Toys and Tools in Pink
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nineteenth-century fictions following in the steps of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* illustrate consequences that ensue when women are subjected to science and technological innovation or engage with science and technology. Although Shelley and Nathaniel Hawthorne depict scientific passion and ambition in conflict with sentimental domesticity in their narratives, Lydia Maria Child and Herman Melville describe women who benefit from science and technology. The bleak outcomes for females affected by science, outcomes that are apparent in *Frankenstein* and in Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” contrast with the more beneficial outcomes for women in scientific plots described in Child’s “Hilda Silfverling” and in Melville’s “Jimmy Rose,” “I and My Chimney,” and “The Apple-Tree Table.” More recently, Sena Jeter Naslund’s retelling of *Moby-Dick* in *Ahab’s Wife* or, *The Star-Gazer* sketches how historical and fictional female characters succeed as result of their engagement with science and technology in ways that resonate with contemporary ethical arguments about women’s participation in science.

Philosopher of science Sandra Harding in “Just Add Women and Stir?” claims an ethical basis for opening up scientific and technical fields to women, arguing that sustainable development issues must be considered from the perspective of women’s lives. The rationale is clear: scientific and technological “changes that are designed only from the perspective of men’s lives cannot produce an overall improvement in women’s conditions nor, consequently, can they generate sustainable human development for men or the communities that both constitute.” Harding asserts, “A form of the democratic ethic clearly states the moral grounds for such a solution: those
who bear the consequences of a decision should have proportionate share in making it” (307).

Other feminists examine values in scientific practices and theories that in part determine gender equity. Philosophers Alison Wylie and Lynn Hankinson Nelson explain: “Feminists engage the sciences not only as critics of bias and partiality but also as practitioners who recognize that systematic empirical inquiry has an indispensable role to play in understanding and changing oppressive conditions.” Wylie and Nelson recognize “complex relationships between science and values,” maintaining

The problem we face, if we are committed to understanding and improving scientific practice, is no longer that of cleansing science of intrusive values but, rather, that of determining what kinds of contextual factors, under what circumstances, are likely to advance the cause of science in specific ways, where the goals and standards of science are themselves evolving and open to negotiation. (79, 78)

Assessing values in the contexts surrounding scientific actors, investigations, and outcomes acknowledges various perspectives and interests. Feminist philosophical arguments about the ethics of science endorse women’s participation in STEM and are consonant with fictions that applaud women’s authority in science and technology and criticize gender discrimination and racial marginalization.

Scientific Ambitions

Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) characterizes the failed ambitions of a scientist who seeks new scientific knowledge without thinking about the consequences or responsibilities associated with discovery. George Levine writes about *Frankenstein* that it “is about the inevitability of solipsism, the alienation of the self from the world, and the necessity and desperation of the quest to rejoin it.” As previously noted, the novel’s subtitle, in referencing Frankenstein as the new Prometheus, indicts egoism, particularly of hubristic men risking family and friends for the sake of ambitious invention. Feminist interpretation recognizes Shelley’s incorporation of gender polarities in the novel: the masculine pursuit of science and technology ignores and threatens sentimental attachments identified with women and children.

The novel’s three concentric narratives call into question the scientific experiment as a heroic enterprise, presenting perspectives of the educated observer, the scientist, and the object of study. An epistolary novel, *Franken-
stein provides Walton’s letters to his sister as the outermost frame of Victor Frankenstein’s account of his ambitious scientific career and his neglect of family. Victor’s narrative incorporates the monster’s tale, describing his lonely search for companionship after Victor abandons him; Shelley contrasts Victor’s insensitivity to others with the monster’s initial emotions. The creature’s “natural” and “intuitive” sympathy for others prompts him to seek companionship, but the DeLaceys’ horror at the creature’s appearance and Victor’s refusal to create a mate for his “offspring” provoke the monster’s revenge.

Instead of concluding with the scientific triumph of Frankenstein or the redemption of his creature, Shelley’s novel ends with Walton’s decision to make a safe return to home, domesticity, and order, values identified within the novel as feminine.5 *Frankenstein* approves the pursuit of scientific knowledge while protecting self and others, as Walton is a scientific investigator who compromises scientific inquiry when its risks become too great. Walton sacrifices his ambitious dreams to extend explorations in the polar regions; he responds instead to his crew’s pleas and turns his ship homeward. He will not risk his crew’s lives, even for the sake of pathbreaking exploration, and thus avoids the sad fate of the ambitious, obsessed Victor Frankenstein, who dies seeking revenge on his creature.

Because Victor resisted marriage and familial connections in favor of pursuing science, many readers perceive his creature’s appreciation of community as more natural, sympathetic, and worthy of respect than Victor’s single-minded attempts to find fame as a great scientist. The creature’s sensitivity, like Walton’s care of his crew, is aligned in the novel with the feminine. If we imagine reading *Frankenstein* and excluding the first-person narrative of “the monster,” Walton’s decision to turn his ship back could signify weakness. However, having noted the massive destruction resulting from Victor’s invention and subsequent abandonment of his creation, most readers understandably pause when he endeavors to persuade Walton’s crew that important scientific discoveries require dangerous risks. Walton’s sense of responsibility toward his crew and his decision to turn back appear more admirable than scientific ambition.6

Presenting Victor’s experiences as learning opportunities, Shelley’s novel instructs readers as to how scientists and inventors should act. Victor’s first-person narrative influences Walton, who serves as the text’s exemplary reader in judging his new friend’s and the monster’s actions. *Frankenstein* warns us that if practitioners do not exercise caution, science and human invention could force unintended consequences on society. The *Frankenstein* myth suggests that science has the potential to go awry and that there might not be a suitable home in our world for technological products. The novel aligns masculine ambition with interest in science and technology, and feminine care of friends and family with more cautious exploration.
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” (1843) is also a cautionary tale about masculine scientific obsession and ambition. The protagonist Aylmer (“a man of science—an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy”) stops practicing science when he marries. The narrator evokes what Carolyn Merchant describes as a Baconian understanding of science’s control over nature:

In those days, when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of nature, seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman, in its depth and absorbing energy. The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart, might all find their congenial aliment in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force, and perhaps make new worlds for himself. (259)

Aylmer loves his wife, but he suggests to her that a peculiar mark on her cheek mars her beauty: “dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature, that his slightest possible defect—which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty—shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly perfection” (260). The narrator explains that this mark “deeply interwoven . . . with the texture and substance of her face” is called a fairy handprint by suitors and “the Bloody Hand” by women; it fades or emerges when Georgiana respectively blushes or pales (260, 261).

Convinced that science can improve on nature, Aylmer wishes to eliminate his wife’s birthmark. For him, it is the sole defect of her nearly perfect beauty, one that is “intolerable,” for it “colors” the totality of their relationship (261). Georgiana responds that many previous suitors found the mark resembling a tiny hand to be a charm rather than a defect, and she wonders what might happen if her husband removes the mark. Despite questioning whether removing it would result in her deformity or death, she nevertheless submits to the operation because she recognizes that Aylmer views the mark as “a frightful object” (262). Georgiana’s feelings scarcely matter, as “her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away” (263).

Her birthmark encourages Aylmer to view his wife as a scientific muse, for, as he tells his wife, “Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science” (264). Aylmer’s pursuit of science as a masterful manipulation of nature links him both to Enlightenment scientists, who according to Merchant, understood science as a means of unveiling the powers of nature, and to alchemists, whose works led Victor Frankenstein astray. Allison Easton finds Aylmer’s fatal flaw to be his prioritizing of science over love: for him, “science’
is always more important than love. He fails to recognize Georgiana as a subject in her own right. Instead, impossibly, she must be both ‘Nature’ and the ‘Ideal,’ a sexual, potentially childbearing being who must also be physically flawless, self-denying, all-loving."

Hawthorne’s references to Aylmer’s scientific powers and knowledge of alchemy suggest that he formed his assistant Aminadab (the name backwards is “bad anima”), called “thou human machine” and “thou man of clay” by Aylmer (273). Aminadab is “A man of low stature, but bulky frame, with shaggy hair hanging about his visage.” Aylmer’s imposition of science on nature appears misguided to the dark, subordinated Aminadab, whose only line of dialogue expresses disagreement with his master: “If she were my wife, I’d never part with her birth-mark” (266). More sensitive than his master, the assistant understands the futility and destructiveness of the scientist’s quest, which raises readers’ suspicion that Aylmer is unreasonable in forcing his wife to submit to an operation removing her birthmark.

Cindy Weinstein points out that “Georgiana fails to see Aminadab,” for “he is neither human nor machine but . . . invisible.” As “an ideal of immobility, stability, and submissiveness,” Aminadab is a model for what Aylmer wishes Georgiana to become. After Georgiana submits to her husband’s performing surgery, Aylmer “was confident in his science, and felt that he could draw a magic circle around her, within which no evil might intrude” (266). But Aylmer’s experiment is a miserable failure; in seeking to “perfect” his wife, he kills her.

Hawthorne’s allegorical plots in “The Birthmark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” employ binaries—masculine vs. feminine, science vs. nature, and ambition vs. love—familiar from Frankenstein. “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844) adds another binary (north vs. south) to this set in describing a student who observes firsthand an Italian Renaissance experimentalist’s projects. Dr. Rappaccini’s work in Padua produces living poisonous plants as an environment suitable for his similarly poisonous daughter Beatrice, for his science controls nature with malicious effect. Giovanni Guasconti, a Neapolitan, meets Beatrice, and unknowingly participates in the lifelong experiment Dr. Rappaccini conducts on his daughter. Beatrice warns Giovanni that her father “is a man fearfully acquainted with the secrets of nature . . . and at the hour when I first drew breath, this plant sprang from the soil, the offspring of his science, of his intellect, while I was but his earthly child. Approach it not!” (416). She allows that “my father’s fatal love of science . . . estranged me from all society of my kind” (416). Giovanni’s entrance into the story enables Dr. Rappaccini to provide Beatrice with a companion by making sure that the young man also becomes transformed into a poisonous being.

“Rappaccini’s Daughter” presents a love story as an emplotment of scientific critique, as romance and science converge in destruction when the woman dies
due to overreaching masculine ambitions. Because the couple “stand in utter solitude,” Giovanni asks Beatrice to ingest, as he plans to, an antidote developed by Rappaccini’s rival Baglioni (418). Dr. Rappaccini emerges from the shadows after Beatrice swallows the antidote and hears her complaint: “wherefore didst thou inflict this miserable doom on thy child?” (420). Rappaccini underscores her supernatural powers, which Beatrice discounts: “I would fain have been loved, not feared” (420). Baglioni’s powerful antidote turns out to be poisonous and causes Beatrice’s death, an event welcomed only by Baglioni who emerges to call “loudly, in a tone of triumph mixed with horror . . . ‘Rappaccini! Rappaccini! And is this the upshot of your experiment?’” (420). Baglioni, Rappaccini, and Guasconti share responsibility for Beatrice’s death because they subject her to their desires, both scientific and romantic. Baglioni and Rappaccini provide material causes effecting her destruction, while Guasconti aids and abets them to fulfill his love. Destructive scientific experiments in technologies of poisons and antidotes in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” are akin to the deathly operation depicted in“The Birthmark,” as both procedures are identified with man’s scientific repression of woman’s agency.

Cultural Readings

Aylmer’s and Rappaccini’s experiments could not be replicated in contemporary scientific laboratories. Yet, as allegories of human engagement with science and technology, the plots and characters of Hawthorne’s fictions have long cultural lives in being referenced as evidence in contemporary political debates about scientific investigations. To read a fictional text as a statement relevant to the real world is to offer it as a fragment of ideology, albeit an unstable ideology, as Terry Eagleton asserts:

> All literary works, in other words, are “rewritten,” if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a “re-writing.” No work, and no current evaluation of it, can be simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process; and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair.\(^\text{12}\)

Ideologies crystallize when close readers of literary texts of the nineteenth century debate scientific and technological controversies of the twenty-first. Recent political and media attention paid to Hawthorne’s stories illuminates a case of fictional interpretation supplying “evidence” of the need for caution in scientific investigation.
There is no more charged environment in which to examine the real-world consequences of analyzing fictional representations of gender, science, and technology than in the political debates surrounding fetal tissue and cloning research. At the first meeting of President George W. Bush’s Council on Bioethics in January 2002, its then-chairman Dr. Leon R. Kass asked panel members to discuss Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark.” Legislative debates in the U.S. Congress in fall 2001 about fetal tissue research focused on fears of human cloning, and the president initially opposed human cloning on any grounds. Therefore, it not surprising that the 18 members of the Council on Bioethics weighed ethical considerations about such science during their first meeting. As Sheryl Gay Stolberg reported in the *New York Times*, “Dr. Kass said that while the panel’s work was delayed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, those events had also created a new moral seriousness in the nation.”\(^3\) After the meeting, the president suggested that the council members “can help the conscience of the country.” The outcome of the council deliberations tilted toward upholding caution and morality over risk and discovery, but they did not recommend a permanent ban on such research.\(^4\)

Other reports indicated dissension within the council. Stolberg’s mention of “The Birthmark” in her January 18, 2002, article about the Council’s first meeting provided a clue that the council would slow, if not halt, research on fetal tissue: “As an icebreaker, Dr. Kass scheduled a discussion of . . . ‘The Birthmark,’ a tale of a scientist who marries a beautiful woman with a tiny blemish on her left cheek and then kills her in trying to remove it.” On July 26, 2002, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*’s Jeffrey Brainard wrote that a ten-member majority of the members on the Council on Bioethics favored “a four-year moratorium on attempts to create cloned cells for medical research, putting the panel at odds with President Bush . . . who has strongly supported a permanent ban on research cloning.”\(^5\)

Kass’s choice of “The Birthmark” as an initial reading for the Council on Bioethics struck a cautionary note and acknowledged the power of literary representations to codify and inspire reactions to scientific and technological pursuits. The bioethicist George Annas wrote in May 2002 about “The Birthmark” in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: “The moral of this 1843 short story is that the quest for human perfection is doomed to fail and that scientific hubris can lead to death and destruction.”\(^6\) Annas identified Aylmer’s “real crime” as “being unable to separate his love of science from his love of his wife” (1602).

Few observers of the fetal cell debates considered that Hawthorne’s story illustrates a gendered and racialized myth about science and technology: Aylmer’s patriarchal, scientific authority is invoked when he operates on his wife, asserting his masculine will to control nature, assisted by Aminadab and
medical procedures. The absence of feminist viewpoints in media coverage of debates about fetal cells and cloning could be explained as a refusal to present a position seen as close to promoting eugenics or as a disinclination to “taint” pro-choice positions on abortion with arguments about cloning. Philosophers Wylie and Nelson assert that “the goals and standards of science are themselves evolving and open to negotiation,” pointing the way toward continual reconsideration of values and interests in science, whether these involve procedures related to fetal cells (78) or other matters.

Cloning cells evokes Frankenstein’s scientific experiments to create life, to allow a male to reproduce without women. While Shelley’s novel and Hawthorne’s stories align scientific mastery, particularly the control of nature’s appearance and reproduction, with misguided male investigators who ignore the interests of women and others identified as socially marginal, it would be a mistake to generalize from Frankenstein and Hawthorne’s stories that fiction always doubts scientific authority as suspect or dangerous, for, as discussed in the next section, some nineteenth-century fictions regard science as empowering and socially beneficial.

**Feminist Science**

Lydia Maria Child, who was well-known during the early nineteenth century for her political journalism advocating for the rights of Indians, African Americans, and women, found appealing the idea that scientific techniques enable social progress. She promoted reform by publishing sentimental fiction about social issues that blends radical political criticism, practical domestic advice to individuals, and the histories of minority achievements. Child’s *Fact and Fiction: A Collection of Stories*, first published in 1846 and later reprinted within the collection *The Children of Mount Ida*, includes short stories resembling Greco-Roman myths, American historical tales, Indian legends, and science fictions challenging readers to correct abuses affecting African Americans, Native Americans, women, and immigrant Irish.

Providing a more positive spin on science and technology than Shelley’s and Hawthorne’s fictions, Child’s story “Hilda Silfverling” explores how a young woman benefits from being subjected to scientific experimentation. “Hilda Silfverling: A Fantasy,” originally published in the *Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine* in October 1845, connects science and social progress by imagining how science and technology help one woman escape cultural constraints. The story represents how technological innovations free Hilda from the social bonds of patriarchal oppression and shows how science can assist in relieving oppression, for Child imagines that progressivism in human history
and culture would allow for the gradual improvement of cultural conditions for women.

Premised on the principle that history progresses reasonably, Child’s short fictions in *Fact and Fiction* bear similarities to G. W. F. Hegel’s theory of history. R. G. Collingwood describes Hegel’s assumptions about the retrospective logic of causality:

[S]ince all history is the history of thought and exhibits the self-development of reason, the historical process is at bottom a logical process. Historical transitions are, so to speak, logical transitions set out on a time-scale. History is nothing but a kind of logic where the relation of logical priority and posteriority is not so much replaced as enriched or consolidated by becoming a relation of temporal priority and posteriority. Hence the developments that take place in history are never accidental, they are necessary; and our knowledge of an historical process is not merely empirical, it is a priori, we can see the necessity of it.17

Illustrating historical shifts regarding social progress, Child’s story “Hilda Silfverling” limns cultural progress in ways that fit comfortably within a Hegelian vision of history, one that imagines expanding rights for women.

Child was not dogmatically religious, but her journalism and fiction reveal her faith in a kind of Christian pantheism which accepts that organic processes of nature influence progress for humanity. Along with her optimistic faith in natural processes, Child’s reformist idealism supports her representation of favorable aspects of technology. Unlike Hawthorne’s and Shelley’s fictions, which illustrate the excessive costs of scientific experiment and technological innovation, Child’s story recounts how scientific and technological discoveries improve society in enhancing social conditions for women.

Child chose Scandinavian settings to tell Hilda’s story, identifying how characters of different nationalities can be drawn together in affection and support each other. The narrator of “Hilda Silfverling” describes how the title character, “the daughter of a poor Swedish clergyman” whose original name was “Hilda Gyllenlof,” suffers first the deaths of her parents and then rejection by distant relations who see her as a burden. Fending for herself, Hilda finds work as a seamstress and maid in Stockholm, where she falls in love with a Danish sailor, Magnus Anderson. Soon after meeting Hilda, Magnus sets sail from Sweden and is lost in a storm at sea. Pregnant by him, Hilda gives birth to a baby whom she is ill-equipped to care for. She manages to find a good woman, Virika Gjetter, who adopts the ten-day-old baby and moves with the infant to Virika’s own native village in Norway.

After someone discovers an infant’s corpse, “strangled with a sash very like one Hilda” wore (207), Hilda is assumed to have killed her baby. She is
imprisoned and sentenced to die. Like the judgment placed on Justine, who is wrongly executed for killing Victor’s brother William in *Frankenstein*, Hilda is convicted by scant circumstantial evidence. She has no defense, for Virika cannot be located to provide any testimony on Hilda’s behalf. But the court spares Hilda from execution because a scientific solution is proposed to effect the legal punishment: a chemist suggests that instead of beheading her, the community might learn more and lose nothing if she were to be frozen and reanimated 100 years later. The chemist has already practiced his freezing technique on a bear and a wolf, so he asks the government to grant his request to test the suggestion of “a metaphysician” to see “how extremely interesting it would be to put a human being asleep thus, and watch the reunion of soul and body, after the lapse of one hundred years” (208). The narrator tells us, “His request, being seconded by several men of science, was granted by the government; for no one suggested a doubt of its divine right to freeze human hearts, instead of chopping off human heads, or choking human lungs” (208).

Although afraid of the freezing process, Hilda is grateful to escape death. She is brought to “a tomb-like apartment” where she falls asleep while being frozen. With a deference to the scientific subject that Aylmer and Rappaccini do not exhibit, the chemist accommodates her desire to sleep on a shelf away from the crocodile and “handed her up very politely” (211). The narrator relates, “On the shelf where she lay was pasted an inscription: ‘Put to sleep for infanticide, Feb.10, 1740, by order of the king. To be wakened Feb.10, 1840’” (211). The chemist’s scientific experiment proves a boon to Hilda, who remains frozen until the chemist’s great-grandson, also a chemist, reanimates her.

Having served her sentence, the still-young Hilda is free to do as she pleases and takes a new name to escape approbation. She travels to Upper Tellemarken, Norway, the homeland of her friend Virika, where Hilda finds a wooden trumpet called a *luhr* that she remembers was owned by Virika; it is “the only visible link between her present life and that dreamy past” (217). Hilda is told that this instrument was given to the current homeowner by one Alerik Thorild. When Hilda meets Alerik, she notices his resemblance to her lover Magnus (222), including their similar voices (230).

Indeed, Hilda realizes that Alerik is her own great-grandson, a fact that she relates to him when she turns down his first marriage proposal. Described as a persistently engaging and unusually spirited young man, Alerik insists on marrying Hilda. He believes what she says, that she is his great-grandmother returned to life, although not by science: “I have no doubt the fairies carried thee off some summer’s night and made thee verily believe thou hadst slept for a hundred years” (235).

Unwilling to let any scientific experiment defeat his plan to marry her, Alerik argues by means of a loosely scientific, mystical philosophy that nature
would not oppose their union. He describes how the human body changes its matter over time and that reincarnation inevitably recycles old matter, demonstrating that he and Hilda are no more closely related than any two other people. Citing Lessing’s idea “that our souls keep coming back again and again into new bodies,” Alerik asks Hilda, “If these things are so, how the deuce is a man ever to tell whether he marries his grandmother or not?” (233). Hilda is exasperated by her lover’s perversity at turning around all arguments and complains that his fantasies are nothing compared to the truth of the Christian religion. But Alerik counters with another question, asking “what [does] the Christian religion [have] to do with penning up young maidens with bears and crocodiles?” (237).

After a time, Alerik overcomes Hilda’s resistance, and the couple marries. During the course of their married life Alerik jokingly refers to Hilda as his great-grandmother, but their friends remain puzzled by his remark. Their marriage is not understood, perhaps because it is based on sexual pleasure and ignores social boundaries. As Carolyn Karcher writes, “Flouting all patriarchal taboos, the bawdily incestuous ending foreshadows a future that will give free play to sexual pleasure,” a future made possible because scientific innovation, being frozen until social mores change, permits the crime of one century to be rewarded in the next.99

Hilda finds a different world in 1840, one friendlier to single women from foreign countries. Suspended animation has protected her from the narrow-minded suspicions of her past society by allowing her to move anonymously to a different one. While Child does not describe what scientific information was gained from the experiment of freezing a human being, she assumes that refrigeration effects social engineering. She imagines how a technology that is still experimental during her own time improves the lot of a woman from an earlier century and shows how scientific knowledge and techniques enable Hilda’s romance and happiness.

Child’s fantasy identifies technological developments as progressive. According to historians of refrigeration technology, inventors worked out many of the modern principles of man-made refrigeration in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Accomplishments of two American inventors were widely reported in the European and U.S. press in the 1830s and 40s. In 1834, Jacob Perkins of New England provided one solution to “the mechanical production of cold” in obtaining a British patent on a closed-cycle volatile-liquid compressor and condenser.20 In 1844 Dr. John Gorrie, director of the U.S. Marine Hospital at Apalachicola, Florida, “described in the Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser . . . a machine ice maker to insure his hospital fever patients that ice would always be available” (32).

Child does not delve into the exact means of refrigeration employed by
the chemist in her story; rather, she creates an optimistic vision of how this technology, one her audience would have some awareness of, might reshape relations between men and women. The first modern refrigerators were developed in the early 1840s as a means of preserving meat and dairy products, a technological improvement that revolutionized agricultural distribution and consumption. Like other household innovations, the refrigerator influenced the way women worked at home and their contributions to family life. The fictional freezing process referenced in the story makes “Hilda Silfverling” a utopian fairy tale recognizing social equality as a benefit of refrigeration.

Child’s fantasy is an allegory demonstrating how improvements in a domestic technology empower women socially and sexually. Refrigeration is thus imaged as a sexually charged trope, for freezing Hilda is the process substituting for imprisonment to confine her as a sexually loose, dangerous woman. But Hilda overcomes the frigidity forced on her, a condition that patriarchal culture associates with the condition of being woman, to find happiness. Hélène Cixous argues, in “Laugh of the Medusa,” that writing allows a woman to retrieve her sexuality,

giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing . . .).”

Child rewards Hilda with a second chance at life, permitting her greater freedom and happiness. The story demonstrates how science and technology enable individual liberation and social progress in freeing women from cultural constraints. Child’s vision of potentials unleashed by scientists in this story differs from the dangers imagined by Shelley and Hawthorne, as “Hilda Silfverling” reconfigures science and technology as pursuits beneficial to women, although not authorized and controlled by women.

**Feminine Domestic Authority**

Exemplifying Deborah Tannen’s characterization of competitive, hierarchical male discourse, the television show *Home Improvement* (1991–99) represents Tim “The Tool Man” Taylor, host of a home fix-it show, as one step above
Neanderthal in his inability to understand the complex, sensitive philosophy of life shared by his wife Jill, his assistant Al, and his neighbor Wilson. Tannen’s prescription to men and women that “[u]nderstanding genderlect makes it possible to change” the way couples communicate (297) is enacted in each television episode, which shows how Tim raises his consciousness. He does so by learning (usually from his wife or his feminist neighbor Wilson) a different vocabulary inflected with more sensitive and practical values, a sociolect that helps him to decode his errors and understand aspects of female culture so that he can become more successful as husband, father, and friend.

Rehearsing nineteenth-century models of domestic power, Home Improvement acknowledges that a woman should control the security and stability of her home by exercising her intuitive ability to guide those in her domestic circle. Because our contemporary culture privileges, at least rhetorically, consensus over competition as a model for social progress, each show conveys Tim’s realization that his wife was always already aware of what he later comes to learn: that her understanding of home and family exceeds his own and that he should defer to her judgment in these matters. Like Home Improvement, three of Herman Melville’s stories—“I and My Chimney” (1856), “The Apple-Tree Table” (1856), and “Jimmy Rose” (1855)—represent gender conflict regarding home renovation as a pretext for miscommunication between husband and wife. In these stories Melville describes home improvement as a battleground in the war between men and women, suggesting that shared understanding generated from communication promotes domestic harmony.

The New England and New York domestic scenes represented in these three Melville stories are free of the dark and imprisoning aspects of domestic family life that haunt other Melvillean narratives. While some critics resort to gender stereotyping in describing William Ford and his wife (he is rationally masculine, and she is too assertive to be adequately feminine, according to conventions of the time), I argue that this couple negotiates common household problems in a fairly cooperative manner as they communicate their different philosophical approaches regarding home improvement. The stories consider how marriages function through periods of disagreement because the partners are committed to each other and do not resist expressing their conflicts. The Fords communicate according to a model that reconfigures power relations between wife and husband to create a modern domestic ideology. In short, the narrator’s pessimism regarding the virtues of domesticity permit him to represent flexibility and compassion as virtues in his portrait of marriage.

Husband and wife in Melville’s “Jimmy Rose” disagree about whether the old city house they have inherited should be newly decorated. The narrator’s husband’s sentimental associations with the previous owner of the house prevent him from putting up new wallpaper. To convince his wife to preserve the
home, he tells how Jimmy Rose’s generosity before bankruptcy does not protect him after his financial ruin. Those who had been eager guests at his table resent the charity their former host later seeks from them. Yet Jimmy’s aspect flourishes even though his pocket is empty: the “roses in his cheeks; those ruddy roses in his nipping winter. How they bloomed . . .” (343). The wallpaper, with its “wilted resplendence of those proud peacocks on the wall,” make the husband think of “the withering change in Jimmy’s once resplendent pride of state” (345). The husband is more sentimental about his friend than many women, who are less sensitive to the needs of the poverty-stricken bachelor. The narrator wishes that Jimmy Rose’s life and house were memorialized and appreciated, rather than cast aside by his friends.

“I and My Chimney” presents presumably the same first-person narrator in a much more gruff and self-assertive mood, but with similar inclinations to preserve past technical achievements. The narrator identifies himself with the large, old-fashioned chimney standing at the center of his domicile and insists that the chimney must not be renovated or demolished, even though previous renovations to the house have changed the roof and chimney. The narrator’s wife objects to the odd appearance of the “wax nose” of the chimney, but her husband claims to prefer the “picturesque” quality of “decay” (356). Only when the mortgagor of the property demands that the wax nose be removed does the narrator agree to the demand, but this lost battle motivates him to persevere in protecting the chimney from his wife, who calls in a builder to support her case. Like the basement of the city house in “Jimmy Rose,” which resembled “the ancient tombs of Templars” (337), the cellar in the country house has noble qualities because the base of the chimney predominates. However, the husband’s sentimental meditations on the stateliness and magnitude of this chimney conflict with his wife’s plans to modernize the house by eliminating its “endless domestic inconveniences” (359).

The wife’s health and energy outstrip the narrator’s, but her plan does not recognize “the realities of architecture” that her husband voices: “if you demolish the foundation, what is to support the superstructure?” (360). Unlike the husband, the wife has a youthful spirit and excellent hearing, and she does not suffer from sciatica. She focuses on improvement and progress and, unfortunately for the narrator, seems inclined to fix problems as soon as possible, a principle that does not hold for the indolent narrator who expresses a preference for “oldness in things” (361). The husband’s criticism of the wife does not demean her as he comically points out their differences, emphasizing his affection for his energetic, clever wife even as they battle.

The war over the chimney proceeds as the wife tries to redesign her domicile by omitting her husband’s favorite part of it. Encouraging a mason to send her husband a letter indicating that the chimney might enclose secret passages,
she hopes that the narrator will give in to his own curiosity, if not her desire to improve the house, but her husband refuses to be taken in by her schemes. Finally, he takes action and pays the mason to write a note verifying that the chimney is safe and has no secret passages. This document does not end the war, as the wife cannot abide the husband's attachment to the chimney. While “Jimmy Rose” and “I and My Chimney” ostensibly privilege his sentimental conservativism over her preference for renovation, in both stories the wife reasonably and convincingly articulates her views. The husband's sensitivity becomes a sympathetic characteristic that questions stereotypical sex roles concerning building renovation and serves as a foil to the wife's doggedness.

Melville's “The Apple-Tree Table” can be similarly read as an argument considering whether scientific rationalism supersedes supernatural and superstitious claims. The story commences with a lengthy description of how the husband, the first-person narrator of the tale, found the table in the attic of his newly purchased house, rumored to be haunted. His wife supports her husband against their daughters, who believe the table to be supernaturally affected (381). For a short time, the family accepts the table as a household fixture. But one Saturday night in December, while drinking and reading, the husband realizes that he hears a strange ticking coming from “one cloven foot of the little apple-tree table” (384). The narrator wakes his wife up to tell her about the ticking, but she persuades him to come to bed rather continuing his investigations. The next morning the wife and daughters listen to the ticking with predictable results: the girls believe it is the physical manifestation of spirits, while the wife maintains a commonsense pragmatism and doubts the supernatural explanation.

The wife manages to be “mistress” of her house despite the unreasonable fears of the supernatural evidenced by her daughters, husband, and maid. Her strength of mind is not appreciated by her more fearful husband because he questions her war against the spirits. Yet the narrator changes his behavior around the table because he wants to imitate his wife, who remains logical when confronting a mystery. His newfound patience rewards him one night while he is alone; he watches a bug shining “like a glow-worm” and catches it under a tumbler “as it was just on the point of escaping its prison” (389). After the narrator explains how the bug came out of the table, his wife retains her composure in the face of her daughters' hysteria. The narrator expects his news to fluster his spouse, but she exhibits “scornful incredulity . . . worthy of Democritus himself” (392) and tells the maid to rub down the table with roach powder. After the more passive husband assumes the mystery has been solved, the wife questions whether there might be another bug in the table. The narrator puts another tumbler on the table and decides to wait for the bug, encouraging his family to stay up with him. The wife's resolve allows her to remain
calm while waiting, although her husband and daughters cower at every noise, including the cider going off and the baker delivering the bread. Eventually, all are rewarded in seeing a bug “flashing in the room’s general dimness, like a fiery opal” (396).

The story illustrates how female and male characters reveal attitudes about science and technology that defy gender stereotypes. The girls refuse to let go of their supernatural explanation of spirits in the face of material reality, but their mother prevails in sending her husband to consult with Professor Johnson, the male naturalist, instead of Madame Pazzi, the conjurress. Professor Johnson hypothesizes that insect eggs had been encased in the table for about one hundred fifty years. The narrator teases his daughters that their faith in spirits has not been vindicated, while his wife and the professor silence his gloating by suggesting that the husband’s speculations have encouraged his daughters’ fantasies.

Despite the scientific account supported by the wife, the husband continues to represent women as more inclined to accept irrational explanations than men are, a conclusion that readers cannot easily accept in view of his confessed irrational anxieties. Instead we understand him to be an unreliable narrator. Demonstrating his conviction that women are less likely to trust logic, the narrator recounts how his daughters take pride in exhibiting the insect to “whatever lady doubts the story” (397), but he neglects to praise his wife’s calmness and common sense regarding the table, held despite her husband’s and daughters’ emotional outbursts.39

Melville’s three stories reverse gender stereotypes in identifying sentimentality and affection with the male narrator and independence and rationality with the wife who is forced to indulge her husband’s wishes. The wife in these fictions is correct and able to understand scientific and technical concepts in a superior way to her spouse, revising conventional associations. As Tannen remarks, “experience has shown that given the tool of understanding, individuals are able to devise ways of addressing and often solving their problems” (314). In Home Improvement, the domestic conflict demonstrates the cultural lesson that “men and women were not meant to live together, and therefore, married life is a series of consequences couples face for having defied fate.”30 Yet, as the actress who plays the wife on the show notes, “The fact that you see two people from different points of view coming together and working out their problems with humor and tolerance is of course comforting.”

Melville’s stories recognize the consequences of gender difference (i.e., understanding that women sometimes know more about and are superior authorities over science or technology) as empowering men and women to achieve fulfillment in domesticity. Negotiations between husband and wife suggest that self-claimed authority over technology should be treated suspiciously and that a
dialogue constructed between variant points of view offers a collaborative interpretation superior to either individual’s position. As Tannen notes, “looking at communication from the point of view of differing conversational styles is reminiscent of the principle of complementarity in physics, which was fundamental to the work of Niels Bohr. You have to look at things from two points of view, he explained, to really understand it” (317). Like marriage, science is enhanced by dialogue and courteous debate between differing perspectives.

Science and Romance in Ahab’s Wife

Sena Jeter Naslund’s novel Ahab’s Wife, or The Star-Gazer (1999) takes up the conjoined challenges of representing the woman who is married to Ahab, one of Melville’s most famous characters, and the noteworthy female scientist Maria Mitchell. Naslund’s historical romance reworks Melville’s canonical Moby-Dick (1851) to include heroic fictional role models for girls; she incorporates the life stories of other women along with “discovering” the woman who married Ahab, Una Spenser. Naslund revised Melville’s narrative in creating a romance, a genre identified as feminine, in celebrating feminist networks and women’s participation in occupations traditionally identified with men, such as whaling, philosophy, astronomy, and writing. Una even suspects that her second husband, Ahab, would not object to the idea of a woman captain, for “[h]e was not conventional, and I did not anticipate this idea, or any idea, would shock him.” Providing a female perspective on Ahab and the Pequod’s crew, Una, as her literary name foretells, becomes a writer.

Naslund’s opening came to her as an epiphany of words and image: the sentence “Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last” and the image of a woman standing on a Nantucket widow’s walk watching sea and stars. Ahab’s Wife tracks Una’s quest for fulfillment, an odyssey incorporating Ahab’s quest for revenge in chasing the white whale as one tale among many. Naslund’s novel satisfies the most ardent Melvillean in weaving together characters, events, and refigured passages from Moby-Dick while also referencing numerous historical persons and political issues such as women’s suffrage, abolition, penal reform, and public education. In addition to Margaret Fuller and Maria Mitchell, who befriend Una and become role models for her, other famous writers appear, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and “Ishmael,” the only sailor to survive Ahab’s last voyage, who becomes Una’s companion at the end of the novel. That Ahab and most of his crew converse in dialogue taken from Moby-Dick or in phrases consonant with it encourages readers to appreciate Una’s story as the feminine, feminist complement to Melville’s narrative epic.
Allusions to other works blend with unexpected turns in Naslund’s narrative. Early in Ahab’s Wife, Una spends a night in bed with Susan, who has escaped from slave catchers by sneaking into Una’s Kentucky cabin. The relationship between the women is somewhat like Ishmael and Queequeg’s in Moby-Dick in that conventions are upturned as Susan takes Una’s surname for her own and and they call each other sisters. Elements of Susan’s story also parallel those in narratives about runaway slaves, such as Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and those in freedom narratives, such as Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig that describe slaves’ ingenious escapes.

Una is an appealing, heroic protagonist who is game for any adventure and sensitive to others’ needs, and Ahab is humanized in being represented in a loving relationship with a young, vibrant wife. Una confronts cannibalism, the lunacy of two husbands, the desertion of her first, and the deaths of both parents and a newborn before hearing about Ahab’s death. Her life appears against a broad background representing many different people with a variety of political and religious views. Her politics generally agree with those of Fuller, who argues in the novel, “One must be able to imagine what it is like to be a woman, or a slave, if one is moved to remove artificial barriers. To remove unjust legalities” (378), an assertion linking womanhood and slavery that helps explain why the life story of the runaway slave Susan frames Una’s narrative.

In the book’s opening, the pregnant Una visits her mother in Kentucky while Ahab is on a long voyage. Una’s labor pains send her mother driving off in a snowstorm to fetch a doctor. While waiting for her mother to return, Una opens the door to slave catchers who insist on fruitlessly searching the cabin for a slave before they head off in further pursuit. Unbeknownst to Una, the slave had sneaked into the cabin and inserted herself between two mattresses to hide from the slave catchers. After Una wails in childbirth, Susan crawls out from the bed and serves as midwife to Una, whose child is born, is named Liberty, and dies in quick succession. Una learns the next day that her mother has also died, for the old buggy she was driving turned over and she froze to death before she was found. Susan sets off for the North after Una provides her with outergarments and ice-shoes. Demonstrating technical ingenuity, they fit a pair of shoes with nails serving as crampons so that Susan can escape across the icy river before the floes melt. Susan and Una are kindred spirits who seek liberty and happiness and use found items to fashion homemade technology.

Una periodically wonders in the book what happened to Susan after she left Kentucky. The novel’s last pages reproduce Susan’s letter explaining that after a time she headed South to free her mother. Finding that her mother’s foot was cut off after she tried to escape, Susan realized she could not leave with or without her lame mother, so she returns to the overseer, who brands
Susan to prevent her from again escaping. Susan’s letter nevertheless ends on a hopeful note: she has faith that one day she and her mother and child, also named Liberty, will be free. No other character in the narrative suffers from “the unjust legalities” discussed by Fuller as much as Susan does, for her ingenuity, bravery, and kindness cannot protect her from being treated as property.

By referencing Fuller and the celebrated astronomer Maria Mitchell in her novel, Naslund naturalizes woman’s participation in philosophy and science. Naslund explains in an interview how including details from Mitchell’s life inspired the novel’s genesis:

Melville had written the quintessential sea story. I needed something more vast—the heavens. The first time I visited Nantucket (which was Ahab’s home), I went from the wharf into a tour guide mini-bus, and the guide immediately began to speak of the historical woman Maria Mitchell, who was the first person in the world to discover a comet using a telescope. She did this from her roof-walk observatory in Nantucket. For a moment I thought she might be Ahab’s Wife, but as I learned more about her, I saw this was impossible. Melville also amazingly enough was struck by Maria Mitchell and wrote a long poem, “After the Pleasure Party,” based on the woman astronomer. In my book, Maria becomes a good friend of my totally fictional character Una Spenser, who does marry Captain Ahab.33

Melville met Mitchell and her father during a visit to Nantucket. Biographer Laurie Robertson-Lorant comments that Melville’s poem “After the Pleasure Party”

voices the anguish of a woman torn between her passion for science and her sexual desires. Her soul split in two with longing, the astronomer Urania has retreated to the terrace of a Mediterranean villa in a state of confused arousal after feeling sexually attracted to a man she observed walking arm in arm with a peasant girl at a picnic. She fears Amor “may wreak his boyish spite” on “her turbulent heart and rebel brain,” and racked by “sensuous strife,” she suspects her devotion to the cold stars is barren “self-illusion self-sustained.”34

That Maria Mitchell, who lived on Vestal Street, lived a constrained life because of her dedication to her scientific work is a thought that also occurs to Una: she contemplates that Maria gives up conjugal bliss to view the stars, something Una would never do (464).

Naslund depicts Mitchell living and working within a loving Quaker family; she is close to her parents and to the younger siblings she tutors. Visiting the Mitchells, Una enters into an astronomy lesson with models of the solar
system Maria has set up for her younger siblings. Maria's mother is “unexceptional” (462) in terms of intellectual pursuits, perhaps because she is the primary caregiver for her children, but Maria works for limited periods in a small closet that she calls her office. These appear meager circumstances to Una, but Maria’s eyes “glisten” (463) with excitement, as she allows, “I am doing exactly what I love to do” (464).

Naslund describes how Maria Mitchell waited on the eve of her celebrated observation of a comet, the moment that began her career as a professional scientist. Her waiting occurs during the beginning of Una’s marriage to Ahab. During this time Una blossoms as a writer, for she recounts her experiences and her friends’ in philosophically meditative letters to Margaret Fuller. Spending time with the Mitchell family allows Una to recognize that her education, and Fuller’s, were directed by fathers less playful and spontaneous than Mitchell’s, a crucial distinction that seems to Una to account for Maria’s passion for science:

I reflected that I, too, had been very happy in the midst of their curiosity about observable phenomena. But what of the inner life and what of the dark issues of our time—of slavery, of the position of women, of temperance, of the crisis in religious belief? William Mitchell had spoken as an ardent abolitionist at the dinner table, but he mainly invested his time in science. Maria seemed content merely to focus on what she herself wanted to do. Perhaps that was as good an answer as any to the question of the status of women. (466)

Maria works in tandem with her father, who teaches her astronomical observation so that she can help him set ships’ chronometers for captains passing through Nantucket, and she never doubts her abilities. She announces to Una that by observing Halley’s comet, Maria will meet the challenge set by the king of Denmark: she will be the first in the world to observe a never-before-seen comet through a telescope (482). When Una wonders whether Mr. Mitchell might do this first, Maria disagrees: “I think it will be I, for Father is not so ardent as I” (482). Una wonders whether Maria is up to the task, fearing her friend might confront her own failure or that of others to recognize her.

Despite Una’s fears, Maria does observe the comet “telescopically,” as mentioned in chapter 151. This achievement was celebrated as a victory for American science and for women scientists struggling to prove themselves as equal to male counterparts. Historian of science Sally Gregory Kohlstedt explains Mitchell was

a symbol to her contemporaries, men and women alike, of the contributions women were able to make in science. Her discovery of a comet in 1847 and her
calculations of its exact position at the time of discovery brought her a gold medal from the king of Denmark and led to her membership in the American Academy of Arts and Science, “in spite of being a woman.” One result of these honors was Lucretia Mott’s citation of Mitchell’s achievement at the Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention in 1848 as evidence of women’s capability in all occupations.38

Mitchell later taught a new generation of female astronomers at Vassar and became an active supporter of women in science by participating in the Association for the Advancement of Women.39 Mitchell advocated enlisting a wide audience of women club members to support female education and women’s colleges, and she headed AAW’s committee on science, which monitored the status of women practicing in the sciences and medicine.37 Kohlstedt concludes that Mitchell identified “success” as “dependent on women working cooperatively to advance the situation of women” (143).

Characterizations of Una’s relatives (her father the stern Protestant, her mother the inveterate reader, her feminist aunt, her abolitionist cousin Fran-nie) and friends (Susan, the dwarf bounty hunter David Poland, her first husband’s former girlfriend Charlotte, Captain Maynard’s wife, first mate Star-buck’s wife Mary, and the elderly Phoebe Folger) provide a spectrum of the lives of women and other socially marginal figures. Female characters establish women’s diverse roles, choices, values, and potentials. Naslund acknowledges the power of motherhood to change the course of individual and social destiny, as a number of characters, including Una, see motherhood as an ethically developmental experience.38 Experiencing feminine rituals of love, marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood, Una behaves unconventionally, notably when she dresses as a boy to stow away on a whaling ship and again when she decides to trust David Poland. Una first lets him share her one-room Kentucky cabin and then allows him to accompany her while she journeys east by foot and donkey.

Incorporating elements of Maria Mitchell’s and Margaret Fuller’s biographies into a retelling of Moby-Dick lets readers view Una within a panorama of women’s experiences.39 Many women in the novel, including Una, Susan, Fuller, and Mitchell, pursue individual passions, intellectual and romantic, to varying degrees while supporting others. They connect social progress for women with scientific and technical achievement. Fuller and Mitchell are models for Una, who recognizes that even famous women resist social conventions to become celebrated for pursuits traditionally identified as masculine (458), just as Una herself ran away to sea and became familiar with whaling.40 Fuller particularly suffers criticism from conservative characters who prescribe domestic duties and constrained lives for females. For example, kind Judge Lord dismisses Fuller to Una: “I should rather have you, my dear . . . describe to me exactly
what you are seeing and thinking at this moment than listen to Margaret Fuller's dusty learning” (376).

Una hears more criticism of Fuller from Nathaniel Hawthorne, who is initially disinclined to speak with Una until he learns she bears a name he wishes to give to his future child. Naslund’s account of the meeting between Hawthorne and Una melds critical and political issues, illustrating tensions evoked in Hawthorne’s fictions and critical accounts of them. Jamie Barlowe argues that

Hawthorne scholarship has, through its exclusions and often intimidating and silencing impositions, exposed the excessive fears that these exclusions and impositions have attempted to hide. When such texts/contexts are continuously recontextualized and reread, they become sites where identity, agency, and power dynamics are contested, and where differences are allowed to emerge, rather than already claimed territory where identities of the Other can be rigidly constructed and maintained by the dominant group.

In Naslund’s novel, Hawthorne and Una meet in the forest as Una is on her way to look for Fuller at Emerson’s home. That Hawthorne stormed out of Emerson’s house after Fuller dared to disagree with him exemplifies the power dynamics Barlowe identifies.

Hawthorne and Una engage in conversation about his prose that empowers her as a critical peer, while offering a sympathetic dimension to Hawthorne as a result of their interaction. Although their meeting might seem like a slight detail blending history in fiction, the episode has great poignancy and offers a hint of repressed eroticism familiar to readers of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) who remember how Hester and Dimmesdale meet in a forest outside Salem. Una later learns that Hawthorne bought her nightgown after her friend David Poland finds her forgotten valise (497).

Reviewers offered generally positive responses to *Ahab’s Wife*, which became a bestseller, but each pointed to different virtues. A number noted the passionate eloquence of the prose and favorably remarked on its epic sweep. Pico Iyer in *Time* indicated that the novel “[p]ossesses the reader like an unholy fever,” and James Urquhart in *The Times* (London) described it as “[c]rammed with travel, childbirth and rearing, unorthodox liaisons and a rigorous engagement with the scientific, cultural, religious and moral issues of the day.” More provocatively, Walter Kirn labels *Ahab’s Wife* as footnote fiction, suggesting that while Melville’s masculine adventure story remains timeless and powerful, the feminine romance is derivative, a kind of “artistic affirmative-action program.” Kirn’s review concludes that the novel is “a diverting work in its own right, decidedly minor but charmingly determined to say something major, to
stick up for itself.” He diminishes the interpretive capacities of *Ahab’s Wife*, noting that Naslund’s Ahab could be “any grumpy old sea captain” instead of “Melville’s great creation” and that Una is an indomitable heroine who is ultimately a bore.

In contrast, feminist reviewers point to Una as the central unifying force of a woman-centered novel that stands side-by-side with *Moby-Dick*, rather than offering commentary on it. Una becomes a star-gazer, but her domestic trials and tribulations remain the focus rather than professional trials or attempts to balance personal and professional lives. Naslund’s and Melville’s narratives are complementary epics, as Melville’s tells of men’s lives in the nineteenth-century and Naslund’s tells of women’s.

The division between marriage and work noted in *Ahab’s Wife*, that most women look for love and most men for professions, resembles generic divisions assigned to different fictional forms, generic conventions that Naslund flouts in true Melvillean spirit. As Steven Cohan and Linda Shires explain the romance:

> The modern romance genre can be more properly termed a ‘feminine narrative.’ For it structures the meaning of gender difference through a narrative representation of female subjectivity in much the same way that masculine narratives such as the thriller and western structure the meaning of gender difference through narrative representations of male subjectivity. Though their structures differ, both feminine and masculine narrative genres rationalize the normative values of heterosexual relations—in the household (for the female) and in the workplace (for the male). In the case of feminine narrative, the story places gender in a field of signification so that, at the level of events and actors, representations of sexual difference acquire meaning by reinforcing the values of love and marriage, of emotional vulnerability and domesticity, and by making them appear natural, inevitable, and desirable as culturally legible signs of “femininity.” In the case of masculine narrative, the story structure promotes the values of competition, physical power, and authority as irrefutable signs of “masculinity.”

*Ahab’s Wife* is both a romance and an adventure about Una, blurring the generic boundaries and gendered modes of appeal that Cohan and Shire categorize. Like *Moby-Dick*, a multicultural epic of whaling that puts Ahab’s obsession and Ishmael’s education in its foreground, *Ahab’s Wife* has a broad scope in describing Una’s life. The novel documents her relationships with individuals whose different genders, races, ethnicities, classes, regions, religions, political viewpoints, and physical challenges prompt Una’s reflections.

Applying conventions of heroic narrative used to depict male scientists to characterize Mitchell, and including Fuller’s tragic romantic adventure,
Naslund’s narrative resists being restrained by generic boundaries, an appropriate stylistic choice considering that *Moby-Dick*, emulating the white whale, slips in and out of genre categories. Child’s and Melville’s fictions identify women’s powers to access science and technology in ways consonant with Naslund’s account, contradicting the view of science and technology as a male domain uncongenial to women as represented by Shelley and Hawthorne. *Ahab’s Wife* acknowledges women’s interests in science and technology as cooperative and progressive, not transgressive.

In the works discussed in this chapter, women’s scientific and technical aptitudes are exceptional rather than typical, but the most recent among them offers optimism for the potential of future generations to emulate Maria Mitchell’s achievements and the fictional Una Spenser’s adventures. As Henry David Thoreau wrote at the end of *Walden* (1854) in his parable of a bug, an anecdote like that of Melville’s “The Apple Tree Table,” “Who knows what beautiful and winged life . . . may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society’s most trivial and handselled furniture to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!” (312).