

# THE DOUBLE FEMININE NATURE AND THE MEDICAL GAZE: ELSIE VENNER (1861)

CRISTINA RODRÍGUEZ PASTOR  
*Universidad de Cádiz*  
*cristina.rodriguez@uca.es*

Received 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2016

Accepted 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2016

## KEYWORDS

Medical gaze; affective hermeneutics; female health; nurse; professionalization.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Mirada clínica; hermenéutica afectiva; salud femenina; enfermera; profesionalización.

## ABSTRACT

*Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny*, written in 1861 by Oliver Wendell Holmes, is a singular novel. Written at a time when medicine was struggling to become a model of professionalization, its singularity lies in the fact that there are four doctors involved in the novel: its author, the narrator of the story and two main characters. Apart from this, out of the three main female characters in the novel, two of them sicken as a consequence of their disobedience to social and moral standards.

The novel helps us explore some of the most important issues that were at the center of public debate in nineteenth century medicine: the supposedly pathological nature of female health, the complex relationship between doctor and patient, the consequences of crossing the borders of gender roles, the medical treatment of hysteria, the observational skills of the doctor, the role of the nurse and the threats to healthy reproduction.

## RESUMEN

*Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny*, escrita en 1861 por Oliver Wendell Holmes, es una novela singular. Escrita en una época en que la medicina luchaba por convertirse en un modelo de profesionalización, su singularidad recae en el hecho de que hay cuatro médicos implicados en la novela: su autor, el narrador de la historia y dos personajes principales. Aparte de esto, de los tres personajes femeninos principales en la novela, dos de ellos enferman

como consecuencia de su desobediencia a los estándares morales y sociales.

La novela nos ayuda a explorar algunas de las cuestiones más importantes que se situaban en el centro del debate público en la medicina del siglo XIX: la supuesta naturaleza patológica de la salud femenina, la compleja relación entre el médico y su paciente, las consecuencias de cruzar las fronteras de los roles de género, el tratamiento médico de la histeria, las destrezas observacionales del médico, el papel de la enfermera y las amenazas a la salud de la reproducción.

## INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the nineteenth century, medicine was in the process of becoming a professional discipline. The standardization of its studies and the regulation of its practice through the creation of the American Medical Association in 1847 responded to the necessity of reinforcing its authority. The consolidation of the prestige of the profession received the support of the middle class who, in turn, was interested in how medicine disseminated theories about the intrinsic pathology of female nature. These theories tried to demonstrate that women's health depended on their reproductive functions. The uterus was considered the central organ of the female body. They insisted on the difficult balance of the uterine economy: any alteration of this organ and its functions produced by emotional or physical causes could lead to all kinds of disorders in women's health. In 1847, Frederick Hollick, a famous American physician, referred to the uterus as: "the most excitable of all, and so intimately connected, by the ramifications of its numerous nerves, with every other part" (205).<sup>1</sup> The well-being of women and thus, of the reproduction of the race, was threatened not only by their natural tendency to emotions but also by their attempts to leave the domestic sphere. If women tried to canalize their energies towards activities other than those proper of their sex, the collapse of their health was inevitable. The doctor then became an indispensable figure in women's lives.<sup>2</sup> A whole apparatus of vigilance was activated

---

<sup>1</sup> Among the countless examples of contemporary advocates of this idea on both sides of the ocean we can find prominent figures such as Thomas Laycock, Pye Henry Chavasse, Edward H. Dixon or John Conolly.

<sup>2</sup> Many historians—such as Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Elaine Showalter, Sally Shuttleworth and Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, to name just a few—have

to control a body, as Foucault puts it, “thoroughly saturated with sexuality” (*History* 104).

If emotions constituted a complication in women’s health, the ability to detect them as symptoms of illness became a skill doctors needed to acquire as a decisive step towards their professionalization. The capacity to read emotions in the body of the other has been, according to contemporary naturalist sociologists like Herbert Spencer, part of the female DNA since primitive times, a survival skill (342-343). Athena Vrettos refers to this ability as “affective hermeneutics” (29). Whereas it was natural in women, doctors needed to develop it, learn how to use it.<sup>3</sup>

This study attempts to analyze anxieties about female sexuality in nineteenth century medicine and its relationship with the professionalization of medicine. Choosing a novel that was written by a prominent American physician has provided me with illuminating insight into Victorian attitudes towards the health of women. Another objective is to grasp the specular nature of Victorian medical practices. To do this, close attention will be paid to the figure of the doctor in his relationship with his patient, the scope of his medical gaze and its connection with the female ability for affective hermeneutics.

Finally, this essay also examines Holmes’s novel in the light of late-Victorian worries about the health of reproduction and the collapse of civilization. Widespread beliefs in the importance of race for the progress of the nation translated into an effort of anthropology for mapping racial differences and defending the superiority of the white race. According to these biological theories based on erroneous interpretations of the evolutionary theory, non-

---

analyzed the impact of these theories on the lives of women and the role they played in the construction of the ideal of femininity.

<sup>3</sup> This interest in interpreting corporeal signs had its origin in the tremendous influence of pseudosciences like physiognomy and phrenology. Developed by the Swiss philosopher Johann Caspar Lavater in the eighteenth century, physiognomy analyzed people’s faces, especially their forehead and eyes, searching for signs that might reveal valuable information about their “moral life” (Lavater 8). Physiognomy was in turn the precursor of the equally influential phrenology, which was founded by the German physician Franz Gall. According to Gall, the character of a person was determined by the shape of their head. Assigning moral and intellectual faculties to every part of the brain, phrenologists believed that the prevalence of a certain faculty in a person’s character depended on the size of its corresponding area in the brain. This way, they carefully examined the bumps in one’s head in order to determine which faculties were more developed.

white races had gone back in the evolutionary scale remaining in a primitive state (Otis 561). The fear of “reverse colonization,”<sup>4</sup> that is, concerns that the colonized might turn the wheels of colonization, underlies much of the Darwinian rhetoric of late nineteenth-century fiction. But this aversion to difference or to “the Other” did not only apply to race, but to all those individuals who fell outside hegemonic groups in terms of religion, social class and nationality. This way, concerns about the mixture of blood and contact with the Other as causes of degeneration are revealed in a story in which the main character, at the onset of her reproductive life, threatens to poison society.

Michel Foucault’s theoretical framework, with his notions of power and knowledge, will constitute the basis of my approach. However, in order to overcome Foucault’s shortcomings in terms of gender, I will extend it from a feminist perspective. This will allow me to trace the role of medicine in the construction of the feminine ideal. Equally key in my research is to examine the extent to which characters fit in their gender roles and the consequences of their deviance from socially and medically sanctioned paths.

*Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny* (1861)<sup>5</sup> was the first novel published by Oliver Wendell Holmes, a prestigious doctor from New England. Young Bernard Langdon, a promising medical student who belongs to the Brahmin<sup>6</sup> caste is compelled to interrupt his studies and look for a job in order to help his family. Thus, Bernard accepts a teaching position at a girls’ school in Rockland, Massachusetts. His

---

<sup>4</sup> Term proposed by Arata in his study about imperial Gothic fiction (623).

<sup>5</sup> *Elsie Venner* was initially serialized as “The Professor’s Story” in the *Atlantic Monthly* between January of 1860 and April of 1861. Careful not to present the story as just an entertainment, he referred to it from the beginning as a “medicated novel” (1), stating that: “Through all the disguise of fiction a grave scientific doctrine may be detected lying beneath some of the delineations of character” (2). The story, although very popular at the time, was condemned by the religious world for his criticism to the stern dogmas of Calvinist religion (Weinstein 90).

<sup>6</sup> It was Holmes himself who first used the term “Brahmin” in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860 to refer to the oldest and most influential families of Massachusetts, most of them direct descendants of the first settlers aboard the *Mayflower*. As a member of this caste, Bernard is an example of its physical and intellectual qualities: “There are races of scholars among us, in which aptitude for learning [...] are congenital and hereditary” (8). Holmes regarded himself as a member of this elite.

story is told by another doctor, his anatomy professor, who also becomes his advisor.<sup>7</sup>

At the school, Bernard meets his colleague, Miss Helen Darley, and his attention is instantly drawn to “the fair, open forehead, the still, tranquil eye of gentle, habitual authority, the sweet gravity that lay upon the lips” (48). The connection between them is immediate, due to their shared ability for physiognomy and affective hermeneutics. A simple glance suffices her to recognize a gentleman in him: “as she read his expression and his features with a woman’s rapid, but exhausting glance” (52), whereas at the same time Bernard recognizes her ability: “as he met her questioning look,—so brief, so quiet, yet so assured, as of one whom necessity had taught to read faces quickly without offence [...] as wives read the faces of hard-souled husbands [...]” (52-53). Helen’s ability to read and interpret body language is described as a “necessity,” intrinsic to her female nature and vital for her survival. In Bernard’s case it is learned, the result of his training as a physician.

Soon he notices something hidden under Helen’s apparent calm appearance. Her beauty seems lifeless due to exhaustion after long working hours:

She was [...] overworked, and an overworked woman is always a sad sight,—sadder a great deal than an overworked man, because she is so much more fertile in capacities of suffering than a man. She has so many varieties of headaches [...] and then her neuralgias, and her backaches, and her fits of depression, in which she thinks she is

---

<sup>7</sup> Like the narrator of his novel, Holmes was an anatomy and physiognomy professor. His study on the causes of puerperal fever in 1843 was especially relevant in the treatment of this illness (Otis 177). He exercised his profession in Boston between 1836 and 1846, was dean of the Harvard Medical School, mentor of the famous neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell and founding member of the American Medical Association. For these reasons, he was truly representative of the professionalization of medicine in America. At the start of his medical career he gained recognition as a poet after the publication of his *Poems* in 1836. His two other novels were *The Guardian Angel* (1867) and *A Mortal Antipathy* (1885). However, the literary works that earned him immediate international recognition were his famous series of written conversations with imaginary interlocutors at a boardinghouse table: *The Autocrat of the Breakfast-table* (1857), *The Professor at the Breakfast-table* (1859), *The Poet at the Breakfast-table* (1872) and *Over the Teacups* (1891). Closely related to some of the main figures of the American Renaissance and one of the leading representatives of the “Conversational age” in fiction, his own public image as a brilliant talker was a reflection of this style, influencing in many areas of social and intellectual life (Gibian 49-50).

nothing and less than nothing, and those paroxysms which men speak slightly of as hysterical [...] so many trials which belong to her fine and mobile structure,—that she is always entitled to pity, when she is placed in conditions which develop her nervous tendencies. (49)

For the narrator, the consequences of nervous exhaustion are more severe in women, due to their pathological nature. Holmes uses Helen's character and the rhetoric of Darwinism<sup>8</sup> to warn about the social implications of female incorporation into the public sphere. An example of sacrifice and dedication—“a martyr by the slow social combustive process” (85), Helen's physical and mental debilitation reduces her reproductive possibilities; her energy is wasted through the wrong channels provoking the collapse of her uterine economy and the alteration of natural laws.

Bernard discovers that Helen is being the object of ruthless exploitation from the director of the school. When he confronts him we can perceive his considerable effort to control his emotions: “to keep [words] from boiling into fierce articulation” (87). In a letter to a friend he confesses: “I am the sort of man that locks his door sometimes and cries his heart out of his eyes,—that can sob like a woman and not be ashamed of it [...]” (151). This admitted sensibility contributes to the improvement of his ability for affective hermeneutics as a result of his medical training:

[D]o you know the pathos there is in the eyes of unsought women, oppressed with the burden of an inner life unshared? I can see into them now as I could not in those earlier days. I sometimes think their pupils dilate on purpose to let my consciousness glide through them; indeed, I dread them, I come so close to the nerve of the soul itself in these momentary intimacies. (151)

Therefore, Bernard recognizes his struggle to avoid sympathy when dealing with women in the same situation as Helen's. The fear that the dissection of the patient's soul might affect his own nervous system is revealed during the training of the medical gaze. This way, in this delicate specular dynamics, doctors must look for signs of emotions in their patient's body while they prevent these emotions being transferred to them. As Foucault suggests:

---

<sup>8</sup> Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* was published only two years earlier and its influence is evident throughout the novel.

Doctor and patient are caught up in an ever-greater proximity, bound together, the doctor by an ever-more attentive, more insistent, more penetrating gaze, the patient by all the silent, irreplaceable qualities that, in him, betray--that is, reveal and conceal--the closely ordered forms of the disease. (*Birth* 15-16)

In order to grant objectivity in this “proximity,” and avoid contamination, doctors were strongly advised to pursue an emotional detachment in their interaction with the patient, something that required a great effort of will. Not in vain, this is the recommendation another doctor offers Bernard later on in the novel: “Keep your eyes open and your heart shut” (141). Similarly at play were concerns about the loss of authority in their relationship with the patient, resulting in a potential feminization of their practice.<sup>9</sup>

When Bernard meets his pupils, one of them immediately draws his attention: “who and what is that [...] sitting a little apart there,—that strange, wild-looking girl?” (38). Elsie Venner’s impression on the young teacher is described as the result of the combination of several elements. First, her breathtaking beauty: her shiny long black hair, her dark complexion, her slender neck adorned with all kinds of jewelry; her sinuous movement; her almost imperceptible step; but the most remarkable aspect of her appearance is her black eyes and penetrating look. In contrast to Helen’s angelical appearance— “[h]er plainly parted brown hair, her meek, blue eyes, her cheek just a little tinged with color, the almost sad simplicity of her dress” (199), Bernard perceives Elsie’s striking beauty as threatening from the start: “She looked frightfully handsome” (85). Her voice includes another element of oddness because, even though it is low and she hardly makes it heard, when she does it retains a peculiar characteristic: “Not a lisp, certainly, but the least possible imperfection in articulating some of the lingual sounds,—just enough to be noticed at first, and quite forgotten after being a few times heard” (121-2).

Elsie belongs to an aristocratic family that lives in a mansion at the foot of a mountain. Her only company is her father, Dudley Venner, who lets her do whatever she wants, and old Sophy, a black servant who has taken care of her since her mother died after giving birth to her. Next to the mansion is Rattlesnake Ledge, a dangerous

---

<sup>9</sup> For a deeper analysis of issues related to the medical gaze, sympathy and gender, see Vrettos 91-96.

cliff that Indians used to inhabit and where snakes breed (32). Since she was a child, Elsie has escaped to this place whenever she has a chance: “at the age of twelve she was missed one night, and was found sleeping in the open air under a tree, like a wild creature” (98). Despite their deep concern, neither her father nor Sophy can do anything to prevent this. Every time she returns from one of her trips, she brings some trophy of her adventure, normally in the shape of some wild flower that only grows in inaccessible places.

Elsie also loves dancing to flamenco music. Dr. Kittredge, the family doctor, finds her one day completely abandoned to this dance. Spying her through a window, he analyzes the sensuality and passion of her movements: “her lithe body undulating with flexuous grace, her diamond eyes glittering, her round arms wreathing and unwinding” (99). After her frenzied dance, she throws herself onto a tiger skin that lies on the floor and falls asleep. This odd scene brings memories of Elsie’s mother, Catalina, to the doctor’s mind. Her name suggests she was a Spaniard.

Soon Bernard discovers the strange effect Elsie provokes on those around her, especially on Helen, the submissive teacher. The debilitated state of her nerves is revealed one night when she’s marking the compositions of her students and finds Elsie’s. Something about her elaborated handwriting and the sensuous language she uses to describe the mountain “made her frightfully nervous” (51) and bring her to the brink of a hysterical attack. The episode contains echoes of the medical warnings of the time about the catastrophic effect of reading sensational novels on the nervous system: “Still she could not help reading” (51). Helen’s nervous weakness turns her into Elsie’s perfect prey. On one occasion Elsie manages to manipulate her teacher’s behavior by using her mesmeric powers.<sup>10</sup> With the girls’ eyes fixed on her, Helen feels

---

<sup>10</sup> Mesmerism was the doctrine of animal magnetism developed by the German physician Anton Mesmer in the eighteenth century. He believed that we have an invisible magnetic fluid which can be transmitted from one person to another. When this fluid is out of balance, disease appears but it can be treated with magnets or channeling the magnetic energy from one person to another. In order to demonstrate this theory, many experiments were performed in which one or several subjects were mesmerized. These experiments aroused public anxiety about the consequences of the external manipulation of someone’s behavior without their consent. Mesmerism was unwelcomed by medicine, which considered it a pseudoscience (Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth 7). In the nineteenth century, James Braid struggled to distinguish mesmerism from hypnosis (a term coined by him) thus establishing the basis for the work to be developed by Charcot and Freud in the treatment of hysteria. For Braid,



forced to stand up and go up to her. When she stands in front of her she implores: “What do you want of me, Elsie Venner?” (54), to which the girl replies calmly: “Nothing [...] I thought I could make you come” (54). After this, she gives her one of her wild flowers. The coldness of her fingers as they touched hers makes the teacher shiver.

Disconcerted by his pupil’s odd behavior, Bernard sets out to solve her mystery. One day he decides to go up into the mountain in order to discover the origin of those wild flowers. Using a colonialist rhetoric, the narrator describes how the main character follows Elsie’s trail through nature. The apparently idyllic environment hides a disturbing reality that the naturalist scientist associates with the behavior of the nervous woman:

[T]he little twigs are crossing and twining and separating like slender fingers that cannot be still; the stray leaf is to be flattened into its place like a truant curl; the limbs sway and twist, impatient of their constrained attitude; and the rounded masses of foliage swell upward and subside from time to time with long soft sighs [...]. (123)

This description reminds the reader of Helen’s character, whose harmonious appearance hides a profound anxiety.

After finding a hairpin next to the place where the exotic flowers grow, Bernard finds the entrance to a small cavern. His desire is sparked as he fantasizes with the possibility of having found her retreat: “carpeted and mirrored and with one of those tiger-skins for a couch, such as they, say the girl loves to lie on [...]” (126). Once inside, what he finds instead is a couple of hypnotizing snake eyes that inexplicably paralyze him. Just when he thinks he won’t be able to escape, Elsie appears behind him and with a penetrating look frightens the snake away. What happens afterwards is faintly remembered by Bernard—quietly, the young woman leads him back to civilization:

Whether he had been awake or dreaming he did not feel quite sure [...] the girl walking just before him;—there was no forgetting her

---

mesmerist phenomena do not depend on animal magnetism but on the physical and mental causes that are provoked by the fixed stare at a bright object and that influence the nervous system, producing hypnosis (61). It was believed that hypnosis produces a change in the state of the nervous system similar to the one produced during sleep (Scull 113).

figure, as she walked on in silence, her braided locks falling a little, for want of the lost hairpin, perhaps, and looking like a wreathing coil of—Shame on such fancies!” (134). His ambivalent feelings of desire, fear and rejection towards the girl bring Bernard to a state of nervous irritability similar to Helen’s.

For the young doctor, trained in affective hermeneutics—“accustomed to watch the faces of those who were ailing in body or mind, and to search in every line and tint for some underlying source of disorder [...]” (121), decoding Elsie’s countenance is a real challenge because it does not provide him with any information, she is apparently incapable of showing any signs of emotion:

The light of those beautiful eyes was like the lustre of ice; in all her features there was nothing of that human warmth which shows that sympathy has reached the soul beneath the mask of flesh it wears. The look was that of remoteness, of utter isolation [...] Her color did not come and go like that of young girls under excitement. (121-2)

Elsie’s secret is soon revealed to the reader: during pregnancy, her mother was bitten by a snake (33-34) and the poison was transmitted to the fetus *in utero*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the girl has had the poison in her system since she was a child. The impression that the first sight of her baby produces in her mother when she repairs on the fatal mark in her little neck is too much for her and dies a few days later (128). After this, the father can hardly stand looking at his daughter: not only does she stir painful memories, but her behavior is too bizarre. Despite his effort to accept her eccentricities and get used to the coldness and hypnotism of her eyes, he can’t help feeling a mixture of aversion and fear in her presence: “Sometimes she would seem to be fond of him, and the parent’s heart would yearn within him as she twined her supple arms about him; and then some look she gave him, some half-articulated expression, would turn his cheek pale and almost make him shiver” (102). The instability and incoherence of Elsie’s attitude are described as proofs of her hysteria. On the other hand, her father’s problems of communication with her contrast with Elsie’s total synergy with the superstitious Sophy, the

---

<sup>11</sup> The topic of the ophidian woman is not exclusive to Holmes. The author himself in the preface admits the influence of Keats’ poem “Lamia” (4), which Elsie reads aloud to her classmates inducing hysterical symptoms in them (140). For a comparison with Hawthorne’s tale “Rappaccinni’s Daughter” see Gallagher.

only person that understands her. The mysterious daughter of an African slave, “with those quick, animal-looking eyes of hers,—she was said to be the granddaughter of a cannibal chief, and inherited the keen senses belonging to all creatures which are hunted as game [...]. Old Sophy nodded her head ominously, as if she could say a great deal more” (101). She has always looked after Elsie replacing her absent mother and can interpret her as if she were an open book: “[She] could do more with her than anybody, knowing her by long instinctive study” (97). The communication between both women is primitive and silent but also unidirectional: it is Sophy who reads Elsie’s face to interpret her emotions. Elsie does not show any signs of this hermeneutic capacity because the snake lacks empathy.

Her eccentricity and the impact of her presence in her environment are made manifest at a big party celebrated at Colonel Sprowle’s residence. All the important families of Rockland are invited. Elsie’s dramatic entrance on the arm of her father makes everybody hold their breath. Spectacularly dressed in silk, covered in jewelry—even in her hair—: “She was, indeed, an apparition of wild beauty [...] when she moved, the groups should part to let her pass through them, and that she should carry the centre of all looks and thoughts with her” (68). As Armstrong puts it, the woman as spectacle is the object of moral distrust because she lacks the capacity for self-regulation: “she cannot be ‘seen’ and still be vigilant” (77). Feeling all these eyes on her, she throws back the challenging look of a caged animal.

Amongst those who observe her closely is Dr. Kittredge: “His eyes were fixed steadily on the dark girl, every movement of whom he seemed to follow” (67-68). In the presence of such spectacle, his medical gaze immediately reacts to try and decipher its language (Foucault, *Birth* 108). The conversation between them is miles away from the typical exchange between the virtuous young woman and the doctor of other novels. Her answers to his questions are unsettling: “It’s been dull at the mansion-house [...] there’s nobody to hate” (68). The doctor analyzes his interlocutors through his spectacles which, as the speculum for medical practice, function as an instrument to achieve knowledge, to extract the truth, without any need for words. However, when he tries this procedure with Elsie, he confronts a look that does not give in:

[H]e lifted his head and dropped his eyes a little, so as to see her through his spectacles. She narrowed her lids slightly, as one often

sees a sleepy cat narrow hers [...]. The old Doctor felt very oddly as she looked at him: he did not like the feeling, so he dropped his head and lifted his eyes and looked at her over his spectacles again. (69)

In this visual duel, the doctor ends up giving in to the magnetic power of Elsie's eyes. As the young girl talks to him about her life at the mansion, she refers to her father by his first name, Dudley. This reflects how far she is from the feminine domestic model. This reflects how far she is from the feminine domestic model popularized by the "Cult of True Womanhood."<sup>12</sup> The American equivalent to "the angel in the house," "the true woman," was an example of delicacy, morality and spirit of sacrifice. Her nurturing power to transform the house into an idyllic place where men find shelter from the public sphere contrasts strikingly with Elsie, who turns it into a nightmarish environment. Her disturbing question: "What kills anybody quickest, Doctor?" (69), immediately followed by a whispering: "I ran away the other day, you know" (69), is obviously intended to scandalize the doctor who, despite being familiar with her trips to the mountain, can't help worrying when she gives him one of her exotic flowers: "he knew that there was only one spot where it grew, and that not one where any rash foot, least of all a thin-shod woman's foot, should venture" (69). But, as Sophy would once ask him sharply: "Who tol' you Elsie was a woman, Doctor?" (227).

Elsie's gaze is diagnosed by the novel's doctors as poisonous (136) because it weakens its victims and provokes uneasiness<sup>13</sup> or even illness, as in Helen's case (Davis 185). Both Holmes and his pupil, Silas Weir Mitchell, devoted much attention to the figure of the hysteric,<sup>14</sup> whom Holmes compared to a vampire "who sucks the

---

<sup>12</sup> See Barbara Welter's seminal article for an in-depth study on this figure.

<sup>13</sup> Whereas Helen's eyes transmit Bernard peace and security—"so full of cheerful patience, so sincere, that he had trusted her from the first moment as the believers of the larger half of Christendom trust the Blessed Virgin, [...]" (199), Elsie's "evil eye" (144) provokes restlessness.

<sup>14</sup> The figure of the hysteric, with her bewildering array of symptoms, was an enigma for Victorian medicine. According to medical debates, her defiance of the normative model of domesticity had turned her into a hypersexualized version of the angel in the house, a nervous woman or an invalid. Replicating the impact that this illness had in nineteenth-century medicine, literature and society, over the last decades many historians have studied the complexity of the hysteric in depth. This way, their treatments, the impact this diagnosis had on their immediate relatives, and the difficult position of the physician between the patient and their families have been

blood of the healthy people around her” (quoted in Mitchell 49). Elsie’s power over her victims is that of a vampire. Actually, she hypnotizes Helen to sap her energy to such an extent that Bernard fears for her life (139). One day, at a tea party, Bernard realizes that Elsie is trying to exert her influence over Letty Forrester, reverend Honeywood’s granddaughter, with whom he had been timidly flirting. The narrator describes the sensations of Letty, who, disconcerted, feels as if she were being trapped at a spider’s web and listened to her eyes’ call (201). At this moment, Bernard must make an almost superhuman effort to prevent Elsie from hypnotizing her, trying to divert her gaze from Letty to him:

He turned to Elsie and looked at her in such a way as to draw her eyes upon him. Then he looked steadily and calmly into them. It was a great effort, for some perfectly inexplicable reason. At one instant he thought he could not sit where he was [...] Then he wanted to take away his eyes from hers; there was something intolerable in the light that came from them. (202)

The visual duel between Elsie and one of the doctors that watches her is thus repeated, however, this time, it is Elsie who finally gives up: “Presently she changed color slightly [...] and turned away baffled, and shamed [...]” (202). A key moment in the novel, this is the first time the protagonist has ever shown a sign of emotion.

Another character that participates in this visual dynamics is Richard Venner, who makes a dramatic appearance halfway through the story. Elsie’s cousin, he also lost his mother when he was a child. Another similarity with Elsie is the fact that his mother was a foreigner too, in this case, Argentinian. His wild and passionate nature turns him into Elsie’s *alter ego*. Playmates during their childhood, old Sophy never took her eyes from them: “Both handsome, wild, impetuous, unmanageable, they played and fought together like two young leopards, beautiful, but dangerous, their lawless instincts showing through all their graceful movements” (100). Once, in one of their frequent fights when they were children, Elsie jumped over him and sank her teeth in his wrist. Even though Dr. Kittredge rushed to heal him, the attack left a scar that still hurts every time he watches her (106).

---

subjects for extensive discussion. Some fine examples of this analysis can be found in Scull, Ehrenreich and English 147-154, and Smith-Rosenberg 197-216.

It was not the first time that something similar had happened. Among other examples of unsettling behavior during her childhood, Sophy witnessed how as a baby, Elsie bit her wet nurse provoking her sudden death (159). This episode represents a shocking twist of the social and medical anxieties of the time about the act of breast-feeding, particularly when it was undertaken by wet nurses.<sup>15</sup> The possibility that these women—typically of working-class origin—might transmit some disease to the baby fueled fears of the wet nurse as a source of contamination; only, this time, the baby is the origin of the poison. Thus, the idyllic domestic picture of a baby being breastfed is dramatically reversed in the case of Elsie, turning her into a vampire figure.

Richard's return after so many years arouses suspicion in Rockland, especially in Judge Thornton. He uses his ability to detect marks of degeneration in the young man's face to justify his distrust:<sup>16</sup>

[T]here is an expression in all the sort of people who live by their wits when they can, and by worse weapons when their wits fail them, that we old law-doctors know just as well as the medical counsellors know the marks of disease in a man's face. Dr. Kittredge looks at a man and says he is going to die; I look at another man and say he is going to be hanged, if nothing happens. (118)

For Thornton this was an ability shared by professionals such as judges and doctors to use external signs in order to access the truth of individuals. However, it is not only reserved to professionals: Sophy, trained in this ability in a natural way, is perfectly aware of something dark in Richard, though "she could not tell what" (132).

An excellent jockey and hiding a dark past, Richard's intentions are no other than marrying his cousin so as to pocket the family fortune. But before that, he knows he will have to tame her like one of his wild horses, so he tries to seduce her using all his arts (120). Her apparent initial interest gradually leads to indifference, which makes him suspect she is attracted to her teacher. When he

---

<sup>15</sup> See section VIII, "Choice of a Wet Nurse," of Thomas Bull's famous manual *Hints to Mothers* (284-287).

<sup>16</sup> Clearly influenced by the precepts of physiognomy and phrenology, anthropologists like Cesare Lombroso in 1876 argued that the marks of degeneration are visible in the criminal's physical characteristics facilitating recognition by any person trained in this ability.

asks her about him, she surprisingly blushes: “Dick could not remember that he had ever seen her show this mark of emotion before” (232). Deciding to find proof of his suspicion, he breaks into her bedroom during one of her trips to the mountain. This violation of her privacy reproduces the episode in which Bernard invades her natural space in the mountain.

Richard is not immune to Elsie’s hypnotism either, nor can he understand her eyes’ strange mystery: “There was a strange fascination in her eyes, too, which at times was quite irresistible, so that he would feel himself drawn to her by a power which seemed to take away his will for the moment” (106). His desire is palpable in the face of the undeniable sensuality of her serpentine ways.

One of the most striking aspects about this nineteenth century novel is Elsie’s freedom. She has been raised by a distant father in the absence of her mother. Her doctor recommends avoiding any interference in her behaviour, suggesting continued vigilance instead (98). When she became a teenager and expressed her wish to go to a girls’ school, he convinced her father to let her have her own way: “Anything to interest her. Friendship, love, religion, whatever will set her nature at work. We must have headway on, or there will be no piloting her. Action first of all” (129). Actually, that is how she takes her classes, as a pastime, attending whenever she feels like it and, when not, running away to the mountain (120). Despite the danger of these escapes, no one stops her. In the interactions between Dr. Kittredge and his patient throughout the novel, we can hardly find any conversations between them, just constant observation. As Foucault suggests: “The observing gaze refrains from intervening: it is silent and gestureless [...]” (*Birth* 107). To undertake this task, he finds Sophy’s invaluable help, whom he trusts as his principal surveillance instrument (128-9). The doctor recognizes in Elsie’s silence a cause for alarm: “Beware of the woman who cannot find free utterance for all her stormy inner life either in words or song! So long as a woman can talk, there is nothing she cannot bear” (221). He also advises her father to facilitate her contact with possible suitors: “If she will be friendly with any young people, have them to see her,—young men especially. She will not love any one easily, perhaps not at all; yet love would be more like to bring her right than anything else” (128-9). This was one of the main recommendations of nineteenth century treatment of hysteria: channelling the sexuality of the patient which, far from being repressed as we find in other heroines, is threatening and out

of control. In relation to this, Thomas J. Graham, a famous nineteenth-century physician, insisted that marriage “is the best cure for hysteria” (188).

Dr. Kittredge, like Holmes, “knew what a nervous woman is, and how to manage her” (67). His purpose is, then, to supervise her sexuality. Implicit in this medical supervision was the need to watch for signs of “solitary practices.” In one of the most famous medical manuals of the time, Dr. Dixon quoted Dr. Columbat who warned:

[I]dleness, [...] or sedentary life, the constant contact of the two sexes, and the frequenting of places where everything inspires pleasure; prolonged watching, excessive dancing, frivolous occupations, and the study of the arts that give too great activity to the imagination; erotic reading; the pernicious establishment of artificial puberty [...] [will keep] the genital system in a state of constant excitation. (115)

The origin of this concern came from a popular physiological theory, common to both sexes, that conceived the body as a closed system of energy.<sup>17</sup> According to it, energy needed to be sensibly administrated along the life of a person in order to avoid being wasted. This way, masturbation threatened to drain the individual’s energy and destroy their reproductive capacity, something that in the case of women was particularly dangerous because, as Poovey reminds us: “it grounded an economy that was perceived to be continuously internally unstable” (*Scenes* 36).

Ideally, parents would assist physicians in the detection of many of these signs. In the same manual, Dr. Dixon noted: “if the powers of life are to be preserved in certain delicate females of a nervous temperament, parents must be perfectly acquainted with their most secret thoughts and actions” (58). However, in the case of Elsie, her father seems oblivious to her sexual awakening, although his inability to admit it might be due to his awareness of her peculiarities: “reasons which seemed to make it impossible that she should attract a suitor. Who would dare to marry Elsie?” (176-7). Sophy, however, is perfectly aware of such changes, which she perceives as ominous: “It’s my poor girl, my darling, my beauty, my baby, that’s grown up to be a woman; she will come to a bad end;

---

<sup>17</sup> This theory, in turn, is connected to Physics, specifically to the law of conservation of energy or the first law of thermodynamics, stated in 1824.



she will do something that will make them kill her or shut her up all her life" (158).

Elsie plays a seduction game with the men that surround her: Bernard, Richard and even Dr. Kittredge. In her relationship with men, it is always her who takes the initiative and keeps control. As for Richard, when he realizes he has just been used as a toy, he tries to kill Bernard using a lasso but he fails and ends up badly injured himself. When Bernard returns to the institute after this incident, Elsie can't help her emotion. Her ophidian nature starts a process of transformation which is reflected in her eyes:

[T]hey seemed to lose their cold glitter, and soften into a strange, dreamy tenderness. The deep instincts of womanhood were striving to grope their way to the surface of her being through all the alien influences which overlaid them. She could be secret and cunning in working out any of her dangerous impulses, but she did not know how to mask the unwonted feeling which fixed her eyes and her thoughts upon the only person who had ever reached the spring of her hidden sympathies. (254-5)

Consequently, her feminine nature is striving to come out to the surface. When, later on, she decides to go to church with her father, she feels compelled to cover her face with a veil in order to avoid all the curious looks (267). This scene presents the heroine as a text at a delicate moment for her interpretation; once more, her body is represented as spectacle.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Bernard's insistence on the scientific nature of his interest for Elsie (141) and his fraternal feelings towards her, his attraction is obvious, but he is aware of the danger:

This gave Master Langdon a good chance to study her ways when her eye was on her book, to notice the inflections of her voice, to watch for any expression of her sentiments; for, to tell the truth, he

---

<sup>18</sup> The specular nature of medical practices in the nineteenth century kept the female body under continuous surveillance and scrutiny. In order to illustrate lectures to medical students, the bodies of poor women (both alive and dead) were displayed in classrooms that imitated theaters (Vrettos 6). Another example of how the medical gaze was increasingly invested with power was the invention of the aforementioned speculum around 1840 by Dr. Marion Sims, which allowed physicians to explore previously inaccessible areas that many perceived as uncharted territory. In a similar vein, the development of the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot's work on hysteria at the Parisian hospital La Salpêtrière in the 1870's boosted photography as a valuable tool to analyze the behavior and physical traits of female patients.

had a kind of fear that the girl had taken a fancy to him, and, though she interested him, he did not wish to study her heart from the inside. (121)

Even though he is the best candidate amongst her suitors—due to his aristocratic origins, his education, his promising career as a physician, his athletic build, his attractiveness—there are two moments in the novel in which certain characters warn against a possible relationship between Elsie and Bernard. First, Dr. Kittredge, from a professional perspective, tells him: “If, through pitying that girl, you ever come to love her, you are lost” (141). Interestingly, the doctor contradicts here his own recommendations of favouring Elsie’s romantic relationships, however, this time the warning is addressed from one physician to another: the doctor’s excess of sympathy towards his patient could be fatal. Setting himself as an example in the relationship doctor-patient, it is vital to keep distance and objectivity.

Later on, Sophy, in her irrational and superstitious logic, reminds Dr. Kittredge: “Doctor, nobody mus’n never marry our Elsie ‘s longs she lives! Nobody mus’ n’ never live with Elsie but ol Sophy [...]” (226). She fears that her sexuality might free the poison kept in her body and her children inherit her monstrous condition. Sophy’s fears are also confessed to her pastor, the Calvinist reverend Honeywood, leading him to a theological dilemma as he starts to question the doctrine of moral responsibility.<sup>19</sup> These doubts are also shared by the narrator of the story in a letter to Bernard (148), as well as by Dr. Kittredge who, in a long discussion with the reverend, asserts: “We have constant reasons for noticing the transmission of qualities from parents to offspring, and we find it hard to hold a child accountable in any moral point of view for inherited bad temper or tendency to drunkenness,—as hard as we should to blame him for inheriting gout or asthma” (210).

The transformation of Elsie’s gaze is particularly evident one day she is heading to school: “[She] had none of the still, wicked light in her eyes, that morning. She looked gentle, but dreamy” (273).

---

<sup>19</sup> Holmes himself admitted that with this novel he “attempted to illustrate the doctrine of inherited moral responsibility for other people’s misbehavior” (5). One of the main voices in the public debate about moral responsibility was Cesare Lombroso with his theory about “the born criminal.” He suggested that a person cannot be completely blamed for their antisocial tendencies because genetic inheritance plays a very important role in behavior (Lombroso 40-41).

None of these changes escape her classmates' scrutiny: "All the girls had their eyes on her. None so keen as these young misses to know an inward movement by an outward sign of adornment" (272). It is precisely the day when she decides to declare her love to Bernard, who rejects her trying to make her understand she is just like a sister to him. He finally gives in to his fear of her wild nature. Immediately after this scene, Elsie falls ill. The correlation between her romantic disappointment and her illness is clear. When Sophy goes to her bedroom "[s]he found Elsie lying on her bed, her brows strongly contracted, her eyes dull, her whole look that of great suffering" (274). Elsie herself asks for Dr. Kittredge.

The attention that she receives from Dr. Kittredge is an example of professionalism. The narrator insists on the need to avoid that the doctor's face turn into a text for his patient: "an imperturbable mask of serenity, proof against anything and everything in a patient's aspect. The physician whose face reflects his patient's condition like a mirror may do well enough to examine people for a life-insurance office, but does not belong to the sickroom" (274). As he comes into Elsie's bedroom, the entire apparatus of vigilance is activated: "he sat a few minutes, looking at her all the time with a kind of fatherly interest, but with it all noting how she lay, how she breathed, her color, her expression, all that teaches the practised eye so much without a single question being asked" (275). Like the doctor, Sophy does not need words to read Elsie: "The old woman looked at her without speaking, but questioning her with every feature as to the sorrow that was weighing on her" (270). What is the difference between their gazes then? Whereas the medical gaze is professionally authorized, Sophy's gaze is linked to a primary communication: "having brought her food [...] set it down, not speaking, but looking into her eyes inquiringly, like a dumb beast trying to feel out his master's will in his face" (121). As we can see, the parallelisms between Sophy and a watching animal are recurrent. For Holmes, her capacity for codifying and decoding emotional outward signs respond to a primitive need, a regression to a former evolutionary state: "it was impossible not to see in this old creature a hint of the gradations by which life climbs up through the lower natures to the highest human developments" (156). Her wild nature and her command of the language of feelings as a type of feminine communication superior to verbal language have allowed her look after the snake-Elsie whom everyone else feared:

Elsie looked her in the face, but did not answer in words. What strange intelligence was that which passed between them through the diamond eyes and the little beady black ones?—what subtle intercommunication, penetrating so much deeper than articulate speech? This was the nearest approach to sympathetic relations that Elsie ever had: a kind of dumb intercourse of feeling, such as one sees in the eyes of brute mothers looking on their young. (271)

However, though Sophy naturally takes on the role of Elsie's nurse during her illness, her excess of sympathy with her patient threatens her own health. Throughout the girl's life, Sophy's health has evolved according to Elsie's state. In winter, when the girl used to be relaxed, docile and "her eye would lose something of its strange lustre" (170), the old woman's anxiety would be reduced, making her look even younger. But when spring came and Elsie's gaze awoke, peace would disappear from Sophy's life: "the light would kindle afresh in her eyes, and the old woman's sleep would grow restless again" (171).

Interestingly, during her illness Elsie asks for a new nurse: Helen Darley. This new need fits easily in the context of Elsie's incipient transformation, when her feminine nature struggles to gain ground. The delicate and compassionate Helen is the closest character to Elsie that embodies the domestic qualities of the ideal nurse.<sup>20</sup> The difference with Sophy lies in her social class and her race. When Sophy learns the news about the arrival of the new nurse, she snaps: "The' 's nobody that's white can love y' as th' ol black woman does" (279). In the novel, Helen represents civilization whereas Sophy symbolizes primitiveness. Both are patient and good at affective hermeneutics, but Sophy's knowledge of Elsie is much

---

<sup>20</sup> The ideal nurse, with her spirit of sacrifice and sensibility, represented the embodiment of the true woman in Victorian culture. Her function was in fact considered a natural extension of her maternal instinct. Most interestingly, this figure intervened in the conflict of sympathy of the doctor towards the patient's emotions. Her natural ability for affective hermeneutics complemented the role of doctors, enabling them to concentrate on their patients' treatment without the threat of emotional involvement. One of the most iconic examples of the Victorian nurse was Florence Nightingale, who published the famous manual *Notes on Nursing* (1860). For an in depth analysis of this figure, see chapter 6 "The Housewifely Woman: The Social Construction of Florence Nightingale" in Poovey (*Uneven Developments*), and chapter 1 "Angels of Mercy" in Swenson, as well as Reverby for a specific study of American nursing.

more sophisticated. Submission is another difference between them. Unlike Helen, Sophy is not a submissive woman, maybe due to her ambiguous position in the mansion since Elsie's birth. In the absence of the mistress of the house and empowered by the fact that she is the only person whom Elsie tolerates, Sophy has assumed a superior position in comparison to the rest of servants. Actually, when the doctor wants to learn about Elsie's state, he goes directly to her, instead of her father.

As Helen looks after Elsie, she witnesses how her human side strives to come to the surface and for the first time she is capable of looking her in the eye without fear of being mesmerized:

Helen looked into her eyes without that nervous agitation which their cold glitter had produced on her when they were full of their natural light. She felt sure that her mother must have been a lovely, gentle woman. There were gleams of a beautiful nature shining through some ill-defined medium which disturbed and made them flicker and waver [...]. (279)

Thus, the image of Elsie's mother comes to Helen's mind right as she plays the role of the maternal nurse: "She sat with Elsie most of the time, by day and by night, soothing her, and trying to enter into her confidence and affections [...]" (279). Still, something keeps holding Elsie back, preventing Helen to complete her reading: "even now there were times when she would lie looking at her, with such a still, watchful, almost dangerous expression, that Helen would sigh, and change her place ..." (279). Therefore, Elsie's double nature provokes in Helen exactly the same mixture of feelings as in her father.

As Elsie gets worse, the doctor's face turns graver (284). One day, the young girl receives a basket of flowers and autumn leaves that her classmates have gathered with Bernard's help. To everyone's alarm, the touch of some of these leaves makes her suffer a hysterical attack: "[she] looked upon the olive-purple leaflets as if paralyzed for a moment, shrunk up, as it were into herself in a curdling terror, dashed the basket from her, and fell back senseless, with a faint cry which chilled the blood of the startled listeners at her bedside" (284-5). The leaves turn out to be white ash which, according to superstition, is lethal to snakes. Although this incident increases Elsie's weakness, it also seems to have defeated her ophidian nature. The first to see this is Sophy: "The shadows ceased flitting over her features, and the old woman, who watched her from

day to day and from hour as a mother watches her child, saw the likeness she bore to her mother coming forth more and more, as the cold glitter died out of the diamond eyes” (285). Her father also notices this and when one day, by her sickbed, he remarks how much she now reminds him of her mother, Elsie bursts into tears (286). According to Cynthia Davis, this episode constitutes an example of Foucault’s concept of self-regulation<sup>21</sup>—Elsie moves from being watched to watching herself, so she has internalized the medical gaze: “she redirects it, turning it inward, in order to uncover finally and unbind the woman the doctors had already detected lurking inside her seemingly snaky exterior” (187). Another proof of the victory of her feminine nature is found in her sudden capacity to interpret the signs of emotion in her father’s face: “[she] lifted her languid eyes upon her father’s face, she saw in it a tenderness, a depth of affection such as she remembered at rare moments of her childhood [...]” (286). This is an ability for affective hermeneutics that was absent during the dominance of her serpentine side. However, though her inhuman nature has perished, the human nature does not survive either.

Meanwhile, in Elsie’s sickroom, melodramatic scenes follow one another. In one of her last moments, Elsie asks Sophy who will miss her after she is gone, which makes the old woman fall into despair. Just at this moment, Helen enters the room and with one look manages to calm her down:<sup>22</sup> “Such scenes were just what were most dangerous, in the state in which Elsie was lying” (292). The protection of the emotional environment of the patient has always been one of the key recommendations from doctors to nurses. The hysterical nurse threatens her patient’s health polluting her environment.

The effect of Elsie’s death on Sophy is that of an animal who has lost its owner: “[She] said almost nothing, but sat day and night by her dead darling. But sometimes her anguish would find an outlet

---

<sup>21</sup> Foucault connected this idea to Bentham’s perfected system of surveillance, the Panopticon, in which the omnipresence of vigilance would guarantee the internalization of obedience (Discipline 195). The ultimate sign of the success of their professionalization, medicine aspired to achieve this ideal in which women facilitated permanent visibility and wouldn’t need to be scrutinized by the doctor anymore, because vigilance comes from inside.

<sup>22</sup> Helen’s presence of mind in this scene in contrast to Sophy’s hysterical behavior marks a remarkable transformation from her own nervous instability at the beginning of the novel.

in strange sounds, something between a cry and a musical note,— such as noise had ever heard her utter before” (294). Her voice is almost inhuman.

Days after Elsie’s burial, the mansion is shaken by an earthquake that opens a deep crack in the adjoining cliff, swallowing Rattlesnake Ledge and all the serpents that lived in it (300). Convinced that it is doom’s day, Sophy collapses on Elsie’s tomb. She is buried at the feet of Elsie’s and her mother’s tombs, something significant given the fact that, when she was nursing Elsie, just before the arrival of Helen, the old woman asks her to let her stay at her feet to keep watching her (279).

Throughout the novel, many episodes have presented Elsie’s body as spectacle: during her dancing frenzies, at the Colonel’s party, in the church, at the school. This way, the end of her life could not be less: her corpse is exposed by her family for public scrutiny. Everybody in the village queues “to look upon Elsie’s face once more [...] see her in the still beauty of death [...]. All was ready for the sad or curious eyes which were to look upon her” (295). These curious eyes search in her neck the birthmark she used to hide behind a necklace, only to find that it has disappeared with the snake’s death. There is nothing to fear now.

The sentimental narrative of the end of the novel reaches its climax with the wedding between Dudley and Helen, as well as with the engagement of Bernard with the sweet (and rich) heiress Letty Forrester. Bernard completes his medical training successfully reading a doctoral thesis that studies Elsie’s case and that consolidates him as a professional. This piece of work represents the victory of the medical gaze and the logical result of the status of her body as spectacle throughout her life: “Despite her best efforts, Elsie is inexorably transformed via the triplicate force of the narrative’s medical gazes from self-author to objectified text” (Davis 187). Her voice is definitively silenced to listen to what medicine has to say about her.

*Elsie Venner* is a novel in which most of its characters do not fit in the traditional gender roles. Dudley Venner is one of them. His dread of Elsie’s hysterical reactions has contributed to improve his ability to interpret her outward signs: “He knew well, by every change of her countenance, by her movements, by every varying curve of her graceful figure, the transitions from passion to repose, from fierce excitement to the dull languor which often succeeded her threatening paroxysms” (250). Consequently, his emasculation could be the

result of his loss of authority at a home where power has moved from the father to the monstrous child.

On the other hand, we find Bernard. His confessed sensibility towards his patients contributes to his emasculation, which is intensified when he meets Elsie. Despite his initial masculine attitude, he eventually turns into an object manipulated by Elsie—like when he goes into the mountain to end up being rescued by her. The scene of Elsie's declaration of her love for him is another example of this role reversion: "He turned pale, he trembled almost, as if he had been a woman listening to her lover's declaration" (273). The only moment he manages to overcome her power is when he prevents her from hypnotizing Letty, appealing to her feminine nature.

Regarding Elsie, we have analyzed her double nature. As the serpent, she is the one who brings evil to paradise. For Burbick, this novel functioned as a cautionary tale for the white middle class about the dangers threatening the health of their reproduction (1). Apart from the debilitation of the female nervous system as a consequence of work (as in Helen's example), another threat to the health of the nation was the mixture of blood. Although Elsie also belongs to the aristocracy, she fails to be a good match for Bernard because she has been polluted by her contact with other cultures, races and ethnicities considered morally inferior. The poisoning of her mother's blood by the snake and the transmission of this venom to her daughter symbolize the consequences of contacts with "the other." In Elsie's case, these "others" are:

- Her Spanish mother who, after death, is replaced by a black servant of African origin. She is also looked after by a Spanish governess for some years.
- Her Argentinian cousin, her only playmate when she was a child.
- The Gypsies whose dressing style she imitates and who, like her, prove to be immune to serpents.
- The Indians who used to inhabit the mountain that she regards as a refuge. When the area is destroyed by the earthquake, peace and security return.
- Reverend Fairweather who, although he belongs to the Unitary Church, converts to Catholicism and is too busy with his own spirituality to attend Elsie's needs. Likewise, Calvinist reverend Honeywood,



whom Sophy seeks for help, also goes through a spiritual crisis.

By the end of the novel, Elsie has had contact with every racial and religious group that threatened the white protestant middle class hegemony in America (Burbick 246). The novel is thus an example of the young nation's anxiety about social order and the constant danger of chaos and instability.

On the other hand, Elsie's love for Bernard awakens her human nature. As we have seen, the signs of emotion she tries to repress reveal a femininity that aligns her with Helen and that prompts her father to identify her with her mother (287).

However, as Weinstein reminds us, Elsie's double nature is problematic (88). Neither her ophidian nature nor her domestic side can explain her passionate character and overflowing sexuality. These traits are rather present in her Spanish mother. We must not forget that it is her image which comes to Dr. Kittredge's mind when he watches Elsie dancing. Although everybody describes her mother as an angel, the doctor links her with this unchecked passion, what seems to suggest that he may have treated her as a patient.

The novel reveals the contemporary perception that medicine had of female sexuality as incomprehensible and mysterious. All the women in the novel are victims of their emotions. Actually, it finishes with three buried women and two happily married men about to lead a fulfilling life (Burbick 243). The only female character that survives is Helen, who leaves her job to embrace her domestic role as Mrs. Venner. Not in vain, she "looked like an angel" (313) on her wedding day.

This is a story in which rescues follow one another—Bernard rescues Helen from working exploitation, Elsie rescues Bernard in the mountain, Bernard rescues Letty from Elsie's hypnotism, Dudley rescues Helen from spinsterhood—so, when Bernard rejects Elsie, he is refusing to rescue her. Doing it would have meant accepting the victory of the powerful woman, something inconceivable for Holmes (Weinstein 88). Elsie must be sacrificed at the end in order to reassert the doctor's masculinity; there is no other possibility for her. The power of her gaze, which represents a wild nature, is eventually annihilated by the medical gaze. Like Holmes once confessed to Mitchell, this was his motivation as a natural scientist: "I liked to follow the workings of another mind through these minute, teasing investigations to see a relentless observer get hold of Nature and

squeeze her until the sweat broke out all over her and Sphincters loosened” (quoted in Ehrenreich and English 84).

## WORKS CITED

- ARATA, Stephen. “The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization.” *Victorian Studies* 33.4 (1990): 621-645.
- ARMSTRONG, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- BOURNE TAYLOR, Jenny, and Sally Shuttleworth (eds.). *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- BRAID, James. “Hypnotism.” 1843. In Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth (eds.), 1998. 59-61.
- BULL, Thomas. *Hints to Mothers for the Management of Health During the Period of Pregnancy and in the Lying-in Room: With an Exposure of Popular Errors in Connection With Those Subjects and Hints Upon Nursing*. London: Longmans Green, 1837.
- BURBICK, Joan. *Healing the Republic: The Language of Health and the Culture of Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- DAVIS, Cynthia J. *Bodily and Narrative Forms: The Influence of Medicine on American Literature, 1845-1915*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- DIXON, Edward H. *Woman and Her Diseases: From the Cradle to the Grave: Adapted Exclusively to Her Instruction in the Physiology of Her System and All the Diseases of Her Critical Periods*. Philadelphia, Pa.: J. W. Bradley, 1860.
- EHRENREICH, Barbara, and Deirdre English. *For Her Own Good. Two Centuries of the Experts’ Advice to Women*. 1978. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic. An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Trans.: A. M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 1973.
- . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

- . *The History of Sexuality I*. Trans.: Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Books, 1978.
- GALLAGHER, Kathleen. "The Art of Snake Handling: *Lamia*, *Elsie Venner*, and 'Rappaccini's Daughter.'" *Studies in American Fiction* 3.1 (1975): 51-64.
- GALLAGHER, Catherine, and Thomas Walter Laqueur (eds.). *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1987.
- GIBIAN, Peter. *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- GRAHAM, Thomas John. "Early Marriages of Excellent Tendency." 1853. In Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth, 1998. 187-188.
- HOLLICK, Frederick. *The Diseases of Woman, Their Causes and Cure Familiarly Explained: With Practical Hints for Their Prevention, and for the Preservation of Female Health*. New York: Burgess, Stringer, 1847.
- HOLMES, Oliver Wendell. *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny*. 1861. s.l.: CreateSpace, 2012.
- LAVATER, John Caspar. "On Physiognomy." 1789. In Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth, 1998. 8-18.
- LOMBROSO, Cesare, Mary Gibson, and Nicole Hahn Rafter. *Criminal Man*. 1876. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- MITCHELL, Silas Weir. *Fat and Blood: An Essay on the Treatment of Certain Forms of Neurasthenia and Hysteria*. Philadelphia, PA.: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1884.
- OTIS, Laura (ed.). *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- POOVEY, Mary. "'Scenes of an Undelicate Character': The Medical 'Treatment' of Victorian Women." In Gallagher and Laqueur (eds.), 1987. 137-168.
- . *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

- REVERBY, Susan. *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- SCULL, Andrew T. *Hysteria: The Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- SMITH-ROSENBERG, Carroll. *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- SPENCER, Herbert. *The Study of Sociology*. New York: D. Appleton, 1896.
- SWENSON, Kristine. *Medical Women and Victorian Fiction*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005.
- VRETTOS, Athena. *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1995.
- WEINSTEIN, Michael A. *The Imaginative Prose of Oliver Wendell Holmes*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006.
- WELTER, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966): 151-174.