The Journey to Womanhood: Travel in Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World and Martha Finley's Elsie's Girlhood

Luella D'amico[*][1]

[1]University of the Incarnate Word – United States

Abstract

Just after Lucy Carrington invites Elsie Dinsmore to spend a holiday with her family in Martha Finley's 1867 novel, Elsie's Girlhood, Elsie retreats from the domestic confinement of her father's Southern plantation to read outside in the open air. She lovingly cradles her new book, Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World (1850), and she is "so full of sympathy for little Ellen that tears were dropping upon the page as she read" (65). It is no accident that Elsie Dinsmore picks up Warner's book in between significant moments in the novel-one where she is asked to go somewhere and another where she is placed in danger. Both wildly popular, The Wide, Wide World and Elsie's Girlhood served as handbooks for children who were making the most significant journeys of their lives-the often perilous journey from girlhood to womanhood. Yet the two protagonists do not merely conduct metaphorical journeys; they undergo real ones: both girls trek to an aunt's house in the rural countryside, enjoy a vacation with well-bred friends, and set sail for Europe. Why do these young girls travel so broadly, and what do their movements teach their readers? Finley and Warner suggest travel allows them opportunities for growth which prepare them to become ideal American women. Men in the books may compel their movements, but Elsie and Ellen take advantage of their opportunities to travel. I argue that the protagonists' geographical moves in Elsie's Girlhood and The Wide, Wide World unlock key recognitions in the young women about the larger quests for self-discovery they are undertaking. Though they live in a hierarchical social system, the girls learn (and accordingly go on to teach those reading about them) how to manipulate institutions, such as Christianity, class, and even patriotism, to work to their benefit.

[*]Speaker