot in the chapter are relevant because they work to underline the
ludicrousness of defining Lily as an ‘Old-Maid Aunt’. She is a part of, not just one, but two
love triangles, at least suspected so by the jealous wife. The first, consisting of Lily, Peggy,
and Henry Goward, is ‘naturally’ the most provoking one, as the older participant is a
woman. Lily narrates her chapter with a mixture of serenity and terrific irony. After
vehemently denying the power of the old maid aunt role to define her, she constantly refers to
herself as such. This ‘old-maiden aunt’ (42) is not in love with the local doctor, even though
she knows that he attracts the ‘the mothlike dreams of ancient maidens’ (43). Later, she
scolds her nephew for ‘talking that way to his old aunt’ (56), after smugly reporting that he
told her she ‘was handsomer in [her] pink dress than any girl in his school’ (56). With less
ironical distance, she communicates that her nephew is not the only one who finds her
attractive. The neighbour’s wife repeats the portrayal of Lily as striking when she apologises
for her fit of jealousy by explaining how ‘her whole life was bound up in her husband, and
[Lily] was so beautiful and had so much style’ (54). It appears that Lily is attempting to
ridicule the definition of the ‘Old-Maid Aunt’ out of its existence, reflecting a much-used
tactic of owning a word to render it powerless. Lily tells the reader that her family does not
know ‘that today an old-maid aunt is as much of an anomaly as a spinning wheel, that she
had ceased to exist, that she is prehistoric’ (33). She appears to know that readers will
encounter the rest of the family, and prepares them for her family’s respective interpretation
of her character. Having already underlined the ridiculousness of the old maid aunt
caricature, the reader will have to take everything to follow with a grain of salt. This
undermines the reliability of the remaining narrators, both regarding the plot and the
portrayal of Lily’s character.

There is a doubleness to Lily’s apparent disinterest in her family’s opinion. While she
appears unaffected by her family’s preconceptions, her constant need to affirm her own
attractiveness and worth tells another story. Irony seems a defence for a character that knows
that she is not in the right place, but nevertheless refuses to leave. Lily, in her brother’s
house, both infantilised and ostracised, reflects on her own behaviour:

I think I will put on my pink linen, and my hat lined with pink chiffon and trimmed with shaded roses
(…) I know quite well how I look in that gown and hat, and I know, also, quite well how I shall look to
the members of my family assembled below. They all unanimously consider that I should dress always
in black silk (…) I know I am wicked to put on that pink gown and hat, but I shall do it. I wonder why
it bemuses me to be made fun of. Thank fortune, I have a sense of humour. (44)
Contemporary ideologies of sexuality and gender are revealed in instances such as this. Lily knows she is attractive, but also that her age makes this impossible in her family home. When referring to how she ‘knows’ how she looks, Lily denotes both her physical appearance, and the sociocultural opinions of her. She looks pretty, but she also looks ridiculous. She looks like a young stylish woman, but this is absurd because she is not, at least not in the eyes of her family. She knows that she looks like someone who deceives herself. Lily is aware that the woman she sees in the mirror is not the same woman her family sees. She is acquainted with the rules governing her contemporaries, and the ways in which they understand the world around them; in other words, she is familiar with her culture’s vocabulary.

Lily’s awareness is especially visible in her anticipation of what the other narrators will have to say about her and Goward. She shows this by establishing forcefully that Peggy is indeed ‘engaged to a man who is fond of her aunt and cannot conceal it’ (37). Furthermore, she retells how her sister-in-law Ada, or ‘The Mother’, laughs that ‘you can’t be foolish enough, Aunt Elizabeth, to think that he is in love with you now?’ (40). While the notion of infatuation seems to be accepted, Ada underlines that such a thing cannot be a lasting situation. A younger woman will come along and prove a proper target for the man’s affection. In this case, Peggy already has. Lily knows everyone will think that the older, single woman merely provides a temporary preoccupation in a man’s heart and mind. Lily reflects on Ada’s reaction and wonders whether ‘another woman would have said what I might have said, especially after the imputation of the idiocy of my thinking that a young man could possible fancy me. I said nothing’ (40, emphasis in original). Precisely what she ‘might’ have said is not made explicit; implying it is something the narratee of such a tale would be left red-eared by. The heavy irony concerning the absurdity of her being attractive suggests that she has ‘proof’ of her attractiveness. It appears that what she ‘might’ have told would deeply disturb Ada, the angel of the house and emblem of her period’s gender ideology. Thus, the core family members in their domesticity appear naïve and conventional upholders of normalcy, while Lily is quite firmly established as attractive and enlightened.

The definitional power of naming recurs in literature with women, especially spinsters. The perhaps most obvious instance is the known and general use of ‘Miss’ and ‘Mrs.’. While men for all their lives are ‘Misters’, women mature from a young Miss to Mrs., unless, of course, she fails to get this ‘update’ on her status. Lily at 34 is an unnatural ‘miss’, and she is steadily becoming a spinster aunt instead. It appears that she might be losing her womanhood. In the case of ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, the factor of naming is not only relevant in
examining Lily as a character, it also has a key function in the plot. More precisely, it constitutes Lily’s theory of how she and Goward could be unaware of the other’s identity until they met again at Lily’s family home. ‘They have probably alluded to me as dear old Aunt Elizabeth’ (34), Lily explains, perfecting the irony by adding a patronizing ‘dear’. She continues to explain that when they met ‘nobody called me Elizabeth, but Lily (...) Everybody here calls me Elizabeth’ (34). That she has two separate names underscores how she lives in two separate spheres. She is both woman and aunt; she is both Lily and Elizabeth. However, the family’s view of her does not allow for both. This refusal to accept the spinster as a complete and complex person is what eventually leads to her exclusion from the familiar domestic novel. Nevertheless, this exclusion opens up for a story, which will remain unknown to the reader, where she might define herself.

**Claiming Space: Resistance and Loss**

The one person in her family Lily claims to get along with is her nephew Charles Edward, not counting the youngest children Alice and Billy. However, this proves another instance where the disagreement between the characters affects the reliability of the narrators. Charles Edward, when his time for narration comes, proves not to be in harmony with Lily at all. In her chapter, Lily reflects that he is ‘really an artist’ (44), something that places him somewhat outside the conventional family. However, even this ‘artist’, whom one assumes can break out of society and the family’s conformity, cannot see. Lily makes this tangible in a spectacular chain of thought:

> He will always be hampered by thinking he sees what he has been brought up to think he sees (...) Now Charles Edward would think that sunburned grass over in that field is green, when it is pink, because he has been taught that grass is green. If poor Charles only knew that grass was green, not of itself, but because of occasional conditions, and knew that his aunt looked – well, as she does look – he would flee for his life (...) but he will never know. (46)

When the reader is later introduced to Charles Edward, it is with the knowledge that he might not see as much as he pretends to. Besides, this passage does more than comment on Charles Edward’s reliability; both his gender and his vocation as ‘artist’ appear to be important.

The metaphorical link between the grass and Lily is rather obvious. Her family cannot see her as she is, because they have been told she is something else. Just as Charles Edward would report that the grass is green, he would report that his aunt is old and unattractive. That Lily uses a male relative as an example of this blindness cannot be unintentional. While the other women described in ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter appear to indiscriminately follow the doctrines of acceptable behaviour, the men do so with greater authority. This is, by all means,
only reasonable in a heteropatriarchal environment such as the Talbert family home. Charles Edward, the oldest son and potential future patriarch, is limited by the same society as he instinctively adheres to and reinforces. His artistic vision will always be coloured by his prejudices, and when painting a realistic picture the grass in it will always be green. Here the link to the creator of ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ character becomes discernible. Lily underlines how grass can really be pink, if one actually looks. The artist, nevertheless, paints grass green from habit, just like the author routinely defines the ‘Old-Maid Aunt’ as old and ugly. This is a critique of a realism based on notions that do not constitute ‘truth’ for all; a realism that restricts what can be, because it is incapable of seeing what is really out there. All in all, the passage appears a snide comment on the way ideology of gender, amongst other things, affects narrative and the characters it contains. This observation expands the specific situation in the chapter, and proves a comment on how narrative and literature work in general.

The most preposterous claim Lily makes, considering the ideology of narrative, is that Goward had ‘proposed to Peggy when he was in love with another woman, probably because he was in love with another woman’ (37, my emphasis). While this might not immediately seem too different from stating that Goward was in love with her, and yet proposed to Peggy, there is a subtle difference. In the above, Lily asserts that the conventional marriage plot, the cornerstone of the novel (both The Whole Family and the genre), is really just a conspiracy. Not only does Lily’s narrative occupy a middle section of the plot, but it also places her character in the absolute centre of the story. She has a place in ‘the beginning’, as there would be no engagement were it not for her. The very marriage plot exists because she does.

While a collaborative novel like The Whole Family will, to a certain extent, have each respective narrator as a protagonist of sorts, it would appear logical that Peggy (the key person in the intended plot) would be the main character and overall protagonist. Peggy might never have been an Isabel Archer, but she could have had the potential to be much more than she turns out as in the novel. After the events of ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter, however, Lily is established as the potential protagonist. It is because of her that Peggy is engaged, and that the engagement might be broken off. Lily takes it upon herself to solve the family’s problems, placing herself as the moving force of the novel. So, in a way, Lily is a rare novel spinster-protagonist. There are two complicating factors though: firstly, she does not consider herself a spinster at this point; and secondly, by the end of the novel her protagonist position is withdrawn.

As the ultimate ‘ending’ of this story is not in ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, but rather in ‘The Friend of the Family’ chapter written by Henry Van Dyke, a scrutiny of the novel as a
whole is indispensable. To grasp how the narrative of the novel functions to diminish the subversive spinster, the complete novel must be considered, including the ending. If one considers the beginning of the chapter on ‘The Father’, it is given that Lily will end up sad and alone. Ned Temple originally introduces Lily, using his wife’s words, as having ‘long been a lady of that age when ladies begin to be spoken of as maidens’ (19). Of course, it is later explained that Temple had failed to make the connection between Miss Talbert and the Lily he once knew. So, while it may not be evident what will happen to Lily when looking at ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ as a separate narrative, it is clear in the context of the novel. In the time between the second chapter and the twelfth, Lily is firmly put back in her place, which is on the outside looking in from the margin where the spinster belongs.

While Lily barely qualifies as an ‘old maid’ in the chapter she narrates, her character does by her point of departure from the novel. After failing to convince Goward to stay away, Lily leaves the family home and goes to New York. By chance, she travels on the same train as Goward, who had returned to deliver yet another letter, only to leave again immediately. The whole family is now concerned with righting ‘Lily’s’ mistakes. Some characters focus on retrieving Goward to reunite him with Peggy; others believe the engagement must be broken off. An ingenious plan is hatched by ‘The Married Daughter’ Maria: Lily is to be linked to the doctor (the same one who according to Lily attracts ‘the mothlike dreams’ of spinsters) both to sway her attention, and to force Goward to see what kind of person she is. More or less at the same time, Lily is reunited with her first and only real love Lyman Wilde. So there is no lack of potential solutions to the spinster problem, nevertheless, none of them win through.

The doctor, in a surprise twist, is revealed to have been Peggy’s first love and Goward only an attempt to get over him. Ironically enough, no comment is made upon the predatory behaviour of the doctor (who is after all old enough for mothlike spinsters). Lily’s endeavour to be the catalyst of events by claiming to be the instigator of the marriage plot is hence undercut. Neither Peggy nor Lily will end up with the doctor. Not to anyone’s great surprise, Lily is again rejected by her first flame. Peggy wows that she will not marry anyone, although this determination is quickly altered. By the end of the novel, Lily is no longer a part of any love triangles; she is merely the character that ended a bad match in which there was never any real love.

In an almost ironically appropriate scene, Peggy narrates the last observation of Lily’s physical presence in the novel. Peggy conveys that ‘Aunt Elizabeth looked so pretty. She was dressed, as I never saw her before, a close-fitting black gown and a plain white
collar and a little close black hat. She looked almost like some sister of charity’ (290, my emphasis). Lily has thus become Aunt Elizabeth, signified by the fact that she now dresses like she always knew her family would find appropriate. She has apparently, if one trusts the narrator, accepted her position as the old maid aunt, rather than protagonist. Unlike the case of Louisa Ellis, there is nothing that indicates that this is remotely close to what Lily wanted in life. However, additionally unlike Louisa, Lily has social resources outside her family. While the whole family considers that she has joined a convent, it can seem she is really joining a coven as she unites with her friend in New York. Though she is written out of the family’s narrative, there is another world out there that she can still partake in. The black outfit would doubtlessly be appropriate in both convent and coven. Bauer writes that there ‘is the threat of marginalization, embodied in the spinster, which the culture holds up as a Medusan image to unmarried women’ (111). Even though Lily fought valiantly to defy the image her culture and family held up to her, she could evidently not withstand forever. By the end of the novel, she has cast off her youth and beauty and seemingly accepted her black mourning outfit. The ‘Medusan image’ has become a mirror, and she recognises herself in the reflection. If one trusts the narrators of the final chapters, it seems like Lily has turned into the eccentric, worst-case scenario young maidens recoil from.

The indication of mourning produced by the black dress of the spinster proper denotes a death of sorts. Perhaps the death of the life she was never to have? In ‘The Son-in-Law’ Tom Price’s chapter, written by John Kendrick Bangs, the narrator proclaims that ‘maiden aunthood is an unhappy state, and grows worse with habit’ (139). In the space of the novel, he proves to be correct. However, this precise prediction is true due to the catch of the ‘Medusan image’. In ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, nothing indicates that Lily finds her life to be ‘an unhappy state’. Rather, she seems better off than any other woman in the book. Still, the ideologies of gender and sexuality of the period do not allow for this. This all resonates with ‘A New England Nun’, and the way Louisa’s solitary bliss is consequently interpreted as desolation.

Over the space of the novel, Lily’s character is continuously modified and redefined by the other narrators. ‘Aunt Elizabeth has reached the point where she is ready for a new man’ (194), her niece Maria says; ‘Elizabeth is one of those unoccupied women’ (62), the grandmother condescends; that ‘preposterous old-maid sister Elizabeth (the biggest child of the lot)’ (296), the friend of the family declares. All things considered, it seems that the spinster mourns the life she could have had. However, the life mourned is not that of married domesticity. Quite on the contrary, the life she mourns is that of freedom combined with
access to an extended family, a freedom that only appears possible in her own chapter.

Considering Lily’s admitted tendency of making a joke of herself, the mourning might be a comment on her exit from the family’s life, and the realist novel narrative. The black dress can thus symbolise an ironic death-in-life of the maiden. The woman dies when she stops being a ‘maid’ and morphs into ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’. Her purpose is now perfectly peripheral; she no longer constitutes anything more than a function in a plot where she is essentially irrelevant. She is effectively written out of the narrative, the life she is about to have, free or not, cannot be a part of Howells’s ideal literary realism.

**The Novel Narrative and the Perverse Threat**

*The Whole Family* is, as mentioned, marked by structural issues. The continuous additions to the plot, the surprise twists, and the general sense of disagreement between the different authors leave the book as a whole rather incoherent. It is known that Howells was extremely unhappy with Freeman’s contribution and even begged Jordan to not ‘let her ruin our beautiful story’ (qtd. in Glasser 92). Henry Van Dyke did not seem any more impressed when he asked, also in a letter to Jordan, ‘who would have thought that the maiden aunt would go mad in the second chapter?’ (qtd. in Glasser 92). This disagreement about the novel’s aim and development is what makes it such an interesting reading experience, especially considering the effects of the ideologies of gender and sexuality.

Kilcup argues that ‘Mary Wilkins Freeman (…) managed to interrogate the trajectory of the domestic romance towards inevitable marriage by creating “The Maiden Aunt” as an attractive – even erotic – “other woman” who intervenes between the young engaged couple’ (7). While Lily’s position in the novel doubtlessly changes the predictable course of *The Whole Family*, it would ultimately be more accurate to say that the novel ends up altering Lily’s ‘trajectory’. The erotic ‘maiden’ aunt does manage to lead the narrative astray for a time. Nevertheless, *The Whole Family* is wrapped up with Peggy (just married) waving goodbye to her family; everyone but Lily, that is, who has already been exiled. Lily has by this point finally realised her position in the world: she is to move in with a female friend in New York, who has discovered that Lily has ‘enormous magnetism and – and other qualifications’ (291). Hence, Howells realist domestic romance seems almost old fashioned, as Kilcup reflects: ‘it concludes, ironically and schizophrenically, with a gesture toward marriage more typical of the traditional nineteenth-century domestic novel than of the “modern” novel’ (12).
While Freeman definitely started the moving force of the perverse and improper narrative alternative in *The Whole Family*, it would be inaccurate to claim that she was the sole perpetrator in the mutiny against Howellsian realism. The way *The Whole Family* is written makes it almost unavoidable to refrain from making connections between authors and their respective characters. There is an interesting link between the narrators that stand in support of the defiance, and the authors who wrote their chapters. It appears that the male representatives of both literary and real life heteropatriarchy had a much bigger problem with the idea of an attractive maiden aunt than the female ones. This is not to say that all the female characters, and their respective authors, in *The Whole Family* challenge the narrative assumptions about the spinster. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the only positive interpretation of Lily from a male narrator occurs in ‘The School-Boy’, which was written by Andrews.

All the male authors, Howells, Bangs, James, and Van Dyke, have characters that are sceptical of or downright negative towards Lily. ‘The Friend of the Family’ describes how ‘Aunt Elizabeth, with her red hair and pink frock, had interfered and lured off the Goward’ (303). ‘The Son-in-Law’ is perhaps a bit more open to the change she represents. Nevertheless, he states: ‘I will give [any taker a] quit-claim deed to my maiden aunt-in-law – not that Aunt Elizabeth isn’t good fun, for she is, and I enjoy talking to her, and wondering what she will do next fills my days with a living interest, but I’d like her better if she belonged in some other fellow’s family’ (126). Because Lily goes such in depth describing her looks later narrators seem to comply with this aspect of ‘the old maid’. The negative characteristics shifts over to her unattractive personality, her unacceptable behaviour, and the embarrassment of having someone like her in the family. The combination of embarrassment and threat coming from the spinster character, as earlier highlighted by Barbara Brothers, is evident.

Whether the portrayals of Lily’s transgression are expressions of the author’s own opinion or the character’s, it typically goes in accordance with their respective characters’ realistic perception of the world. Whether it is because of the particular author’s talent, or Howells ability to match authors with their characters, will remain unknown. The narrating women of *The Whole Family* are not substantially more generous in their portrayal of Lily than their male counterparts. ‘The Grand-Mother’ does not believe Lily’s stories. She claims that ‘Aunt Elizabeth had been making trouble!’ (72), and is certain that the entire business of Goward and Lily is something the latter has construed. The grandmother undermines Lily’s story by showing how ridiculous she finds her tale: ‘I don’t suppose you believe Henry
Goward’s dying love for Aunt Elizabeth when he can look at Peggy!’ (73). That the ultimate matriarch of the house attempts to eliminate the threat towards the heteropatriarchal narrative is very much ‘in character’. This is also the case for the scepticism voiced by ‘The Mother’, correspondingly visible in ‘The Married Daughter’. These narrators are likewise married, conventional, and defensive when faced with something they perceive as dangerous disrupts their ordinary lives.

The artistic ‘Daughter-in-Law’ Lorraine is kinder in her interpretation than her husband; she also precedes him chronologically. She underlines both that Lily is indeed as she presents herself, and that she does not seem to belong in the family home: ‘Miss Elizabeth Talbert is howling swell; she only just endures it here’ (92). Even if the female narrators are more generous than the men in their descriptions of Lily, the heteronormative demand of narrative is still visible. Maria, ‘The Married Daughter’, reflects that Lily ‘is an attractive woman; she knows it; women admit it; and men feel it. I don’t think Aunt Elizabeth is a heartless person; not an irresponsible one, only an idle and unhappy one’ (195). All this is accentuated to illustrate how ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter is not completely alone in reworking the spinster character. Nonetheless, these portrayals have implications that ultimately further the required elimination of the spinster from the narrative. When Lily reflects that the idea of old maids is an anachronism, she is proven right. This makes it necessary for the family to create a new ‘perversion’, a new version of the threat to narrative. Allowing Lily to be attractive seemingly supports her claim to truth, yet she is described as unhappy and out of place. It becomes ‘apparent’ that she needs a man to be fulfilled, highlighting how beauty does not really mean anything if it does not help you find a man.

*The Whole Family*, considering all the above, substantiates Roof’s theory that there is no room for perversion that goes against heteronormativity in narrative. This is underlined in *The Whole Family* by the fact that Lily does not manage to derail the heteronormative marriage plot. In a way, considering the novel genre, her character might even function to reinforce the plot. Roof writes that ‘without the possibility that something might go wrong, the saving force of heterosexual attraction means nothing’ (xix). Considering the historical context of *The Whole Family*, it is observable that ‘heterosexual attraction’ is not necessarily a ‘saving force’ in and of itself. While perhaps accurate in modern-day America, Roof’s theory does not include a consideration of historical changes affecting ideologies of gender and sexuality. Lily, representing non-normative sexuality in her time, is someone the sanctity of marriage and narrative need saving from. This resonates with Susan S. Lanser’s point that ‘impropriety, even in a seemingly straight context’ might constitute ‘a queer formation’ (283,
emphasis in original). Furthermore, it goes in accordance with what can be defined as necessary perversion. Lily, to use Roof’s example from above, is the possibility that something can go wrong. She constitutes the challenge the novel needs to overcome to arrive at the rightful reproductive end. Lily is the scary alternative, the motivator of patriarchal heteronormativity, and the threat which society, represented by the family, must unite against. Like Charles Edward contends: ‘I think we should really all band together, for once in our lives, in an unnatural alliance to get rid of Eliza’ (165).

While Lily does not disclose precisely what she could have said to shock Ada, she does reveal that she has ‘grasped all the minor sweets of life’ (33). Lily, unabashedly and without shame, has ‘been around’. Bauer argues in her article on the novel that the promiscuous spinster ‘represents a danger to the patriarchal domestic ideology which the whole family is enlisted to protect’ (111). It is precisely this danger perversion encompasses. Roof explains how perversion ‘acquires its meaning as perversion precisely from its threat to truncate the story; it distorts the narrative, preventing the desirable confluence of sexual aim and object and male and female, precluding the discharge of sexual substances, and hindering reproduction’ (xxi). ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’s version of ‘Aunt Elizabeth’ has essentially the same effect on *The Whole Family* as ‘perversion’ has on narrative in the above quote. The spinster, though reportedly straight in this case, distorts the narrative in the same way Roof’s queer figure does. In *The Whole Family* the ‘heterosexual saving force’ (xix) is assembled in an ‘unnatural alliance’ (165), and eventually the novel’s narrative overcomes the perversion.

The chapter on ‘A New England Nun’ focused on Roof’s notion that queer characters can only ‘occupy certain positions or play certain roles metonymically linked to negative values within a reproductive aegis’ (xxvii). This statement is equally accurate considering Lily as a spinster. While Leah Glasser’s claim that ‘Freeman decided to revolutionize the novel by making Lily a major rather than a minor character’ (89) might be accurate when considering Freeman’s intentions, it largely ignores the way narrative works, and the novel as a whole. Lily is just as far off from the reproductive aegis as Louisa is, at least in the opinion of her family. As the historical consideration of the spinster underlined in the main introduction, the moment the single woman becomes an ‘Old-Maid Aunt’ she is marked as barren. Because the novel requires a reproductive end, Lily cannot be present. The position she can occupy is that of the onlooker, the schemer, the opposite of the endearing and fertile niece. This is, fittingly, the position most of the narrators in *The Whole Family* place Lily in. In the case of ‘A New England Nun’, the idea that ‘the nature of narrative depends upon an unwitting estimation of narrative’s proper (re)productive end’ (xxxiv) was problematised in 36
relation to genre. In the short story, the spinster can avoid facing up to the narrative demand for reproduction. In the traditional realist novel, on the other hand, *The Whole Family* illustrates that the case is another.

**Conclusion**

*The Whole Family* proves to be an excellent example of how ideologies of gender and sexuality can coincide with conventions of narrative and the novel genre in particular. In the case of *The Whole Family*, the way in which the novel’s heteronormative narrative reworks figures such as the spinster is especially visible. The case appears the opposite from what Glasser claims, that Lily ‘emerges a woman superior’ (91). This is made clear when one considers the novel as a whole. Seeing the story of Lily directly after that of Louisa underlines the way the short story, because of differences in genre conventions, might be a better home for spinsters than the novel. Of course, the effect the many authors have on *The Whole Family* cannot be stressed enough.

*The Whole Family*, rather than being a story about a family’s reaction to an engagement, may be seen as being about the struggle to create one’s own narrative. In the chapter ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, Lily predicts how her family will react, because she is aware of how social structures work. She knows that she does not hold the power to design her own narrative, yet she makes a brave attempt. For a moment at least, she can be central. *The Whole Family*, then, is about the preconceptions and false truths of the realist narrative, which distort spinster lives just as spinsters might try to distort the narrative. The chapter ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ pokes fun at the notion of the old-fashioned maiden. By doing this it challenges the period’s limited available positions for women, but first and foremost the way society misrepresents her. Another point can be made here about whether it is possible to create a realism that is valid for all. Narrative tells us that some stories are likely to happen, and some are not. A spinster protagonist involved in a love triangle falls into the category of unlikely. This notion is challenged in *The Whole Family*, although tradition and propriety seemingly win in the end. Both the first and second chapter of this thesis thus illustrate how the spinster’s potential path to happiness is not realist novel friendly.

Consequently, the novel’s spinster protagonist appears to have a greater potential for defiance than that of the short story spinster protagonist, as her existence outside the margins is essentially problematic. Nevertheless, the potentially defiant novel protagonist spinster is not Lily. She, like Louisa Ellis, can only exist in the short story – or her respective chapter in this case. The novel form effectively tames the ‘middle-aged’, unmarried woman and by the
end she emerges a docile old maid incapable of fighting the patriarchal domestic order. At least it appears so from the familial perspective. Lily’s actual fate remains unknown, precisely because it is outside the family’s narrative grasp. While she might be excluded and thus apparently tamed, the exclusion provides her with the opportunity to create her own narrative. What goes on inside the doors of potential Boston Marriages, for example, is rarely reported on, but chances are great that the stories would not comply with Howellsian novel realism.

Simply accepting the family’s version of Lily’s future in her New York home implies accepting Susan S. Lanser’s previously introduced ‘heteronormative veil’ (280). Questioning it is the only opportunity of discovering the potential underlying ‘non-heteronormative arrangements’ (280). The desperate struggle of the spinster to be the protagonist underlines that a spinster who actually holds this position is rather rebellious. It is fitting that Lily is linked to a ‘sister of charity’, while she is really going to join ‘Mrs. Ronald Chatway Magnetic Healer and Mediumistic Divulger Lost Articles a Specialty’ (290). It appears that the spinster has to choose between becoming a witch or a nun, at least in the eyes of normative society. Lily success outside the patriarchal home remains uncertain, but it is suggested that she has embraced witchery as a more tempting alternative to the nunnery of old maidenhood. Witchhood, coincidentally, is a spinster fate that will be explored in the upcoming chapter.
4 Lolly Willowes; or the Loving Huntsman as a Perverse Narrative

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.
Ann Sexton

In Sylvia Townsend Warner’s 1926 novel Lolly Willowes: or the Loving Huntsman, the main character Laura Willowes asks the Devil whether it ‘is it true that you can poke the fire with a stick of dynamite in perfect safety?’ only to follow up with ‘I used to take my nieces to scientific lectures, and I believe I heard it then. Anyhow, even if it isn’t true of dynamite, it’s true of women. But they know they are dynamite, and long for the concussion that may justify them’ (195). In some ways, the novel is about how ‘Laura Willowes, in England, in the year 1922, had entered into a compact with the devil’ (143). It is, nonetheless, just as much about what an explosion could look like, respecting the conditions of the dynamite.

In the introduction to Lolly Willowes, Sarah Waters writes that the novel is among the few that are ‘intensely alive to the contrast between the unglamorous exteriors of their “old maid” heroines and the women’s actual, deeply passionate, emotional lives’ (xiv). It is interesting that the two books she compares Lolly Willowes to, The Rector’s Daughter (1924) and Spinster of this Parish (1922), both contain love plots (even if only one of them is somewhat fulfilled). This says something about the uniqueness of Lolly Willowes and its spinster protagonist, an exceptionality the story itself seems aware of. It is explained early in the novel that the heroine’s ‘upbringing had only furthered a temperamental indifference to the need of getting married – or, indeed, of doing anything positive’ (24). Unlike other protagonists she might be compared to, Laura is never motivated by romantic heterosexual incentives. Within heteroideology, it is almost inconceivable that a woman can have an either ‘emotional’ or ‘passionate’ life without a heterosexual agenda. What passions can a spinster possibly have, when heterosexual love is out of the question?
Potential spinster passion was explored in connection to Louisa Ellis’s embroidery, and the chapter highlighted how the spinster’s habits and actions are easily prone to be defined as useless. In *Lolly Willowes*, the issue of usefulness is central, only in this case the spinster believes herself to be too helpful. Laura is tired of being ‘too useful to be allowed to stray’ (56). Heterosexuality as a requirement for meaning in literature was also discussed in the chapter on ‘A New England Nun’, and it is likewise highly relevant in this chapter. Where can meaning be found in *Lolly Willowes*, or any similar narrative, when the protagonist has no inclination towards a heteronormative story? This chapter will not profess that *Lolly Willowes* is above being affected by the heteroideology; however, the novel seems to be actively and consciously working its way around the heteronarrative.

This final chapter will focus on the ways in which *Lolly Willowes*, as a novel, illustrates the spinster’s limited narrative positions. Do self-aware narratives, like this thesis contends *Lolly Willowes* to be, have a greater opportunity to explore the values inherent in these limited positions? Critic Kate Macdonald argues in ‘Witchcraft and Non-conformity’, that ‘Warner’s arguments are feminist’ (216). There is a consensus among critics that the novel presents a confrontation of gender ideologies, and Warner herself was quite likely a feminist as Macdonald maintains. This chapter will continue the intersectional focus from the previous chapters, keeping an awareness of the feminist implications and inflicting an additional queer perspective.

Barbara Brothers points out in ‘Flying the Nets’, that ‘the novel is both a psychologically realistic bildungsroman and a satiric fantasy attacking those patriarchal values and attitudes that make a woman who doesn’t marry and doesn’t choose to serve her family a threat to society, a witch’ (207). This is perhaps the most accurate definition of *Lolly Willowes* written; however this thesis will focus on a different line of argument. While Brothers considers the novel to be about claiming womanhood, it seems more accurate to interpret the novel to be about claiming personhood. Resonating with Monique Wittig’s famous dictum that lesbians cannot be women because they are not the opposite of men, *Lolly Willowes* seems to claim that spinsters (and possibly lesbians) are witches for the precise same reason.

As in the previous chapters, the discussion of *Lolly Willowes* relies heavily on a queer perspective and Judith Roof’s suggested narrative theory. First comes an exploration of Laura’s identity, or lack of one. She is a character so defined by her relation to others, it appears almost as if she is a supporting character in her own novel. This chapter moreover underlines the by now familiar aspect of spinster characters, more precisely, their not being
seen as they really are. Secondly, the concept of what the spinster can be if she is not an aunt is investigated through close readings of the ways Laura sees herself. As she does become a witch, this ‘self’ that she explores and works to define comes to contain much more than ‘just’ her, rather a virtual forest of women. Finally, the structure of the novel will be looked into. It was earlier contended that the short story is the safest haven for the spinster. Be that as it may, there is also the suggestion in Roof’s work of a ‘perverse narrative’ (xxiv), in which the queer pervert can subsist. Might this be the witch’s narrative?

Spinsterhood and Other Identity Disorders
There is little doubt that Laura Erminia Willowes is the protagonist of Lolly Willowes. Yet, the novel appears to consistently underline the unlikeness of this. It is noteworthy that the title of the book is not Laura’s full, dignified name, but the nickname she receives upon becoming an aunt. Even the book about Laura defines her as aunt, something that goes in accordance with the plot of the book, and the pervasive trend of considering spinsters as nothing but their societal position. Brothers’ argue that ‘Lolly is by nature no spinster’ (197), yet, it seems that a case can be made for the opposite if one accepts this thesis’s understanding of the spinster. Though not one formally from the beginning, Laura appears to always be a spinster at heart. With time, she becomes one by law:

When [she] went to London she left Laura behind, and entered into a state of Aunt Lolly (...) or rather, she had become two persons, each different. One was Aunt Lolly, a middle-aged lady, light-footed upon stairs and indispensable for Christmas (...) The other was Miss Willowes, “my sister-in-law Miss Willowes” whom Caroline would introduce, and abandon to a feeling of being neither light-footed nor indispensable. But Laura was put away. When Henry asked her to witness some document for him her Laura Erminia Willowes seemed as much a thing out of common speech as the Spinster that followed it. (52)

It should first be noted that ‘middle-aged’, in this instance, is 28. Officially, Laura has surpassed the age where it is likely that she will be married. The most remarkable aspect of this quote is nevertheless Laura’s reflection on her multiple personas. Not only because of the obvious, slightly schizophrenic aspect, but because she claims to have ‘become two persons’ when really she describes three: Lolly, Miss Willowes, and Laura. The last one, Laura, her (assumed) actual self, appears not to count, as she is the one ‘put away’. So, which one of these three women is the protagonist? One of the two she counts, or the last one that she seems to have forgotten? While one would assume Laura, the actual self, is the protagonist, the book is named after her alternate persona ‘Aunt Lolly’. The above quote underlines how being all three versions of herself at once is an impossibility. Laura, portrayed as a ‘gentle creature’ (6) ‘of a middle height, thin, and rather pointed’ (23), fits the spinster stereotype.
perfectly. Hence, it seems the question from the last chapter on *The Whole Family* needs a revision. The question becomes whether the spinster can be a person, if she fits the spinster stereotype?

Laura, throughout part one of the book, moves steadily further away from what one would expect a novel protagonist to be like. This appears to be caused by her acceptance of her position in the narrative as ‘Aunt Lolly’ and ‘my sister-in-law Miss Willowes’. Unlike Lily Talbert, there is no conflict to stay at the centre of the narrative. The positions Laura occupies are all acceptable and typical for spinsters. While her sister-in-law Caroline has busy days with worthwhile tasks, ‘there was no useful needlework for her to do (…) so Laura was driven to embroidery’ (39). The main problem here is not that she is forced to do something useless, quite the opposite. It seems a metaphor for the way spinsters have no choice but to take upon themselves tasks they know are considered worthless. What bothers Laura is that she is not allowed to remain idle, something she would ‘not have minded’ (39). The stitching gives her no pleasure, apparently because someone else commands it. Laura reflects that she ‘had actually a sensation that she was stitching herself into a piece of embroidery with a good deal of background’ (40). The image of the embroidery illustrates the way in which she is simply partaking in someone else’s narrative, where she has a mere peripheral function. A protagonist is rarely a character frozen in an image with a lot of background, but in this instance she is.

Stitched in a picture with a ‘good deal of background’ is a pervasive image in the book, and Laura is from the very first page defined by her affinity to others. The book curiously starts with establishing that ‘when her father died, Laura Willowes went to live in London with her elder brother and his family’ (5). Rather than having Laura focalise this life-altering period of her life, her sister-in-law Caroline does. Caroline does not appear to actually know Laura, or to be interested in a friendship that extends their familiar relation. She observes that ‘the girls loved her’ (6), so Laura will be useful, even though giving up the ‘small spare room would be rather a loss. They could not give up the large spare-room to Lolly, and the small spare-room was the handiest of the two for ordinary visitors’ (6). This humorous portrayal of Laura as an inconvenience is typical for the novel. It underlines the contemporary period’s view of the spinster, and highlights the absurdity of it. Eventually Caroline reflects that Laura ‘would meet nice people, and in London she would have a better chance of marrying. Lolly was twenty-eight. She would have to make haste if she were going to find a husband before she was thirty. Poor Lolly!’ (6).
That her brother and sister-in-law decide for Laura what she will do, accentuates the limited possibilities for a spinster aunt. Combined with Caroline’s hopes that Laura will marry, it becomes quite clear that these are the two options she has. One man or another has to be responsible for her. Historically, Laura moves in with her brother about the same time the plot of *The Whole Family* takes place, in the early beginning of the twentieth century. In this novel too, it is commented upon that the family’s ‘point of view was old-fashioned’ (9). While Laura can do nothing to contribute to the household financially, she can at least help with the children. Consequently, she is not completely ‘superfluous’. She is not allowed to stray, and her existence is limited to the help she can provide the family with. The almost paradoxical element here is how the very social structures that keep the spinster enclosed in her limited position, also colour the cultural vocabulary and thus the perception of her life as empty.

Quite suddenly, after 20 years in her brother’s home, Laura starts being ‘extravagant’ (71). Through this extravagance, she moves back in time, to the freedom she experienced in her family home ‘Lady Place’; with her eccentric father who not only allowed her to do whatever she wanted, but encouraged it. For each autumn that passes, a feeling of restlessness increases in Laura. Laura has started shopping, and her bedroom ‘blossomed with an unseasonable luxury of flowers, profusely, shameless as a greenhouse’ (69). While professedly shameless, there is an element of concealment: ‘these things were exciting enough to be pleasurable, for she kept them secret’ (69). This is right after the second part of the book begins, and the narrative has changed remarkably. Rather than jumping back and forth in time, telling stories of the past and future, the second part is rooted in Laura’s London existence, at an apparent narrative standstill. She is 47, and a new generation is finding her ‘indispensable’ (52). Still, London living has Laura growing restless: ‘sometimes she tried to account for her uneasiness by saying that she was growing old’ (66), but reflecting on this she concludes that as ‘she was not wildly anxious either to die or live; why, then, should she be rent by this anxiety?’ (66).

The flowers Laura splurges on bring an element of wilderness to her life, and unexpectedly, one autumn, she discovers precisely what she has missed. Laura is suffering from rural longing, from a need to go back to her own beginnings. Quite simply, it appears Laura is ready to ‘put away’ Miss Willowes and Aunt Lolly and become Laura again. The solution is to move to Great Mop, a seemingly random small village, which she feels a great force compelling her to visit. There is given no explanation of why this specific moment in time is the one that requires Laura to go through a change. This complete lack of external
motivation, this apparent arbitrariness, seems to note on an important aspect of the novel. More precisely, it reflects the absence of genre typical novel events, which typically motivate a protagonist’s actions. By refusing to make use of the elements that typically structure a novel, Lolly Willowes underline how particular and controlling these structures are.

Because of the spinster’s peculiar situation, Laura requires familial assistance to eliminate her alternative personas and find herself. That is, as Laura does not have financial independence, she must ask her brother to pay out her inheritance money. While Laura reasons that ‘nothing is impracticable for a single, middle-aged woman with an income of her own’ (89), her brother cannot agree. It turns out that this is probably because he has lost most of her money in bad investments, which he is not eager to disclose. Henry argues that Laura cannot go because “you are rheumatic –” Laura tried to interpose. “– or will be” (89). Here it becomes obvious that he does not really consider Laura a person, at least he cannot see her as one. This proves another example where the spinster is not seen as she is because the image projected of her by society is too strong. Like the artist who cannot see that the grass is really pink, and thus always paints it green, Henry cannot see Laura outside her role as spinster aunt. And spinster aunts are always rheumatic – one assumes. This resonates with and answers the earlier question of whether a spinster can be a person if she lives up to the spinster stereotype. And it can be answered in the negative, for now. As long as Laura is in her brother’s home, she will be ‘Aunt Lolly’.

**Ideological Projections and Self-Realization**

Brothers defines Lolly Willowes as a specifically female bildungsroman, which has implications that the novel itself seems to comment on. Male bildungsroman protagonists generally have the opportunity to pack up and leave for an adventure. They can enlist in the army, they can take stray jobs, they can stalk a woman they just met and fell madly in love with, and so on. The First World War figures in the novel, but it does not bring any changes for women like Laura. Accordingly, the motif of the war seem to underline how external events have little impact on lives lived in the margins of social structures. Older women of Laura’s class must take what their brothers allow them, which in Laura’s case are some rooms in a cosy cottage. At least Laura’s rooms have a wind that whispers ‘Hoo! You daredevil (…) Have you come out to join us?’ (91). Perhaps because the spinster’s possibilities for journeys are so limited, her mild escapades seem all the greater. The promise of adventure might have the reader expecting great change; which is only partially fulfilled in
Lolly Willowes. While Great Mop will turn out to be an adventure (of the magical sort), it proves to be first and foremost a time for quiet self-reflection.

In her first week in Great Mop, Laura learns that ‘life becomes simpler if you do nothing about it’ (95), as she is finally allowed to do precisely nothing as much she likes. The novel, by refusing anything stereotypically adventurous to happen, challenges the reader’s expectations. When will something happen? Will it ever? Sameness was linked to death through Judith Roof’s narrative theory in the introduction. How the reader will have a hard time seeing a story at all when there is no discernible end has also been underlined. Roof explains that ‘our pleasure in knowledge and meaning is connected to our pleasure in the end’ (7). The ‘end promises an ultimate result’ (7), a result connected to reproduction, something that sameness threatens. Lolly Willowes’s way of withholding the notion of an end challenges the reader’s patience. Furthermore, the stagnating narrative makes that which is not there particularly visible, and consequently it underlines how Laura’s story is non-normative.

Time passes, and while she gossips with her landlady Mrs. Leak about the villagers, Laura reflects that ‘she had not come to Great Mop to concern herself with the hearts of men’ (106). She is there to concern herself with the heart of herself, to place herself at the absolute centre of her own life. This eventually happens after some months, and one day, to mark her newfound self-reliance, Laura throws her guidebook and map into a well while walking. This symbolises that she has gotten what she came for, she has found herself. The lack of external events, and the denial of action, appears defiant in a social structure requiring a woman to be a married mother to be fulfilled. Not only in the story’s plot, but also on the narrative level. How can a novel be about a woman who does nothing, then moves somewhere else, and does more of nothing?

According to Brothers, Lolly Willowes ‘retells social and literary history from the perspective of a women who refuses to cast herself as Eve’ (196). There is a little something that does happen to Laura, and it is connected to this refusal. Representative for the book, everything occurs in her inner life. Waters’ argument, that the novel is ‘intensely alive’ to the reality of the spinster’s interior, emotional life, corresponds with this. Laura is described as having a feeling that a great secret is lurking under the surface of her consciousness. She cannot grasp it, ‘her secret had alluded her’ time and again, yet ‘she did not mind’ (113). She has an excellent time doing nothing. In the first part of the narrative, Laura is always described based on her relations to those around her. It appears that their projection of her corresponds with how she sees herself. Dale M. Bauer’s notion of a ‘Medusan image’ held up by society (111) thus seems to be confirmed in the novel. After moving to Great Mop, Laura
loses this instance of identification, with life-altering results. However, she still discloses things about those around her that serve as excellent points of comparison.

When she meets one of the villagers, a Mr. Saunter, the narrator explains that ‘so much did Mr Saunter remind Laura of Adam that he made her feel like Eve – for she was petitioned by an unladylike curiosity’ (113). Precisely what constitutes this ‘unladylike curiosity’ is not disclosed, but it can appear the one hint of heterosexual attraction in Laura’s life. Nevertheless, it can also signify the ways in which her new relaxed attitude to life have allowed her to give up being ‘ladylike’, perhaps this was a character trait of ‘Miss Willowes’? What is certain is that her view of the world, and herself, is changing. Moving from an earlier indifference to men, she is now using them to mirror herself. In this spinster tale, like ‘A New England Nun’, the man sheds an illuminating light on the woman. Rather than being an aunt, Laura is now a woman in the binary sense of opposite of man. Temporarily, despite her age and position, she has found her place in the heteronarrative. Freed from the patriarchal home and narrative, it appears Laura is placing herself centrally and in a romantic position. This both complies with traditional narrative, and breaks with it. For a moment, Laura appears to be doing what Lily Talbert does in ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, that is writing herself a story where she stars as the romantic heroine. However, as firmly established in the last chapter, middle-aged women are rarely allowed the position of romantic heroine. Consequently, establishing herself an Eve to Mr. Saunter’s Adam can be seen as Laura’s first act of perverse subversiveness, as it contains an element of impropriety.

This subversiveness is short-lived, though rapidly substituted. Shortly after, Laura is re-considering Mr. Saunter: ‘No doubt he was like Adam. And she, watching him from above – for the field sloped down from the gate to the pens – was like God’ (116). That Laura now considers, if only for a moment, herself to be Godlike, marks an enormous internal development. In the story’s present, this ensues right after Caroline visits Laura. It appears that the visit works as a reminder of Laura’s former life. Contrasting her past with her present, Laura recognises a change in herself. She cannot compare herself to Caroline; she is not that kind of woman. Laura has apparently come to the stance that if that is womanhood, she is not interested. The alternative has not yet presented itself, so for now she is Godlike.

‘A woman like that is not a woman, quite/ I have been her kind’ (21), reflects the poetic self in Anne Sexton’s poem ‘Her Kind’. It is obvious that Laura too is not ‘a woman, quite’. Laura deliberates that finally ‘the weight of all her unhappy years seemed for a moment to weigh her bosom down to the earth; she trembled, understanding for the first time how miserable she had been; and in another moment, she was released. It was all gone, it
could never be again, and never had been’ (123). It is at this moment, she truly transcends the aunt narrative, puts away ‘Miss Willowes’ and ‘Aunt Lolly’, and becomes Laura again. It is not connected to becoming a woman, not casting herself as Eve, but rather shattering the ‘Medusan image’ projected upon her. Laura realises that ‘she had changed, and knew it. She was humbler and more simple. She ceased to triumph mentally over her tyrants, and rallied herself no longer with the consciousness that she had outraged them by coming to love at Great Mop’ (123). It is no longer necessary for Laura to measure her life against others, or take their opinions of her choices into consideration. She is free to live in ‘perfect idleness and contentment’ (124). Laura, apparently, has managed to surpass the challenges of normalcy and ideology, and to inhabit, without conflict, the driver’s seat of her story. That this corresponds with an acceptance of herself that in turn coincides with this thesis’s definition of the spinster is obviously noteworthy.

While her first round of self-realization was motivated by an imperceptible drive to shed her aunthood and move to Great Mop, Laura’s becoming a witch has a very tangible reason: to get rid of her doting nephew Titus. Titus decides to live in Great Mop to write a book, and consequently brings back Laura’s aunthood chains. The metaphorical chains of heteronormativity, it seems, can only be escaped through witchhood. When Laura gets her opportunity to properly speak to the Devil, she gives him have a piece of her mind. Their dialogue, though monologue might be a more accurate definition, reflects on the contemporary period’s ideas considering the value and meaning of life. Laura scolds the Devil for not ‘helping’ more women. She explains why they need to ‘become witches: to show our scorn of pretending life’s a safe business, to satisfy our passion for adventure’ (196). These women need the opportunity to know that the image others project upon them is not real. Because even if people ‘are all so accustomed, so sure of her!’ (195), they do not see her. Laura argues that the emblematic witch is ‘the typical genteel spinster who’s spent herself being useful to people who didn’t want her’ (196). Laura’s arguments seem to highlight those lives that are considered without inherent meaning, those who gain all their worth from the instances where they assist society.

When Laura thinks ‘of witches, I seem to see all over England, all over Europe, women living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded’ (193). She extends the nature metaphor and further explains to the Devil that ‘they are like trees towards the end of summer, heavy and dusty, and nobody finds their leaves surprising, or notices them till they fall off. If they could be passive and unnoticed, it wouldn’t matter. But they must be active, and still not noticed’ (194). This resonates with Laura’s problems from the
beginning, that she had to embroider even though she could not produce anything useful. The forced activity underscores how spinsters’ activities, and who they are, are considered worthless to the general public. This appears somewhat ironic, as it is the social structures ruling the same general public that leave them with no other opportunities. Like leaves on trees are taken for granted, because they constitute an element of the picture one assumes is there from habit, the spinster’s position is constantly reinforced as it presupposed. Just as Henry assumes that Laura is rheumatic, the artist that the grass is green, and the author that the spinster is unattractive, the leaves stay unnoticeable, because they are embroidered into a certain projection of the world. By accepting her vocation as a witch, Laura can embrace inactivity, as it will finally free her from her duties as an aunt. Moreover, she accepts not being seen as she is by her family, as she no longer requires their recognition of her to recognise herself.

**The Spinster’s Subversive Narrative**

Mimi Winick notes that ‘like a condensed version of a Victorian realist “triple decker” novel, *Lolly Willowes* is divided into three parts’ (575). The first clue suggesting that *Lolly Willowes* is a novel up for challenging the heteronormative narrative comes in the beginning of part two. Laura ‘felt as though she had awoken, unchanged, from a twenty-years slumber, to find [her family] almost unrecognizable’ (77). One third of the novel’s space has been used, the second, middle section, has just begun. Laura, too, is in the midst of life at 47, even if she has been ‘middle-aged’ since 28. The fact that most of Laura’s life and her family history can be summarised in a third of the book appears connected to her ‘perversion’, that is, her blissful singleness. In the last part of the book, Laura becomes a witch and is finally, to the extent of the reader’s knowledge, left alone by her family. While *Lolly Willows* does mimic the ‘triple decker’ structure, the disposition of time and plot in each section is untraditional. The story seems unsure of what direction to take in the first part, and moves in practically all directions at the same time. It has one eye on the future – Laura’s niece reflecting back – and one on the past – telling the family history – while all the while narrating the little things that can be said about Laura’s present.

Roof suggests that ‘insofar as perversity belongs to narrative as the instance of its potential dissolution, the perverse narrative (…) would be a narrative about narrative dissolution, a narrative that continually short-circuits, that both frustrates and winks at the looming demagogue of reproduction’ (xxiv). The function of the perverse threat to narrative was explored in the last chapter on *The Whole Family*. The instances of perversions are
highly different in *Lolly Willowes*. Firstly, Laura is not treated as much as a threat to the narrative of the novel as Lily is, which of course can have much to do with the singular author. Laura definitely occupies positions on the negative aegis of reproduction, yet she is a novel protagonist. Does this go against Roof’s argument of the queer’s position in narrative? How does *Lolly Willowes* deal with the issues regarding ideology of narrative and sexuality differently than *The Whole Family*? Might *Lolly Willowes* be a perverse narrative?

The narrative structure of *Lolly Willowes* is probably not disintegrated enough for Roof to accept it as a perverted narrative, *per se*. Nevertheless, there is something about the manner in which the book is structured that breaks with regular structure, even if it is hard to put one’s finger on precisely what. It appears connected to the sameness already commented upon. Waters explains how Warner, ‘read verbatim accounts of sixteenth-century Scottish witch trials and [had] been struck, as she described it, by the “romance” of witchcraft for the women who became involved with it, the “release” it represented to them from their “hard loves” and “dull futures”, it occurred to her to try out a novel on this theme, but with a contemporary setting’ (ix). The ‘release’ and ‘romance’ aspects of this are interesting, because what romance can Laura seek and what release is available for her? Romance and release are concepts easily connected to the positive end of the reproductive aegis. In *Lolly Willowes*, anything potentially reproductive is removed from the story, as Laura works to remove herself from the heteropatriarchal society. It seems the absence of release and romance, in Roof’s language orgasm, the end, and death, influences how *Lolly Willowes* works as a novel.

There is no doubt that Laura avoids a dull future by escaping London. While she is still in London, the reader learns that ‘when she drew back the curtains she looked upon the day with no curiosity. She had seen it already’ (40). This lack of curiosity underlines the sameness that allows for 47 years of life to be summarised in 60 pages, and still include all major events. It appears that the novel asks: what can constitute a major novel event? What must happen to make a story worth telling? By now it should be obvious that courtship and marriage are the two big happenings to be expected in novels about young, often orphaned women. However, this is not a possibility for a character such as Laura. Roof’s claim that ‘sameness (…) is a threat to narrative’ (74) appears increasingly relevant. In Roof’s case sameness is linked to homosexuality and how the ideology of heterosexuality requires binary opposites. Sameness is the denial of linearity, which again stands ‘in the way of reproduction’ (81). Laura can be seen as embodying this sameness with her apparent asexuality. Laura’s narrative contains no oppositions, no challenges to overcome that will
ultimately lead her to the righteous reproductive end. The one challenge she does face is how to get away from the narrative demand of a reproductive end.

All the above seem to be noted upon in the way the book is structured. Part one of the novel introduces the plot and a protagonist that is past her reproductive potential already before her story starts in earnest. Jacqueline Shin claims in ‘Lolly Willowes and the Arts of Dispossession’, that Laura ‘spent the prime of her life living an existence not her own’ (223). However, can the time spent in London really be said to be the prime of Laura’s life? A time where she did not care much whether she would ‘die or live’? It does not seem so; rather, her prime is at 47 when she finds herself. The permanent delay of the traditional plot can be read as a docile yet rebellious move against traditional narrative. The precise moments and occurrences that begin and end the different parts of the book contain clues to the reading, and to understanding the book as a whole.

Some scenes are more telling than others regarding their reflection of Lolly Willowes’s subversiveness. The Witches’ Sabbath is one of these. This Sabbath, which occurs right after Laura discovers her (Satanic) kitten and her newfound witch status, is presented as neutrally and rationally as every other slightly unusual aspect in the book: ‘there was no need for further explanation. They were going to the Witches’ Sabbath’ (155). Winick argues that ‘Warner maintains the realist style even as the events become fantastical, encouraging the reader to accept the fantasy content of the story as he or she would more traditional realist content’ (567). The archetypal Witches’ Sabbath is an occasion of perversion, which fills all the requirements for being heteroideology’s opposite. That is, the version of the Witches’ Sabbath that our culture’s vocabulary has created. Pauline Bartel writes in Spellcasters that over the centuries ‘people believed that witches congregated for Satanic worship, sexual orgies, and rapacious feasting at diabolical celebrations called sabbats’ (30). In other words, the reader will have certain expectations of what might happen at such a gathering. The notion of a Witches’ Sabbath all but confirms heteroideology’s ideas of what the ‘others’ might be up to. However, when Laura gets there ‘a familiar discouragement began to settle upon her spirits. In spite of her hopes she was not going to enjoy herself. Even as a witch, it seemed, she was doomed to social failure’ (159). Again, nothing changes. The narrative dangles a promise of plot-inducing perversity in front of the reader, only to pull it away again.

Bruce Knoll argues in his text ‘“An Existence Doled Out”’, that Laura is ‘tested’ at Great Mop. He argues that her lack of success to become actively involved in the Witches’ Sabbath represents Laura’s ‘utter failure of her goal to get back in touch with nature (…) she
feels she has rejected Satan’ (358). However, this seems counter to what Laura reflects upon leaving the Witches’ Sabbath. While she does consider that she ‘had been insulted and made a mock of’, she deliberates that, ‘for all that she did not feel truly humiliated. Rather, she was filled with a delight and scornful surprise at the ease with which she had avenged her dignity’ (167). As Winick points out, ‘Lolly responds to the attempted sexual rite in a manner consistent with her general refusal of heterosexuality’ (582). Laura’s opportunity to pass up the Witches’ Sabbath, because it does not agree with her idea of fun, underlines precisely why she became a witch in the first place.

Laura did not become a witch to partake in orgies, nor dances for that sake. She has become a witch to gain freedom to do what she wants, which allows her to, among other things, avenge ‘her dignity’. Again, the story resists the opportunity to progress, to move away from the sameness that threatens its destruction. Bartel’s example, although based on another historical period, illustrates people’s conception of witches and especially Sabbaths. It appears that the narrative of Lolly Willowes again goes against the reader’s expectations when denying the Sabbath to contain the acts (sexual or not) typically expected to take place. That is not to say that the story excludes the possibility of such acts after Laura leaves. However, by turning down the opportunity Laura illustrates that she can maintain her autonomy and her personhood better as the Devil’s servant than in her brother’s home. As a witch, Laura is first and foremost herself, something that proved impossible when she was an aunt.

Macdonald argues the importance of the fact that there ‘are no magical acts’ (224) in Lolly Willowes. The notion that there is no actual magic, though argued differently, is supported by Knoll when he claims that ‘after an ignominious defeat by a nest of wasps, Titus gives up and decides to leave Great Mop’ (359). These two arguments are connected, because they both concern Laura’s way of obtaining her freedom. Knoll, by stating that Titus leaves because of a wasp nest, ignores how Laura and her kitten work for this to happen. This comes in addition to the fact that Titus leaves because he becomes engaged. Perhaps Titus really is extremely unlucky, and the wasps and the mice and the flies are just realistic side effects from living in the country. Nevertheless, not considering the engagement appears erroneous. What is certain is that after a sequence of unfortunate events, Titus ends up in the arms of a woman, and this removes them both from Laura’s story. He, it appears, does not get to lead a non-normative life as an artist in the countryside. Titus fulfils the bildungsroman narrative where he goes out into the world, finds love, only to returns home to a rightful and reproductive end.
Both the example of the Witches’ Sabbath and Titus’ fate work to underline how *Lolly Willowes* constantly undermines traditional narrative and its pursuit of ‘the End’ with a big E. Ultimately, according to Roof’s theory, the reason spinsters cannot partake in narrative on equal grounds as normative characters, is that they have no promise of a reproductive end. In the discourse of *Lolly Willowes* there is a visible objection against the idea that only certain narratives and stories have meaning and value. For Laura to completely accept her position with the witches would be to stitch herself into yet another embroidery ‘with a good deal of background’ (40). It would also undermine the notion that is clear throughout the novel, precisely that some women are better off being allowed to be self-defined and alone. For Laura to take on witchhood in the same manner as the rest of Great Mop would be to concern herself ‘with the hearts of men’ (106), which she is not there to do. The ‘release’ that Laura achieves is from the strict conventions that rule the positions available for her. Laura might have had to become a witch to escape heteroideology, but she does it without accepting the traditional notions of what witchery implies.

**Conclusion**

Although the narrative of *Lolly Willowes* is not completely fragmented and broken down, it does portray an element of the perverse narrative. In this case, it is perverse in its denial of the perverse, illustrated when Laura becomes deadly insulted by the (wrongly) supposed Devil’s sexual advances as he ‘with a fine tongue like a serpent’s (…) licked her right cheek close to the ear’ (167). By refusing the suspected Devil, Laura goes against popular and narrative presumptions regarding the perverse acts that are committed at Witches’ Sabbath. This denial is what continuously shuts down the story’s progression as it consistently goes against the reader’s expectations.

Brothers argues that ‘traditionally, spinsters have been both an embarrassment and a threat to society and literature. They have no place in the social structure and no role in fictional plotting, except the role of attending to the family of man’ (198). While this goes perfectly in accordance with what has been argued so far in this thesis, it appears to be argued against in *Lolly Willowes*. In this novel, heteroideology and its consequences appear a bigger threat to the spinster than the other way around. Thus, Laura’s escape from Titus is a final confirmation that the spinster novel must actually rid itself of representations of the heteronormative to be in firm control of the narrative. In *Lolly Willowes*, the spinster can only have a role in the fictional plotting when she is not attending the family or a man. This is underlined by how she is not really herself while in London; she is others versions of herself
that her family projects upon her. Only when she sheds these projections and rebels against
the heteronormative plotline and conventions can she become a protagonist proper. As Laura
reflects: ‘one doesn’t become a witch to run around being harmful, or to run round being
helpful either (…). It’s to escape all of that – to have a life of one’s own, not an existence
doled out to you by others’ (196).

The non-normative form of Lolly Willowes appears a realistic reflection of life. The
realism that influences most of the novel is telling a story that would not be permitted within
classical realism. Barbara Pym’s comment on novels about unmarried women appears
relevant, yet again. Laura does become ‘someone’s mistress’, in a way, as she makes a deal
with the Devil. However, her allegedly male counterpart can easily be argued to be the
ultimate queer and most perverse character in literature. The Devil’s ‘undesiring and
unjudging gaze, his satisfied but profoundly indifferent ownership’ (203) is merely the final
element assisting the spinster’s self-realization. Brothers argue that the Devil’s ‘maleness is
an attribute ascribed by the myth Warner attacks rather than of the character she presents’
(209). Laura’s coupling with the ultimate literary Other functions to underline the spinster’s
disassociation with the heteronormative.

Still, Laura achieves self-realization before making her deal with the Devil, as it was
the return of her nephew that prompted the witchhood. What she needed for that was a room
of her own, and the opportunity to do nothing. Consequently, the novel purports that a single
woman can find the worth and meaning in her life on her own. The novel’s eventual move
away from realism thus seems a comment on the unrealistic portrayals of spinsters defined by
their lack and their worthlessness. As Macdonald states, ‘Lolly Willowes is a realist novel that
happens to use a fantasy element in its critique of normative social behaviour’ (224). Finally,
Lolly Willowes is structurally defiant. The narrative structure of the novel refuses the
tautology that the reproductive period is necessarily the prime of a woman’s life. The novel is
a contribution to the debate about the limited positions of women, as well as the debate
regarding which lives and what aspects of these lives have value.
Conclusion

This thesis examines how the spinster’s position in literature is defined by adjoining ideologies of narrative and sexuality. Throughout the explorations of ‘A New England Nun’, The Whole Family, and Lolly Willowes some tendencies have been proven pervasive. One of these is the tendency that the spinster needs to account for her singleness and existence; which has been established as a consequence of the heteroideological narrative. The study has been limited to the period between 1891 and 1926; the realist literary affinities dominating literature at that time; and the ruling contemporary ideologies of gender and sexuality. The discoveries made both confirm Judith Roof’s narrative theory regarding the queer’s position in narrative, and problematise her lacking focus on genre and historical context.

The chapter on ‘A New England Nun’ focuses predominantly on how the cultural vocabulary and characterisation of the spinster deem Louisa Ellis’s life and habits meaningless. Mary Wilkins Freeman’s short story has traditionally been interpreted as an ambiguous tale that either condemns or celebrates the spinster. This thesis has argued that it can also be interpreted as condemning the notion that a single woman’s life has no meaning in and of itself. An aspiration to challenge popular perceptions of the ‘old maid’ is almost as obvious in ‘A New England Nun’ as in Freeman’s contribution to The Whole Family. The second chapter asked whether the spinster is a spinster if she differs from the stereotype and concluded that she is. The pervasiveness of heteroideology, and the negative associations acquired by posing a threat to the narrative, will ensure that the defiant spinster is eradicated from the realist novel. Thus, The Whole Family seems to be about the struggle to exist on someone else’s terms. While the Howellsian realist novel cannot contain the spinster proper, it is not so for all literature. By considering Laura Willowes as defiantly and definitely queer character, the third chapter comes to the conclusion that the novel can be considered a perverse narrative. Furthermore, Lolly Willowes questions what can constitute major events in a single woman’s life, and thus touches upon the same issues as Freeman in ‘A New England Nun’.

Some elements are observable in all three texts, and, as this thesis suggests, might be representative of literature on spinsters in general. Combining Tone Hellesund and Susan S. Lanser’s research, this thesis has come to the conclusion that unmarried, childless women, who resolutely remain that way, are best defined as spinsters; furthermore, that the literary
spinster character is best considered queer, as this allows one to consider her position outside the heteronarrative. Absence from the norm, whether through asexuality or improper sexuality, is what defines the queer spinster. By highlighting heteroideology, and the way in which it affects narrative, this thesis has attempted to lift the veil of heteronormativity to investigate the possibilities for resistance underneath. The very usage of the spinster term has been advocated, as a part of a call for non-normative investigations of literature. The spinster term itself, with its queer, asexual implications, indicates a focus on subversion of the heteronormative. Ultimately, this thesis contends that the spinster figure is possibly the least normative female literary figure, even in her at times extreme conventionality, because she is excluded from the reproductive narrative.

The first chapter examines Roof’s theory combined with short story theory, in order to find a link between the queer spinster and the short story. Heteroideology’s effect is observable in all texts, nevertheless, this thesis underlines how different genres are differently equipped to tell stories that challenge the heteronormative. It appears that the way the novel genre works leaves it more prone than the short story to yield to the heteroideological demand for the spinster’s literal or figurative demise. This is because the structural events and thus plotlines that mark the novel genre do not comply with the positions the spinster can occupy. The plot however is similarly affected in both short story and novel, that is, the spinster is always first and foremost a spinster, and most plotlines she exists within will revolve around her singleness.

The whore-madonna dichotomy is another relic of Sigmund Freud and the first sexual revolution. After considering the fate of Louisa, Lily, and Laura, it seems an appropriate time to ask whether there is a witch-nun dichotomy ruling literary representations of spinsters? If so, what would be the implications of considering these categories as valid? The answer to the first question, a hesitant yes, is greatly affected by the answer to the latter. Accepting the dichotomy would be to assign heteroideology the correct definition of the spinster. If one simply sees Louisa and Lily as nuns, and Laura as nothing but a witch, they all end up following the patriarchal script. Nuns and witches are ‘acceptable’ positions solidly positioned on the negative end of the reproductive axis, even if one of them is inherently virginal and the other promiscuous. Consequently, there appears to be nothing essentially subversive about these positions. Nuns and witches are the stereotypical caricatures of single women, single in regards to other humans at least, as one is married to God and the other to the Devil. Truly, nuns and witches are heteroideology’s perfect spinsters, as they have accepted traditional, yet marginal roles, all the while controlled by men.
Nevertheless, there are multiple instances of defiance in the three spinster characters scrutinised in this thesis, which problematises the dichotomy. This thesis has highlighted the limitations and inconsistencies in descriptions of single women, and accordingly it appears there is valid reason to deny the cultural script of the nun and the witch. ‘A New England Nun, ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’ chapter, and Lolly Willowes all confront the notion that there can be one reality inherent in realism that constitutes truth for all. This is especially visible in how principally all stories about spinsters include segments highlighting how they are not seen by their family and by society as they are. Lily Talbert makes a valid effort to destroy the notion that she is ‘The Old-Maid Aunt’, and the chapter underlines how Lily exists in multiple spheres. Both Lily and Laura find new positions for themselves in the duration of their story, and both accept that the ‘cultural script’ (their family’s view of them) will never reflect their real self. Laura will remain ‘Aunt Lolly’ from her family’s perspective, though she knows she is a witch. The same goes for Lily. She might exit the story as a nun of sorts; nevertheless, the image of the witch is present at her departure. Louisa, too, challenges the societal opinion of her. While she might appear a solitary nun, she might as well be seen as a stoic queen. The last element that underlines the defiance in these spinsters is how bad they are at being nuns and witches. The reader never learns how Lily fares in her new position in New York. However, Laura is certainly a terrible witch, distancing herself from everything witchhood stands for. Finally, Louisa is an awful nun, gazing upon a future caring only for herself, which excludes the self-sacrifice inherent in society’s characterisations of nuns.

This thesis has been inspired by an ambition to investigate stories that exceed and deny the normative. The reason the spinster character and term appear imperative to reclaim is that the literary figure has the potential, if accepting this thesis’s approach, to stand outside heteropatriarchal society. Of course, if anything, this thesis has shown that she very rarely does. A queer-asexual approach nevertheless seems to contain the greatest potential for searching out and investigating characters easily concealed by heteronormative veils. Though this approach has specific benefits when working with literature from a different historical epoch, it is in no way limited to it. Characterisations of women who remain unmarried and childless are still marked by the historical cultural vocabulary, and happy single women who resolutely remain that way are still oddities in literature. Accordingly, there appears to be a fruitful potential for literary studies highlighting how and why some lives are considered less worthwhile and meaningful than others.
Works Cited


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