CONVERSION AND CHRISTIANITY IN AUGUSTA JANE EVANS' *ST. ELMO*

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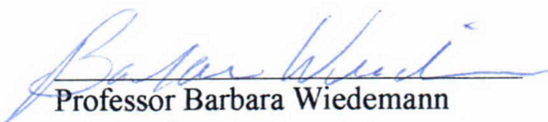

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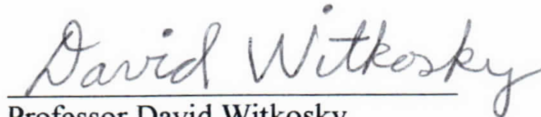

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Chapter 1
Introduction

By the mid-nineteenth century, America was practically living as two nations—the North and South. Each still depended on the other for goods and services, but the increasing gap in understanding how Americans should go about improving the United States caused fissures in culture and society so deep that war had begun to seem inevitable. Many agricultural southern states believed the destiny of the nation lay in expanding slavery. The belief that Southern traditions were the essential to all ways of life was characterized by the fight for slavery and the belief that states had the right to make the important economic and social decisions. American authors of the time were quite involved in this scene, making observations, as well as voicing opinions about the struggle itself. Any reader during the time was most likely familiar with Harriet Beecher Stowe's eye-opening account of slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The popularity of that novel in the North was only equaled by its aversion in the South. Though some slave owners were portrayed as humane, the depiction of horrible conditions, torn families, and evil masters added fuel to the fire of division between the sides. In response to Stowe's depiction, a number of novelists of the South took it upon themselves to refute the idea that slavery was inhumane and barbaric through works of sentimental fiction. The domestic novelists from the South believed that slavery was just one part of the cultural tradition of the South and that the Southern planter family generally embodied strength, courage, and resolution.

However, not all the Southern domestic novelists concerned themselves with politics, nor did the central theme of each novel have to be the struggle for power between the North and South. In fact, many of the themes spoke of strong Christian morals, duty to family, and the power of Christian love to heal all wounds. One such author was Augusta Jane Evans (Wilson) (1835-1909), whose novels were among the most popular fictional works during the latter nineteenth century. Though a strict believer in the Southern customs she had grown up with, her novels' popularity spanned both South and North, gaining the Georgia-born author a measure of fleeting regional, national, and international fame. Most of her life was spent in Mobile, Alabama, where her family resided, though not always comfortably. Augusta's father Matt Evans was an incautious businessman whose ventures time and time again led to economic blunders, obliging the family to move a number of times. Though Matt Evans was supposedly a loving and caring father, his lack of success left a mark on the Evans family. The family's economic status may suggest why Augusta became intent on resurrecting the family name through her literary success. For several decades her success in that endeavor was hardly equaled by any other.

While Augusta Jane Evans believed wholly in the idea that a woman's place was at home, supporting her husband in his decisions and struggles, her main female characters are more than romantic heroines hanging on every word of a handsome lover or brave soldier. Though referred to as domestic or sentimental fiction, many of Evans' works deal with serious concerns in the changing culture of mid-1800s America. Suffrage, education, and the general place of the woman in a world that was gradually giving

opportunity to almost everyone become central themes in Evans' novels. Beyond the domestic or sentimental patterns that she follows, moreover, are traces of originality that critics have discounted in their promptness to condemn her novels for their obvious sentimentalism.

The greatest strength of Evans and other domestic novelists was that their stories did not overstep the bounds of the subject matter they were presenting. The domestic novel was a celebration of women and their respective work, and rarely did the novel stray from the topic of domesticity. That is not to say that domestic novelists did not have a point beyond home life. On the contrary, many domestic novels depicted women outside the home faced with adversity and opportunity alike. Edna Earl, the heroine of Evans' most popular novel *St. Elmo* (1866), becomes a successful writer in spite of what many people around believed would happen to her if she decides to pursue her dream of becoming a writer. One characteristic of the domestic novel heroine is that she is independent and often strong willed. But what separates the domestic novel from later novels by woman writers is its sensational idealism, signified by the conclusion that places the women back into the home after a lifetime of seemingly running away from it.

When young Edna Earl loses all remains of family in the simple country town in which she lives, she believes there is no other choice for her but to go out on her own and try to make her way in the world. With very few possessions, and even fewer friends, she boards a train to Columbus, Georgia, where she believes she can find work in a factory. The fierce independence displayed by the young girl causes those around her to question her intent, as they believe Edna will find little better than what her peaceful home can

provide. But Edna is resolute in her purpose. Early in the course of the novel, Evans establishes the conflict of Edna's individualism versus those who believe it would be better for Edna to do what they believe is right for her.

When Edna's train crashes on the way to Columbus, Mrs. Murray, who becomes Edna's caretaker and supporter, rescues her. We learn that Mrs. Murray is widowed, lives in a luxurious home, and has one son, St. Elmo. Edna's meeting with St. Elmo at Le Bocage, the fantasy home, is well detailed, but it is not the first time the two have met. Once before at her grandfather's blacksmith shop, St. Elmo and Edna met when St. Elmo's horse was in need of a shoe. The meeting, albeit a brief one, was a dark moment for Edna. The renewed meeting between the two does little to amend Edna's dislike for the man, but the encounter reintroduces the two characters whose stories will be intertwined through the rest of the novel.

Edna is soon introduced to Mr. Hammond, her teacher who will become an important minister and intellectual guide to her throughout the novel. Edna so thoroughly enjoys reading and learning new things that she is consumed with the very pursuit of knowledge. Though Mr. Hammond encourages Edna in all her pursuits, there are those around her that wish she would not be so concerned with learning and would instead make efforts to be more noticeable to society. Mrs. Murray attempts to bring Edna into proper society through a series of gatherings that are designed not only to attract men to Edna but also to gain the girl respect in the upper classes. However, Edna's plans and Mrs. Murray's plans do not coincide. Mrs. Murray sees Edna as the daughter that she never had and wants to see Edna molded according to how she sees fit. Edna, on the other hand, has

many dreams beyond becoming a housewife. The few social gatherings that Edna is forced to attend only demoralize her. Because of this demoralization, Edna closes herself off from society. She, in turn, focuses even harder on her education.

Those attempting to exert control do not always have bad motives for their purpose. Edna's fellow pupil under Mr. Hammond, Gordon Leigh, is a handsome, wealthy, and kind gentleman who falls in love with Edna during the course of their study together. His affections are genuine, for in Edna he sees a great woman who meets his expectations as not only a beautiful lady, but also as a fellow intellect. Unfortunately for Gordon, Edna does not return his affection. Edna's love for Gordon is not of the romantic kind, but rather more like the love one sibling might show the other. In a society that expects girls to marry for stability first and love second, Edna's refusal of Gordon's marriage proposal comes as a shock to Mrs. Murray, who believes Edna might never find a better suitor than Mr. Leigh.

While Edna's story is consistently in the fore of the novel's progression, St. Elmo ducks in and out of the story, at one point traveling for an extended time in Europe and Africa. St. Elmo's literal journey is a symbol of the figurative journey he takes in order to satisfy his hunger for life. His travels are not detailed; through later conversations with Edna, the reader finds out that his journey is not filled with self-discovery and enlightenment but rather dark times hidden by Bacchanalian tendencies and a vain lifestyle. When he returns to his home, he expects Edna to be like all the other young women that he has associated himself with, namely that she will be shallow and self-serving. Instead St. Elmo finds Edna unlike any woman he has ever been around. The

figurative light switch is thus turned on inside the head of St. Elmo. Quickly his respect for her grows into love.

Perhaps the defining moment for St. Elmo comes when he finances medical treatment for a poor young girl whom Edna has been caring for. Edna, leery of St. Elmo, does not want to display too much affection though it is clear she finds him attractive. While St. Elmo tries to extract affections from Edna, she is unwilling to be tempted by his romantic queries. Edna cannot commit to St. Elmo because she believes him to be unchristian and spiteful to the cause of goodness.

When Edna decides to leave behind the safety and love in the Murray household and travel to New York, St. Elmo finally professes his love in tender words that he believes convey his feelings. Edna, whose respect for St. Elmo is still too small for her to yield to his words, is touched by compassion but still refuses his romantic advances. St. Elmo attempts to explain his sad view of life as a result of the past that has wrought his life with pain and anger. St. Elmo explains how his character became so dark and his personal philosophy so cynical in hopes that Edna will sympathize with his plight, but his story only elicits a plea from Edna for St. Elmo to look to God for mercy and understanding. In the church that St. Elmo had built for his friend Murray Hammond, Edna leaves him to ponder his life's direction. It is her hope that St. Elmo will find the path to righteousness, not so that they can be united in marriage, but because it is her belief that St. Elmo's heart can only be softened by Christ.

Thus ends the first part of the story of *St. Elmo*. Literally and figuratively, Edna begins a new life. While she aspires to become a published writer, she is concurrently

learning other responsibilities: she becomes a governess, and she becomes a part of the intellectual circle in New York. But perhaps the greatest thing that Edna learns while in New York comes from the simple act of caring for two young children, Felix and Hattie Andrews. Felix is a young boy of twelve and Hattie a girl of eight years. Predictably, the children's mother is caught up in the affairs of society, and therefore Edna becomes the figure to which the children, especially Felix, attach their love. As Edna has excelled at each task presented to her, so she continues to excel as teacher and friend to the children, though it is Felix that she draws closest to.

Six weeks into her stay in New York, Edna finally meets the editor Douglas Manning, who becomes a literary adviser and friend. Manning believes it is against Edna's best interest to fulfill her life's work and write a book, for he believes that the reading public is not prepared or interested in the kind of subject Edna is attempting to illuminate. Edna believes there is a higher purpose for her writing, one that will reach out to those readers in search of something more than a simple love story. It is with this confidence that Edna endeavors to write, while still maintaining her position as governess. The effects of her persistence in becoming a great writer are, however, detrimental to her health.

All the while in Georgia, St. Elmo remains, struggling to change from a dark, cold man to someone who can find the key to winning Edna's heart. His reconciliation with Mr. Hammond and subsequent entrance into the study of ministry represent a significant altering of St. Elmo, and soon his conversion is made final. St. Elmo's coldness is replaced by understanding, his selfishness by personal reconciliation. Now, St. Elmo is secure in something greater that the temporal world around him. Even when a past love

interest attempts to convince him that Edna is now married to Mr. Manning (which is not true), St. Elmo retorts by saying:

> She may be Manning's wife—God forbid it!—or she may be in the grave. I have lost her, I know, but if I never see her dear angel face again in this world, it will be in consequence of my sins, and of yours and with God's help I mean to live out the remainder of my days, so that I shall meet her in eternity!(423)

St. Elmo's final resignation is perhaps his greatest feat in the novel, for it is through his humility that he learns what it is to be a true gentleman. Though worldly happiness may not be his in the present, he is quite satisfied with the eternal effects of his newfound spiritual life. Death and sadness may still ensue for any of the novel's characters, but the concerns for St. Elmo's eternal salvation have been met.

The final reuniting of Edna and St. Elmo is a short and sweet conclusion to a novel whose major body is composed largely of Edna running away from love interests in pursuit of her own personal fulfillment. But the love that begins as fascination and curiosity becomes more than just school girl love, for Edna continually denies her romantic feelings towards St. Elmo because she realizes God has designs on him of a greater nature. Edna's romantic hold over St. Elmo is very empowering, for Edna gradually draws St. Elmo from his cold shell to a man worthy of her love. Recently, Karen Tracy, author of *Plots and Proposal: American Women's Fiction 1850-1890*, writes of Evans' developing a so called "double proposal plot" that allows the female writer to argue for a more egalitarian concept of marriage without expressing a direct attack of patriarchal society (4). In other words, in *St. Elmo* Evans fashions a scenario

whereby Edna rejects early marriage proposals in order to fulfill her own desire to accomplish meaningful things. Edna rejects St. Elmo early in the story in order to fulfill both her own purpose and God's will. St. Elmo proposes twice in order to satisfy both Edna's and God's requisites. Not only does the rejection empower Edna, but it forces St. Elmo to reconcile his own struggle before Edna will accept him. Tracy writes in her introduction:

> The renegotiated marriages that close most double proposal novels involve some conflict, some compromise, some tension. These novels may be read as evidence that writers and readers of novels struggled with the problem of marriage and autonomy for women and advocated not necessarily radical reform, but certainly ongoing negotiation of women's roles without and within marriage. (41)

The topic of gender roles is important in *St. Elmo*. The focus Evans places on how Edna Earl expresses herself as a woman inside and outside of marriage is indicative of Tracy's "double proposal" plot. Throughout the novel, Edna Earl plays anything but the traditional gender role. It is only with five pages left in the novel that she submits to St. Elmo, and even this submission is partially based on the fact that St. Elmo is now a man of God.

The novel's ending, the marriage of Edna and St. Elmo, is an apt conclusion to the sentimental plot for it sums up the feelings of not only the characters involved, but also the author's hopes as well. For all the exploring that Evans does throughout the novel of what an intelligent, hard working woman might accomplish, she chooses to return to the

most traditional ending. The modern reader may ask why, after empowering her female character for a majority of the novel, does Evans reduce Edna to a position of submission. That is one of many questions this thesis is designed to answer.

Among other problems the novel presents are its popularity among its contemporary readers but its utter lack of critical attention in modern scholarship. Modern scholarship has passed over most works of domestic fiction perhaps because their themes are historical or because they are remarkably idealistic. But what scholars thereby ignore is the immense popularity of the domestic novel, the emphasis on traditional feminity of such novels, and the financial success of the authors. Though *St. Elmo* became one of the most successful novels of the latter nineteenth century, it is quite unknown today despite the fact that thirteen towns in America, and many more streets were named for its Byronic hero. There have been only a few critical treatments of this novel, many of them disparaging. I hope to shed some light on why *St. Elmo* made such a sensation when it was published. Modern critical approaches have pointed out that the overall density of the novel—its pages are filled with mythological, theological, and historical allusions—would baffle the modern reader.

In the succeeding chapters, this thesis will examine many aspects of the book, from a focus on the finite points of the novel to the larger questions of women's education and their role in society. In Chapter two, I will discuss Edna Earl's education, intellectualism, and the general role of education plays in the novel. It will also place Edna in relation to other characters, in particular the male characters of the novel. Chapter three will concentrate on the characterization of St. Elmo as a Byronic hero and an analysis of the

duel as Evans' allegorical tale of right and wrong. Chapter three will conclude by relating the themes of reform and conversion to be St. Elmo's redemption and subsequent choice to become a minister.

Chapter four will attempt to understand the reasons why Evans chose to fill *St. Elmo*'s pages with such complex and confusing allusions. Whether or not they were intended to establish an issue of credibility, the many references in *St. Elmo* cause the reader to question what motivation lies behind the conglomeration of history and mythology in the work. Chapter five will discuss the popularity of the novel in the years following its publication, and its utter lack of readership in modern times. Only one firm, a pious Christian press, has published an edition in recent years. Chapter six will discuss the seemingly antifeminist tone of *St. Elmo* in the Victorian era, when "the woman question" was a prominent one. Perhaps most pertinent to modern interpretation, the antifeminist tone of *St. Elmo* offers the greatest insight as to why the domestic literature of the time was as popular as it was while obtaining little contemporary or lasting critical success. Finally, Chapter seven will conclude by reexamining *St. Elmo* in the context of nineteenth-century American literature. Chapter seven will also make some final assessments as to what value, literary and culturally, *St. Elmo* contains and further what the reader might gain from reading the novel today.

Chapter 2
The Education of Edna

Edna Earl's education is, for a large part of the novel, an important centerpiece to her character as it is her reading and desire for knowledge that truly define her character. She strives to educate herself because she hopes to become a writer. Edna is motivated to educate herself so that she can move beyond the limited surroundings of her simple mountain home. Edna is drawn to greater education because she is genuinely interested in learning. Much of the same could be said when describing Evans as a woman and writer. Like her fictional heroine, Evans benefited greatly from her education. Indeed, Edna's experiences in education are autobiographical. Evans' education was, according to Fidler, primarily presided over by her mother. Once her mother believed Augusta had mastered the basics, she gave the girl opportunity to browse and read books at her leisure. Much like Edna, Evans was widely read. Her readings benefited her greatly when she set out to be a writer. How then, does the theme of education tie into Evans' purpose for the novel? In many ways, Edna's education is at odds with the resolution of the novel because of her willingness to give up her literary ambition. Is Edna's education and work to become a great scholar merely a filler of time while she waits till St. Elmo is reformed? Or is scholarly study her true passion that she unselfishly gives up when St. Elmo calls her to the altar? In *St. Elmo*, Evans subverts the idea that an educated girl who pursues scholarly issues is a girl not concerned with anything else, particularly her "womanhood." Instead of Edna being unattractive and bookish, her knowledge helps her to gain great public recognition. Edna's knowledge and intelligence also stimulates the

love of St. Elmo. By showing that a girl could be educated, Christian, and the object of many men's desire, Evans fashions Edna as the perfect heroine and role model. Thus Evans' hope that her art would depict inspiring, noble characters is supported by Edna's education rather than hindered by it.

When we first meet the young girl, she is neither highlighted as a great pupil, nor is she placed in a country schoolhouse. Though her grandfather provides her with books and encourages Edna, he can only do so much to continue Edna's education. Since his experience is limited to his small village, further education for Edna becomes something beyond his comprehension. Even though he is the primary provider for Edna, there is little he can provide in the way of book knowledge for a girl of Edna's intelligence. Especially in the context of Edna's maturation process is this evident. We learn early on that Edna has a deep interest in educating herself beyond merely finishing school. The initial signs of Edna's intellectual abilities come when she spends hours reading the small number of books she has access to. With her grandfather still alive, her intellectual advancement is stunted, not just because of her environment but because of traditional notions of woman and schooling. Once her grandfather passes away, she makes up her mind to work in Columbus, Georgia, and when questioned about the nature of her aspirations, she says it is "because I want to be educated" (24). As Mary Kelley writes in her chapter "The Season of Instruction:"

> Even for daughters of prominent families intellectual accomplishment was more symbolic and ornamental than functionally purposeful. As a result,

> intellectual efforts by females were almost certain to be undirected and unchanneled, and just as likely to diluted and undermined. (57)

The chances for Edna to continue in an advanced education in her present environment are very small. Living in a small farming community might have satisfied Edna's aesthetic needs but her intellectual needs can only be satisfied through further study. Thus, the death of her grandfather serves as an opportunity to forge a new intellectual identity.

With the death of her grandfather, Edna decides to go out into the world and work long enough to pay for more schooling. When she decides not to accept charity from her extended family or close friends, everything from her gratefulness to her sanity is questioned. With no one to support her, Edna's opportunities shrink, yet her hope is not defeated. Now an orphan, Edna sees no other choice but to attempt to make her own way in the world, with little help from those who are not related to her. The Wood family members, the closest to what Edna might call relations offer a place in their home. But Edna's ambitious nature causes her move beyond the simple valley home, for she wishes to become more than "a model housekeeper" (23). When asked if she will not become homesick after her departure, Edna responds "I have no home and nobody to love me, how can I ever be homesick?"(25). Thus, Evans presents Edna as an orphan in every sense of the word, physically and emotionally. The strong willed, independent nature that arises in her personality is, in part, due to her state as an orphan.

As if to reinforce the idea that Edna's education will always be seen as superfluous and not useful to those country people around her, Evans writes of a scene between Edna

and the Wood family before she leaves for Columbus, Georgia. When Edna explains that she plans to go and find work in Columbus, Mr. Wood offers to take Edna into his household, "to take good care of you, and clothe you till you are married" (23). When Edna responds that she wants to be educated, Mr. Wood retorts "the quicker you get that foolishness out of your head the better; for books won't put bread in your mouth and clothes on your back; and folks that want to be better than their neighbors generally turn out worse" (23). Mrs. Wood promptly jumps into the conversation by countering that a woman has just as much right to be educated as any other, and the conversation quickly ends. Mrs. Wood is concerned for Edna's safety primarily, and in many ways acts as mother figure that wants her daughter to achieve goals beyond mere domesticity.

Mrs. Wood represents a step in the right direction for Edna's hope of education, but much like Edna's grandfather, all she can do is encourage the young girl to pursue her dream. Therefore Evans soon introduces a character who can actively take a role in helping Edna achieve a better education—the minister Allan Hammond. Edna's education is supported best by Allan Hammond, minister, teacher, and friend. Of all those close to Edna, Mr. Hammond is the only one that understands Edna's yearning for education. While Mrs. Murray contends that education should provide only the most rudimentary of advantages to women, Mr. Murray is more supportive of Edna's ambitions. Hammond cultivates Edna's intelligence in function and form that keeps her from being a bookish, opinionated student, a matter of great fear to Mrs. Murray. Mrs. Murray states, "I think the child is as inveterate a bookworm as I ever knew; but for

heaven's sake, Mr. Hammond, do not make her a blue-stocking" (57). A "blue stocking," as Mr Hammond explains is,

> generally supposed to be a lady, neither young, pleasant, nor pretty (and in most instances unmarried); who is unamiable, ungraceful, and untidy; ignorant of all domestic accomplishments and truly feminine acquirements, and ambitious of appearing very learned; a woman whose fingers are more frequently adorned with ink-spots than thimble; who holds housekeeping in detestation, and talks loudly about politics, science, and philosophy; who is ugly, and learned, and cross; whose hair is never smooth and whose ruffles are never fluted (58).

Here, the idea of the blue stocking is spoken of because it concerns Mrs. Murray as to Edna's future as a woman. Her concerns are founded in the belief that education would not only be detrimental to a girl's social development, but also perhaps, to a girl's physical development as well. One article on the nineteenth-century view on education and physical development states a widely held conception: "A young woman,...,who consumed her vital force in intellectual force was necessarily diverting these energies from the achievement of true womanhood" (Rosenberg, 340). Mrs. Murray shows true concern that the time Edna spends reading and writing could better spent learning about how to become a "true woman."

Early on in her education it is evident that Edna is intellectually superior to many of the women and men around her. At times, her intellectual pursuits inhibit relationships in

the story. The greatest example of this is her relationship with Gordon Leigh, a fellow student under the tutelage of Mr. Hammond. Leigh and Edna study together and become close friends. However, Leigh develops greater feelings for Edna and assumes that Edna will in time return those feelings. But instead of returning feelings of love for Leigh, Edna draws closer to her true love—learning, and even turns down Leigh's proposal. Bewildered and saddened, Leigh looks to Mr. Hammond for guidance. Hammond, though, offers only harsh reality:

> Gordon, you will never be Edna's husband, because intellectually she is your superior. She feels this, and will not marry one to whose mind her own does not bow in reverence. To rule the man she married would make her miserable, and she could only find happiness in being ruled by an intellect to which she looked up to admirably. (121)

Indeed, Mrs. Murray's greatest fears are realized. Edna turns down the perfect mate, the ideal husband, and in doing so contradicts the widely held belief that a woman should marry for security first and love second. But perhaps the true reason why Edna does not accept the marriage proposal is grounded in her education. To give up her right to read, think, and write to become a housewife does not coincide with her goal to be educated. In these terms, education plays an important role in determining what future road she may travel down.

As the story progresses, it is because of her education and intelligence, not in spite of them, that Edna's relationships flourish and succeed. Each relationship (especially male) she forms, whether it be with Mr. Hammond, Mr. Manning, or St. Elmo is strengthened

by her knowledge and intellectualism. Instead of being considered a woman who is in danger of becoming an "old school maid," her successes as a theorist and writer are attributes that draw people to her. It is because of her education that Edna is able to converse with other intellectuals, and it is because of her intellect that her admirers grow in number in New York. Edna inspires women who read her magazine articles and books. At the same time, Edna becomes the object of affection for at least two men.

The problem of education is not what it leads Edna to achieve by way of her intellectualism, but rather the physical ailments that are brought about by her intense hours of work. With no time to read and write during the day, Edna forces herself to stay up late at night to continue her writings. In doing so, her health begins to fail. Edna's greatest attribute becomes her greatest hindrance. After falling ill because of her intense study, Edna is advised not to continue staying up late to work, but her stubborn nature drives her on. Here Evans is at her most conservative and most traditional stance. Rather than continue the progressive track Edna is on, from educating herself, to making the decision to take the teaching position in New York, Evans ultimately seals Edna's fate. If she continues to work late without rest, clearly she will die. What, then, is Edna's other option? What the reader has learned of her character for the most of the novel is that Edna is not one to give up on her purpose and simply let fate take its course. Her self-advancement through education is what defines Edna. But as Evans makes a lesson of St. Elmo and his weakness, so does the author use Edna to support her belief that education was a woman's right in so far that it did not interfere with her womanly duties.

Subsequently, if her education and intellectual advancement encroached upon the supportive role the woman had to her husband, then it was dangerous to all society.

While Evans is clearly advocating a woman's right and in some ways, a woman's responsibility to educate herself in *St. Elmo*, her overriding belief that the greatest responsibility of the woman was in support of her husband wins out in the end of the novel. There is no compromise. Once Edna marries St. Elmo she will no longer write. What, then, is the function and purpose of Edna's greatest triumph—success and recognition through her study and writing? The obvious answer is that Evans' endowment of an education to Edna makes her a noble and thus an admirable character. Further, Edna is a much more of a whole character than the other women characters in the novel. She is most contrasted with Estelle Harding and Agnes Powell, the two women whose education is representative of high-class symbolism. Instead of an education that is function, these two women's education do little to better their knowledge or intelligence. Edna's education is what makes her singular. Her educational path is also indicative of her hard work ethic, as it is her endeavor to become a teacher and "[sic] earn her bread" (186) that sets her apart from other women characters. Finally, it is her education and consequent intelligence that accentuates her best qualities—humility, service, and devotion. All of these characteristics are the things that draw both the reader and St. Elmo to her.

That Evans decides to take away from Edna what has sustained her and made her great may come as a surprise to us, but the reality of Evans' purpose for the novel should not surprise us at all. To her readers, Evans expressed the importance of women's education

as a means to an end. Indeed, Evans implies that Edna is the one of many characters who struggles against conformity. Edna's cause is more empathetic than St. Elmo's, for hers is more pure, but even Edna's writing career takes a toll on her, emotionally and physically. The internal narrative lesson teaches Edna that her education, writing, and literary career are temporal and passing, but the happiness she will gain by marrying St. Elmo is God's eternal gift. Sentimental yes, but if we keep in context Evans' wish to promote those traditional beliefs she thought inherent and essential to maintaining a strong Christian faith, then Edna's subservience should come as no surprise.

Chapter 3
The Redemption of St. Elmo

Male characters play a complex role in *St. Elmo*, from the opening pages of the novel to the romantic conclusion. At times, the men are portrayed as loving, understanding, and supportive of the women they come in contact with. Other instances in the novel portray men as being capable of maliciousness, trickery, and mistrust. In fact, the first two men whom Edna Earl meets are characters involved in a duel over familial rights. The duel, disguised as a noble way of resolving disagreements among men, characterizes the evil dichotomy of the Southern gentleman. The two men involved in the duel are, in essence, dueling over the right to protect their family's name. However, the act of violence that is carried out through the duel makes the men not protectors but aggressors, and thus they fail to represent their respective families. As Bradley Johnson discusses in his article, "Dueling Sentiments: Responses to Patriarchal Violence in Augusta Jane Evans' *St. Elmo*" the violence propagated by "the duel" works to match the male struggle for power and respect. As Johnson notes, "*St. Elmo* resonates with the language of the duel, and the social chaos that the novel attempts to resolve is brought about by dueling" (15). Evans is commenting on the disgrace of the duel when she begins the novel with the scene. Another duel is what also causes hate and sorrow in the novel, as it is a duel between St. Elmo and Murray Hammond that brings about St. Elmo's falling away from God.

The duel also represents the end of a period of innocence surrounding Edna. As the duel between the two men serves as a way of exemplifying the world beyond what Edna

has experienced, the event also tells the reader much about the way Edna will psychologically process future trials and conflicts. Therefore the immediate impact of the duel on Edna provides us with an idea of what kind of character she will be. Each experience thereafter is, in a sense, a duel between different powers. When her grandfather dies, Edna duels with her faith in God because she has only known beauty and grace in him. When Edna decides to leave the shelter of her home for Columbus, she duels with the domesticity that seeks to bind her to the home. Sometimes it is not the traumatic experiences that change Edna or our view of her, but the basic and most simple of decisions that enlighten her. For example, when Edna is taken into the home of Mrs. Murray, her experiences of high society and culture are very small. Instead of embracing the manners and codes that are all around her, she rejects the idea that she needs to attend formal dinners and balls to become acquainted with the good life. Edna's dislike for the formalities of southern life are grounded in the idea that one should not waste one's time in such pleasantries when there are tasks to be accomplished, and knowledge to be gained.

The duel also represents a conscious effort by Evans to diffuse the noble aspect of the duel act itself. Whereas the duel is a classic example of pitting one man against another in the simplest terms, Evans reshapes the duel conflict as a much more complex, immoral situation. Instead of glorifying the duel, which in effect, would justify male violence and thus the animal-like struggle for power, Evans condemns the act on number of levels. She makes Edna recognize the duel for what it truly is—a malicious, ceremonial act that has no positive end. When Edna claims murder she is discounted and told that she knows

not what she speaks of. Secondly, the duel provides for a scene of unalterable sadness for both Edna and the family of the defeated dueler. Evans also cites the duel as a part of "long tradition of Anglo-American culture" (Howe, 524) that runs against the belief that violence was an acceptable means of social control: "the tendency of Victorian culture was away from the sanctioning the use of violence in human relationships, and toward the substitution of persuasion of social control" (Howe, 524). Evans' condemnation of the duel as an act of unregulated violence therefore is a moral lesson in a novel that preaches many lessons.

The duel goes beyond mere physicality to a higher degree between Edna and St. Elmo; it becomes a point of constant tension throughout the novel. Edna must learn to deal with that struggle if she is going to accomplish any of her goals. St. Elmo attempts to subvert any feeling of personal freedom Edna has through his schemes to break her confidence. The men Edna comes in contact with throughout the novel attempt to conform her to something she does not wish to be. Her grandfather and the men of her mountain hope she will become a school teacher. Gordon Leigh and other men in New York hope to make Edna a respected wife. St. Elmo believes she will submit to his will, while he is still treacherous. But Edna will have none of it, for her vision is above and beyond that of a housewife. The tension that takes center stage in the story between Edna and men of *St. Elmo* is continued in her relationship with St. Elmo.

The duel exposes to Edna the harshness of the world in which she lives. Her introduction to St. Elmo exposes her to the harshness of love. Though Edna knows no love thoughts when she meets St. Elmo, Evans is careful to ignite a curiosity and interest

in Edna for St. Elmo. Edna's intrigue begins with her first glimpse of the "very tall, strong man" (12) whose impatience is unlike that of her grandfather. When St. Elmo departs, it is his book that Edna takes a great interest in, the copy of Dante representing a fascination with the foreign. This interest is wholly different than the interest in her grandfather. While her grandfather can provide paternal love and care that no one else can, St. Elmo represents romantic love, something her grandfather certainly does not.

The scene in which St. Elmo and Aaron Hunt, Edna's grandfather, speak to each other represents a change in Edna. When her grandfather remarks that St. Elmo "is a rude, blasphemous, wicked man" Edna responds by asking, "why do you think him wicked?" (15). Edna identifies St. Elmo with his fancy clothing, impatient attitude, and his dollar coin. All these things leave Edna with an interest that goes beyond mere curiosity. When Edna speaks of the foreign language inscribed in the book St. Elmo left behind, her grandfather remarks, "It is Greek, or Latin or Dutch, like the other outlandish gibberish he talked to that devilish horse" (15). Ironically, a few years later it is this "outlandish gibberish" that Edna takes great interest in. When her grandfather urges Edna to throw the book in the fire, she does not explaining, "He may come back for it, if he misses it, pretty soon" (15). The excitement Edna feels in the introduction to St. Elmo is more than just silly schoolgirl love; in fact it begins Edna on a journey of romance and intellectualism that can only be fulfilled by one man. That man is St. Elmo.

If anyone can be called a hero in *St. Elmo* it is the titular character St. Elmo Murray. He is not a typical male hero, for he does not represent the traits a hero usually represents. For one, his personality is cold. His every thought and movement are

calculated to either demean the other person or make himself stronger. He believes power and intimidation go hand in hand, and he finds that there are few people (especially women) that will not bow to his call. Secondly, he is skeptical of God. His beliefs are based on his own observations of the world. He attempts to discount and discredit the idea that the world contains any person worthy of trust and respect. In his language there is a decided slant of skepticism that reflects that St. Elmo's world is distorted by emotional pain. Thirdly, he cannot become close to anyone, for fear of betrayal and deceit. Part of St. Elmo's problem is his lack of trust. But Evans wants the reader to believe that St. Elmo suffers most because he has lost faith in God. His emotional and psychological ruin is due to his inability to recognize that peace of mind comes through Christ. Clearly Evans creates St. Elmo as the Byronic hero because he is without peace and displays no penitence; his pain and suffering are the internal storyline to a novel that preaches faith in God.

The "Byronic hero" functions as an example of an anti-hero. Instead of bing characterized as a role model to young men, and a fantasy to young women, the Byronic hero accentuates the darkness and coldness of man's inner self. The Byronic hero, attributed to the British Romantic poet Lord George Byron (1788-1824) became a common character in nineteenth century fiction, particularly in sentimental fiction like that of Evans. Peter Thorslev's excellent study of the Byronic hero states that "This agonized Hero of Sensibility was Byron's legacy to literature of the age which succeeded him..." (144). St. Elmo is characterized by his strong masculine presence, coupled with his unwillingness to recognize the opinions of others, making him a typical Byronic hero:

"a saturine, passionate, moody, and remorse torn but unrepentant sinner, who, in proud moral isolation, relies on his absolute self against all institutional and moral trammels" (Abrams, 1600). St. Elmo is an example of the unchallenged and brilliant man who needs to be reformed and, in religious language, to be converted. The language used to describe St. Elmo does make him sound attractive and mysterious, but clearly he needs to change his habits and beliefs for him to become a viable hero. In this light, St. Elmo's characterization serves as a way for Evans to make the story exciting and achieve her own goal of bringing readers to Christ. The thousands of schoolgirls who dreamt of the "tall dark, and handsome hero" who would whisk them away to a wonderful place would find in St. Elmo a hero magnificent enough to fulfill every fantasy. However, the fantasy St. Elmo provides does not fulfill or satisfy the heroine. Quickly we learn that Edna is disgusted and angered with St. Elmo because of the things that initially created her curiosity—his mysterious nature and his nonchalant attitude. Like Edna, the reader takes St. Elmo for what he has become—a sad shadow of a man that hates himself and others. St. Elmo the hero becomes St. Elmo the unreformed, conscious-less man who prides himself on manipulating others.

Just as the duel is portrayed not as a noble and glorious moment when two men exchange blows, but as a senseless act of violence, so too is St. Elmo's manner not celebrated, but rather denounced. St. Elmo does not hold a great power over Edna through his devious ways, as is the case with Emily Bronte's Heathcliff. He does, however, display a coldness and retribution like that of Heathcliff. More like Rochester of *Jane Eyre*, St. Elmo is tricked into love, and spends many years trying to reconcile the

actions taken against him. St. Elmo is tricked by Murray Hammond and Agnes Hunt into believing that Hunt loves St. Elmo. When St. Elmo finds out, he challenges Murray to a duel. Murray is killed, and St. Elmo is destroyed by the event. Though St. Elmo shares traits with both Heathcliff and Rochester, ultimately his conversion is closely tied to Evans' strong beliefs in Christianity, rather than merely Victorian moralism.

The perfection we see in Edna through her morals is, in effect, counterbalanced by the struggles of St. Elmo. The imperfections of those that let him down and trick him become his reality. His trust betrayed, St. Elmo seeks perfection in things of the world. Time and time again he is disappointed. Finally, when he finds Edna, the model of perfection in his mind, he can begin to change. All the riches, the women, and the worldly things in which St. Elmo has placed his artificial faith have failed him. The anger and cynicism are merely masks, hiding sadness and despair. When he confronts Edna, and explains the torment he has experienced, he expects her to sympathize and embrace his hardship. Edna cannot accept St. Elmo as he is: an unreformed sinner unwilling to recognize the sovereignty of God. Edna tells him, "I put no faith in any man whose conscience another keeps. [...]. Oh! Your perverted nature shocks, repels, astonishes, and grieves me. I can neither respect nor trust you. Mr. Murray, have mercy upon yourself! Go yonder to Jesus. He can only save and purify you"(258).

The autobiographical connections between Evans and Edna often overshadow the same connection between the author and St. Elmo. But one of Evans' closest comparisons to any of her character comes in the form of St. Elmo's spiritual trial and redemption. As Fidler explains, Evans' mother taught her at young age to love reading,

and once a strong foundation in the classics was established, Evans was given free reign over any reading material she sought out. Her uncle's library was as close to the fictional library of St. Elmo's as a real catalogue could be. The positive results of Evans' many hours of study are evident in her novels. Her abilities as a writer and storyteller no doubt benefited greatly from the vast amount of literature she consumed. However, her readings were at times so widespread and varied that her religious faith wavered: "During [the years preceding the writing of Beulah (1859) and St. Elmo (1867)], Evans experienced a searing crisis of faith from which, with the help of a young minister, William Harriss, she emerged the devout Methodist that she remained throughout her life" (Genovese, xvii). Part of Evans' skepticism is evident in Edna, as the young girl at one point early in the novel wrestles with her faith when her grandfather dies. But it is St. Elmo who turns his back on God and incurs a loss of faith. Though, according to Fidler, Evans never incurred the same loss, she did recognize the danger of religious skepticism:

> I have been sorely tried on many points. I do not pretend to be satisfied! I never expect to be in this world. But I am sick to death of the struggle. And impotent to help myself, I give it over and admit that I do not and cannot know anything, save as God wills it should. Like a caged bird, I have quit fluttering madly against the bars, and am waiting for the appointed hours, when food is to be given my soul. (Fidler 50-51)

While there are hints of Evans' spiritual battle in Edna Earl, it is through St. Elmo Murray that the struggle is manifested most. In the language of St. Elmo's confession

there is a sense that St. Elmo's faith was built more upon the association he has with Murray Hammond, son of the minister, than an actual true faith in God. In the following passages there is good evidence that St. Elmo's early faith was based upon false hope in his friend and model, Murray Hammond:

> I had fancied myself a Christian, had joined the church, was zealous and faithful in all my religious duties. In a fit of pious enthusiasm I planned this church—ordered it built. The cost was enormous, and my mother objected, but I intended it as a shrine for the 'apple of my eye' and where he was concerned, what mattered the expenditure of thousands? Was not my fortune quite as much at his disposal as mine? I looked forward with fond pride to the time when I should see my idol—Murray Hammond—standing in yonder shining pulpit. (262)

For St. Elmo, Murray Hammond becomes the object of his idolatry. His faith is in Murray Hammond instead of God. When St. Elmo chooses to build the church to honor Murray, his faith is misdirected. The church should be built to honor God and God alone, but clearly God is not at the fore of St. Elmo's faith. Since he put his faith in man and not God, his faith crumbles easily. Murray Hammond is no foundation, even if he had been a respectable man. Evans' lesson in St. Elmo's loss of faith is analogous to the same questioning she endured. She believed that if man was to put his faith in another man or his words, then all is lost, for man is imperfect and is destined to fall without God.

Evans once wrote that novelists should write of characters that were models of the human race in order that reader would be inspired by "the very highest noble types of human nature" (Genovese, xxi). We see that high ideal in Edna Earl particularly, but the

characterization of St. Elmo is, for most of the novel, less than noble. So if Evans' purpose was to impart upon her readers models of what they should strive to be, what role does St. Elmo play in creation? The story of Edna teaches the reader that perseverance and hope are qualities that can never be reduced when times are difficult. The lessons Edna's story imparts are more evident and obvious because they coincide with a Victorian vision of a hard working, intelligent young female. In contrast, the characterization of St. Elmo, like the duel, represents an avenue for Evans to promote her personal platform for reform and conversion. Denouncing the duel through her portrayal of the act becomes then an analogy for Edna's denunciation of St. Elmo's misdirected faith. Both require reform, but both also have become accepted among the culture they are a part of. The purpose of St. Elmo's character is not merely to give the young girl readers a fantasy, but also to extend the idea of reform as personal responsibility rather than just a societal one. The story of St. Elmo is closely tied to the reform of the individual, just as the story of the duel is closely tied to societal reform. Both stories are effective within the novel because of the positive results they yield either directly or indirectly. Evans believed that her novel could be an effective tool in changing the individual as well. Thus the reform and conversion of St. Elmo are closely tied to Evans' purpose as a writer, and her hope that her work would exemplify the most noble and highest standards.

Chapter 4
Allusion in St. Elmo

For all of its popularity, *St. Elmo* suffered great criticism because of Evans' erudition. Critics pointed out that *St. Elmo* was attacked most for containing characters that are "walking encyclopedias"(Fidler, 52) when they become wrapped deep in intellectual discussion. At times, the story of Edna Earl becomes a confusing hodgepodge of references. As Helen Papashively astutely points out, "to bring home a cow from the pasture required a dozen classical allusions" (159). Evans does not choose a certain setting or moment deemed appropriate for symbol or parable; in fact almost every page of the novel contains some allusion. The allusions run the gamut of history and myth as well, from biblical to pagan, classical to contemporary. The history lesson provided in finding the source of each reference would be a book in itself and up till this point has not been undertaken, nor will it be in this paper. Rather, I will be more interested in tracking Evans' motive for writing in such a manner. Truly it is almost an emulation of the heroines she creates and their continuous search of higher knowledge.

Modern critics who have created a basic framework for the understanding why Evans choose to write so many allusions have traditionally referred to Evans' wish to support women's education and their wish to be "scholars, discoveries of new knowledge as well as absorbers of what was already known" (Baym, 280). In one sense, the allusions provide an avenue for Evans as an intellectual to prove her knowledge. At the same time, it may have been her wish to provide the references as a lesson to her readers about the immediate advantages of education. In doing so, Evans also forces the reader to reckon

with all of the strange and foreign references. Whether an odd way of advocating a woman's right to education, or a more self servicing motive, the choice to use so many references often detracts from the message and, it could be argued, hinders the book's chance of being called great. What the allusions do to *St. Elmo* in the eye of the modern reader is to create a confusing, and sometimes hostile, narrative; often the basic idea or premise in any given situation in the novel is clouded and even lost amid the constant reference.

For all the negativity attached to Evans' allusions, from her contemporary critics to modern literary scholars, one must not forget the author's intellectualism and memory to write in such markers. It is doubtful that Evans researched every point of history from biblical to contemporary in an effort to merely sound intellectual. Like Edna Earl, it is more likely the case that Evans' ability to learn and her recollection of such histories had its foundation in many, long hours spent in the library. Nina Baym writes, "there is no reason to doubt that Evans Wilson had read and pondered the material she alluded to and discussed. She meant to scale the highest and most difficult peaks of scholarship for herself and on behalf of other women. She meant to reform woman as an intellect" (342). To her credit, Evans' motivation stemmed not only from wanting to be a good student and avid reader, but also because she recognized early on a tangible, financial side to writing. In addition, the example of her uneducated father who financially struggled led her to strengthen her intellectual spirit. Mary Kelley quotes Evans on the role of education: " 'the best way to educate a girl is to let her browse in a well selected library.' In short, Wilson in large measure had to be self-motivated as well as self taught...Wilson

had access to the libraries of wealthy relatives in Columbus, Georgia in addition to her own family's" (76-77). No doubt exercising her mind in the library, Evans' knowledge, which she infuses into her characters like Beulah and Edna Earl, becomes a point of pride for her and a source of inspiration for her young female readers.

When Evans begins her story by giving the first breath to Edna Earl to voice a Hebrew prayer with reference to the Old Testament, she is setting a tone, a theme, and a specific voice to *St. Elmo*. That voice, whether it is the narrator offering a lesson or Edna Earl learning a lesson, never strays far from a didactic form. Because Edna Earl is in full knowledge of what she recites, the reader is to believe a young girl would know the story of Habbakuk's prayer to God on behalf of the Israelites outlined in Chapter 1 of the book by the same name. Before the reader even reaches the second page, Evans has already compared Edna's face to that of a "Syraic priestess—one of Baalbee's vestals"(7). Amid the descriptions of the rising Tennessee Mountains, Evans' gentle, unassuming reference to the "powerful face of Lorenzo de Medici" may seem out of place (2). Evans' narrative voice is, in some ways, indistinguishable from the language of her central character. The metaphor of language to which her main characters are attached spans both the simple and complex, as her allusion-filled prose noticeably declines when Edna's grandfather takes the stage. During these simple, sometimes eloquent scenes the complexities encountered via the introduction of St. Elmo pass away and we are left with simple language from a simple man. Even Aaron Hunt, the grandfather, admits his simplicity. In facts he basks in his plainness: "Politeness is a cheap thing; and a poor man, if he believes himself, and does his work well, is as much entitled to it as the President" (13).

If we take note of Evans' use of language to indicate the social divide between certain characters, we may find that she was quite aware of her overwritten prose and actually used the allusion to indicate the increasing separation between educated and uneducated.

One possible reason Evans chose to write with such a heavy pen was to accentuate the intellectual (and essentially the sexual) tension between St. Elmo and Edna. Both characters are painted as highly intelligent, well read, and strong minded. Edna is transfixed by not only by St. Elmo's dark, handsome persona but also by his mind that is clearly Edna's equal. When the two speak, there is obvious tension because of the one's ability to manipulate the other's emotions. Not only do they disagree intellectually, but also they disagree on extremely obscure points of discussion. Like many of the allusions that become symbols of the greatness and shortcomings of her character, Evans set Edna and St. Elmo upon discussions that range from topics like Italian statesmen's morality to biblical characters' resistance to divine commands. For all the complex topics and intricate histories discussed, the basis for each argument begins with the frailty of human nature. St. Elmo's bitter attitude towards human nature conducts him to speak ill of man, for he has no faith or trust in anyone. To counterpoint his negativism, Edna says "I believe that human nature is a curious amalgam of meanness, malice, and magnanimity, and that an earnest, loving Christian charity is the only safe touchstone" (12). During these debates each character uses historical analogy to promote his or her argument or defuse the other's. Unwilling to give up any room on their respective points, the intellectual arguments become symbols of a greater tension between the two. Putting aside their emotions they feel for each other, the numerous references record their

intellectual weight and the frustrations they feel during discussions. In contrast, the discussions between Edna and Gordon Leigh do not have the same depth, tension, or importance that Edna and St. Elmo engage in. Edna may discuss intellectual topics with Gordon Leigh, but rarely do their discussions become tense. Only when the idea of romance is pushed to the front of Gordon's tongue does tension become evident. But the tension is one sided, since Gordon is the only one who feels romantic love for Edna. As has been discussed, tension is important to the novel's progression. When Edna and St. Elmo are together the tension is more evident than ever. So the allusions become a way to illustrate that tension over each character's beliefs about human nature.

Much like the setting of which they are a part, the characters in *St. Elmo* are ideal. They speak with intelligence and think with a profundity rarely seen in literature. It is not enough that each character is well read and able to understand the most complex of philosophies but he or she also has the ability to spout off historical or mythical references without blinking. What is even more difficult to believe is the fact that they can understand a multitude of foreign languages and often recite full passages of philosophical works. The best example of the characters' intellectualism is not surprisingly Edna Earl. Edna Earl is not satisfied with learning Latin and even Greek. She, with the help of Mr. Hammond, learns Sanskrit, Chaldee, Arabic, and Cufic. While these languages are learned because they are essential to Edna's authorial purpose, writing a complete history of world mythologies, it is Edna's conversational language that is most highbrow. Even in times of deep sorrow and sadness, Edna finds the most studious of phrases to explain her emotion. One need not read too far to discover that the

erudition is perpetual, and often is misplaced. Dee Garrison writes in her article on popular fiction in the Victorian library that "Even when crying into the pillow [Edna] speaks in grandly structured sentences: 'Commit me rather to the horny but outstretched hands, the brawny arms, the untutored minds, the simple but kindly –throbbing hearts of the proletaire!'" (78) Evans, in giving her characters highly intellectual voices, does make them ideal. However, the idealism, was in many ways a combination of Evans' pedantry and her readers' expectations.

As we read the allusions in *St. Elmo* today, we may not only feel bewildered and confused at Evans' choice of language, but also we may question what the nineteenth century reader thought of the overriding intellectualism. We know the novel was tremendously popular. However, that alone does not explain the contemporary reader's thoughts on how the story was written. There are few reader responses of the novel catalogued, and the few that exist today, speak more of the basic elements such as the love story and the Byronic hero. Professional reviewers of the book were critical of Evans' style. Karen Tracey quotes one reviewer as writing: "'the few original ideas in the book' are lost 'in a sea of classical quotations, while page after page is but a compilation of every philosophical, metaphysical, and religious treatise that has been thrown to the surface since the days of Roman grandeur and Athenian eloquence'"(98).

While the criticism was not unfounded, few critics acknowledged the task Evans accomplished in writing such a novel. Rather than criticize Evans' style, many readers delighted in the challenge of educating themselves as Edna Earl does. Letter after letter sent to Evans expressed great and deep appreciation for her skills as a writer to inform

her willing readers. Fidler writes of letters sent after the publication of *St. Elmo* that detail the adulation girls felt for Evans. In particular, one letters that Fidler writes of contained the details of one girl's inspiration being Edna Earl: "I am a better Christian girl because of having read of the trials of Edna Earl" (137). Another letter Fidler writes of explained the renewed passion one girl had for education because of Edna Earl. (138) In fact, here was a case where life mirrored art. Edna Earl's hope for her writings is that they will touch and inspire the reader not only to educate him or herself, but also truly to reform his or her thinking. She frets over the idea of her writings actually achieving this goal, writing, "If there should accidentally be an allusion to classical or scientific, which they do not understand at the first, hasty, novel reading glance, will they inform themselves, and then thank me for the hint...?" (236). Instead of critics that castigate Edna's writings, here it is her editors who question the marketability of works that contain great scholarship. Mr. Manning states to Edna:

> Persons who desire to learn something of astronomy, geology, chemistry, philology, etc., never think of finding what they require in the pages of a novel, but apply at once to the text-books of the respective sciences, and would as soon hunt for a lover's sentimental dialogue in Newton's 'Principia,' or spicy small-talk in Kant's 'Critique,' as expect an epitome of modern science in a work of fiction. (240)

When Edna asks whether the reader will actually go to the textbook to inform himself as to history of the subject, Manning responds again:

> ....They will either sneer at the author's pedantry, or skip over every passage that necessitates thought to comprehend it, and rush on to the next page to discover whether the heroine, Miss Imogene Arethusa Penelope Brown, wore blue or pink tarlatan to her first ball, or whether on the day of her elopement the indignant papa succeeded in preventing the consummation of her felicity with Mr. Belshazzar Algernon Nebuchadnezzar Smith. (241)

Manning's final statement on the subject reflects the presumed sentiment of the reading public:

> I repeat, the world of novel-readers constitute a huge hippodrome, where, if you can succeed in amusing your spectators or make them gasp in amazement at your rhetorical legerdemain, they will applaud vociferously, and pet you, as they would a graceful danseuse, or a dexterous acrobat, or a daring equestrian; but if you attempt to educate or lecture them, you will either declaim to empty benches or be hissed down. They expect you to help them kill time, not improve it (241).

In the novel, Edna does not sway from her original purpose, and against the advisement of Manning and others, continues her ambitious project. Unlike in the case of Evans, Edna Earl receives only gratification from her admirers and praise from her critics. Indeed, what Evans could not always achieve through her own work, the vicarious nature of Edna seems to provide fulfillment.

The allusions that Evans writes of are arcane to us today, but to the late Victorian-era reader they would sound exciting and completely in the scope of the author's capability.

In essence, the contemporary reader of *St. Elmo* lived in a time "when people were particularly self-conscious about their culture" (Howe, 510). The idea of art for art's sake was not a widely held view. In fact, the opposite belief held true. Art was believed to be just one way inspire and influence others to be better than what they might be otherwise. Popular authors like Evans were keen to this sentiment, and they took advantage of the educated public's beliefs. While "American Victorianism" (as titled by Daniel Howe in his article "American Victorianism as a Culture") is not reason enough to justify Evans' heavy use of the allusion, understanding the culture of the time helps in creating a framework for analyzing the work. When Edna Earl learns all the esoteric languages to complete her study, she does not do it out of arrogance and a selfish need to intellectualize the world to her view, but rather because she wishes to reform the public of its ignorance. So what is to us a text full of overblown and sonorous language was actually considered eloquent and lofty by the contemporary reader. Therefore, the high ideals the characters strive to maintain become part of their culture through their education and discussion of the obscure topics. Not only could readers identify with the characters on a personal level, but perhaps more importantly for the sales of *St. Elmo*, readers could find an identity within the world the novel created. Whether that identity was vicarious or the reader endeavored to better herself intellectually by taking up the study of ancient cultures, the allusionary prose succeeded in drawing readers to take up the novel.

The scholarly lessons that *St. Elmo* teaches the reader were less important to Evans than the Christian lesson she held as a standard for her fiction, they nonetheless provided

a key marketing ploy during a time when books became well known because they were passed from hand to hand and read aloud. In a market where the slightest derivation of style might condemn the book to obscurity, and the author to early retirement, Evans found that her signature formula could be recognized by her variety of allusions. This point alone seemed to separate her from the rest of the women writers of the time. As Baym writes in "Women's novels and women's minds: An unsentimental view of nineteenth-century American's women's fiction:"

> It is also possible that the academic information with which these books are stuffed was itself a selling point. We, as academics, are perhaps overcommitted to the scholarly publication as the one appropriate source for disciplinary information, but there is no reason to doubt that novels can purvey "information" along with purveying romance (345).

The attitude toward art as a way of fulfilling a specific purpose is not singular to Victorian thought, but didacticism was celebrated and those who utilized art in this way were often the artists who became very successful. Howe writes that "literature and the other arts were expected to benefit society by elevating or instructing the audience" (527). The high art of *St. Elmo* can be seen as a way of attracting readers, enlightening them in circumstances and situations that would not necessarily be altogether enlightening. Therefore the act of leisure reading becomes much more than an activity in repose; in reality the act of reading *St. Elmo* becomes a way of understanding and (at least in the case of the late Victorian reader) of being part of the culture that surrounds the work.

Whether Evans believed writing the dense, heavy prose style would showcase her intellectualism to the world, or whether she believed the allusions best accentuated key relationships within the novel, the approach certainly benefited her in financial ways. If we look at her technique as a way of contributing to a culture that endeavored to better itself morally and intellectually then we can begin to better understand why novels like *St. Elmo* became so popular. The "pathetic hunger for status through knowledge reflected in the popularity of *St. Elmo*" may surprise us and leave a distaste for the popular novels of the time, but not to recognize the people's sincere belief in didactic art would be in error (Garrsion, 78). Not only do we learn much about the culture of late nineteenth-century America and its likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears, but in turn we become more in tune with our own cultural sensibilities.

Chapter 5
Victorian Philosophy in *St. Elmo*

Domestic novelists like Augusta Jane Evans perpetuated the traditional mores of womanhood during a time when women in the real world were taking on more responsibilities. Whether a matter of recognition or historic inevitability, women of all regions of the country were moving beyond the domestic sphere. Yet the women's movement in America did not move as fast as its predecessor across the Atlantic. The women's movement of England began, as many social movements did, as an intellectual movement among the prominent thinkers of the day. What was written in England in the 1850s through the 1870s certainly did reach America, but because of the Civil War, the intellectualism of mid-century England did not have the immediate impact in America as it did in the homeland. Evans, being the ever conscious and learned writer that she was, felt compelled to incorporate, discuss, and ultimately judge the intellectualism coming from philosophers like John Stuart Mill and John Ruskin.

Each philosopher represented viewpoints as to which way women should proceed in the world. Sometimes their perspectives coincided; other times each man proposed ideas that were opposing. The liberalism of John Stuart Mill towards a woman's role in society was quite revolutionary since many of his beliefs were based upon the idea that women were wrongly subordinated to men through their physical needs. In his "Subjection of Women" (1869) Mill compares the history of women's subordination to that of slavery because of the force men have used to gain power for their sex and the dependence woman have felt for men because of their need for protection. When taking Mill's points about the subordination of women in context with *St. Elmo*, a familiar pattern arises.

What Mill calls men's justification for subjecting women to generations of resignation is actually what Evans believes is women's obligation not only to herself but to her husband and children. While Mill's philosophies are based upon his observations of the interaction of humans and their need for each other on the most basic levels (Mill was definitely influenced, as were other Victorians, by the work of Darwin), Evans' beliefs could have not been more different. Though she was familiar with the theories of Darwin and Bentham's social offshoot of those theories, one must remember that the definitive view of the world was overwhelmingly influenced by Evans' Christian upbringing. Therefore when Evans' mouthpiece Edna speaks on the state of women's affairs in America, she speaks of Bentham and Mill directly:

> America has no Bentham, Bailey, Hare, or Mill to lend countenance or strength to the ridiculous clamour raised by few a unamiable and wretched wives, and as many embittered, disappointed old maids of New England, whose absurd pretensions and disgraceful conduct cannot truly represent American woman. (251)

Evans' attack on English philosophy is coupled with a direct condemnation of the north, and more specifically the northeast part from which women's rights conventions were being held.

In our modern frame of reference, Evans' antifeminism seems absurd and contradictory to what contemporary women were working for such as suffrage and other rights, but taken in context of the purpose of *St. Elmo*, Evans' views are more understandable. The denouement of the story is a perfect example of the traditional

view that Evans was striving to maintain. That is not to say that she believed southern heritage would change a great deal, but rather that the end of *St. Elmo* takes measures to protect the traditions that Evans believed were right for a woman to adhere to. We may be taken aback at Edna's willingness to give up what has been her life's purpose, but Evans would not have ended the story any other way. What the end sets up is everything that Mill believed would move reform back fifty years, but by Evans' calculations, Edna could afford no other ending. Yes, Edna had become a virtual celebrity in her own time, and her financial worries were no more. But her success had come at a cost. She suffers from a weak heart, no doubt because of her overwrought desire to finish her book. It was a common belief during the 1800s that women could not handle physical and mental exertion, since it would damage their bodies. The result of Edna's arduous writing habits causes her the physical weakness for which the only cure is rest. Precisely at the same time when Edna is experiencing her greatest public success does she experience her most physical weakness. Thus the success she achieves is intertwined with consequences that force her to end her writing career. But her career as a writer is clearly secondary to the purpose that she feels dedicated to do. As a teacher and caregiver to two young children, Edna fulfills her role as woman, while her literary career fulfills her own desire to enlighten readers. It is only when both these roles conclude in the final stage of the book does her God-ordained, culturally sanctioned role as wife complete Evans' design for her.

For over three hundred pages of *St. Elmo*, Evans creates a story that would lead us to believe that women played a much larger role in society than they were given credit for. After all, Edna controls her own destiny. She is fiercely independent and intelligent and

clearly needs no one to lead her by the hand through life. Edna seems a portrait of femininity and grace but does not allow herself to become so narrow minded as to believe that a woman should do no more than care for her husband and children. In essence, what Evans gives the reader through Edna is a glimpse of pragmatic feminism that allows the author to manipulate the scope of a woman's place without damaging the traditional womanhood. This common sense ethic Evans applies to Edna also succeeded in gaining Evans public notoriety without leaving the domestic realm. Edna experiences much of the same scenario as Evans did in her life, even ceasing to write after her marriage to an older man later in life. Evans did publish two more novels after her marriage, but the did not obtain the same popularity. By design, Edna slowly transitions back to a woman's proper place in the home, rather than continuing her quest for success. While Edna's quest for success has netted her public success far beyond just public approval, the financial security guaranteed to Edna allows her to marry St. Elmo for true love and not because she needs his money.

For all of Edna's determination and eventual success, she still finds herself unsatisfied in her endeavors. Though she has every reason to be happy with what she has accomplished, there is still something missing that prevents her from attaining true happiness. Why is she not fulfilled? Is she unwilling to accept that her goal has been reached? Or is she unfulfilled in her personal relationships? In these final stages of the novel Evans seems to be testing the widely held, Victorian ethic that to become great one needed to endeavor to accomplish the greatest of intellectual feats. Happiness, the most intangible of qualities, was equated with achieving great things. And yet, through Edna's

success and her relatively unhappy state, Evans is making a statement. She believes that achieving the greatest of feats will not alone produce happiness, but rather that when a woman accepts her true place in the world, only then can she be satisfied and ultimately happy. Indeed, Evans is testing the waters of feminism in order to calculate the impact of a woman like Edna on a society that hardly accepted women who were happy with being identified as intellectuals with no domestic or matriarchal purpose.

Edna chooses not to marry any of her suitors for the same reasons that she secludes herself from the world, in an effort to hide the fact that she is unsettled. Edna denies that she loves any of the men who propose to her not merely because she is saving her heart for another, but also because she feels the need to make her way in the world before settling down. What again seems as a feminist spin to the traditional view of love and marriage is actually anything but progressive. Evans creates Edna to be independent but restless, intelligent but unsettled in most environments. She is not comfortable sipping tea and talking gossip. Yet at the same time, she knows the importance of displaying good manners and proper etiquette. However, a closer look credits Evans' intent on creating Edna as an unsettled character who is set adrift on a journey to find the correct path that a woman should take. This figurative journey begins when Edna's literal journey to New York takes place. Her acts as a writer change little, since she continues to write and study with the same fervor that she wrote at Le Bocage. What changes is her environment and her purpose in life with respect to those around her. Upon her journey to New York, she takes on the role of governess for two young children, whom she comes to care for very much. Evans makes it clear that the satisfaction she gains from

caring for the children is equal to the public recognition and respect gains through her publications. As Edna recognizes the good she can do through her care giving, Evans slowly transitions the story into a tale of an unsettled woman who becomes a happy caregiver.

Mill's belief that women should become more involved in the business beyond the home has its foundation in the idea that they could contribute something just as valuable to society as men could. In Mill's mind, the essence of humanity was no different in woman than it was in man, and both had the opportunity to reform the world, from inside and outside the home. Approximately at the same time, John Ruskin proposed that a woman could do more positive things within the sphere that she had always known, the home. The support given to her husband in his decisions and tireless devotion she showed her children outweighed any effect she could have in politics, social reform, or public work. In his Queens' Garden lecture of 1864, Ruskin spoke on the importance of the sound home:

> it [the home] is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from injury, but from all the terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown; unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be the home; it is only a part of that other world which you roofed over and ignited the fire in. (Mudhenk, 261)

Ruskin's belief in the traditional home certainly found its challengers, but Evans was a philosophical ally who believed that the structure of not only the home but also all of society rested on woman's place in the home. Evans believed that if women were given the right to vote it would disrupt the domestic world to which they were essential. Instead of believing that suffrage would empower women to take more control over their destiny, Evans believed that voting would place women in a situation that would detract from the positive work they did in the home. Thus, participating in politics meant that women would have taken on more duties than they already had, namely caring for their children and the home. In effect, Evans believed that women's newfound duties would take place of their true responsibilities. If a woman was made to do such things, Evans believed that her "proper" duties would be neglected and the whole system that Ruskin outlines would fail. Such is the reason why Edna does not marry when her mind is adrift with thoughts of studying and writing, for her time becomes consumed by these things. But once her intellectualism is "satisfied" she can then find solace in home life, the thing she flees from the whole novel. Thus we return to the theme of conversion in *St. Elmo*. The lesson Evans intends for her readers is two fold. Not only does St. Elmo receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit on his life and is thereby converted from his selfish and devious ways, but Edna receives what in modern terms we might call "inner peace" after all the trials she endures during her life. The Christian lesson not only taught people that the way of Christ was the way of redemption and salvation, but also that the traditional structure of the home was also still proper and good. What does Evans' lesson do to

promote these beliefs? Through *St. Elmo*, readers of the late nineteenth century could witness what the traditional beliefs could provide for both man and woman.

The lesson of *St. Elmo* also conveys what Evans hoped would stay the same, namely the tradition that provided for southern aristocracy, states rights, and even the institution of slavery. All these things are tied to the belief that womanhood is to be protected at all costs, and that without the basic tenets of a conventional home, the South would crumble. For Evans, in 1866, some of the crumbling seemed to be already happening. To do her part in the fight against the change, she could have written a social or political tract that explained what she believed was right and the outrage she felt for all the liberal ideas that threatened her way of life. Instead, Evans pens *St. Elmo* with no visible political agenda but rather a simple domestic story that teaches a story of love, goodness, redemption, but most of all conversion. St. Elmo is saved, but so is Edna. She is saved from ill health and the need to provide for herself by marrying St. Elmo. This is perhaps the greatest lesson taught in St. Elmo, what Anne Goodwyn Jones writes in her explanation of southern womanhood: "the southern lady is at the core of the region's self definition; the identity of the South is contingent upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady" (4). In essence, *St. Elmo* succeeds in keeping intact this belief through Edna's story.

Edna leaves the South with many hopes and aspirations concerning what she can accomplish. What Edna does not leave behind though is her wit and charm that draw many to her. Whatever expectations we have of Edna, she is not a character who becomes enraptured with New York and forgets her roots or humble beginnings. Edna experiences no spiritual or sexual epiphany in New York, nor does she become captivated

by the bright lights and big city so much that she loses her purpose and falls into degradation. Ironically, in the big city that offers so much in the way of distractions outside the home, it is here that Edna begins to learn the true importance of a well cared for home. But Evans does not divert Edna's writing career or her aspirations to become a writer when she takes on the role of governess. Taking away Edna's self-ordained purpose of creating a comprehensive world mythology would not be in the style of Evans. Here again we see the feminist overtones of *St. Elmo*. Edna is a strong woman who can manage multiple tasks and still succeed. But the task that she comes to adore the most is not writing but rather her role as friend and teacher to the young children, and especially to the young but sickly boy Felix. Thus Evans is proving that a woman can more than tend to home life. Evans' writing of Edna as a multi-dimensional woman accomplishes two things. Edna's story inspires young girls to educate themselves, while still emphasizing the things that keep the home intact. Secondly, Evans advocates the above-mentioned prospect without discrediting the idea that a woman should remain in the home. It is, indeed, an effective lesson for the late nineteenth-century teen girl. When Edna engages in conversation with different men and women of New York society, she is an equal if not more than equal to those who direct questions at her. But when she returns home to care for the children, she leaves behind the intellectual world for the domestic, where she will finally find true happiness.

With the publication of her second book, Edna secures her place among the great writers of her day, and in doing so, also gives credit to all the women of the America who tirelessly work for the good of their families. Her book, entitled *Shining Thrones of the*

Hearth, sounds as though Evans might have written one of the same nature herself: "she [Edna] proved by illustrious examples that the borders of the feminine realm could not be enlarged, without rendering the throne unsteady, and subverting God's law of order" (338). Edna also writes of those women in the past who have believed that good could be done through collective organization but notes that there were "some lurking dangers in all systems which permanently removed woman from the heaven-decreed ark of the family hearthstone" (338). Edna's purpose then, like Evans' is to preserve the sacred tenets of womanhood that are already in place. Soon after the publication of her book, Edna travels to Europe where her health grows stronger, but Felix's heart grows worse. When Felix finally passes away, the death heavily affects Edna in two separate ways. She deeply grieves Felix's passing since he was her closet friend and pupil. Felix's death also releases Edna from her responsibilities as governess and consequently allows her to return South. Evans does not address why Edna chooses to leave her position even though Hattie is still a young pupil. Somewhat like the Mrs. Murray-Edna relationship, the Edna-Hattie Andrews relationship lacks the roundness and depth that some of the novel's other relationships demonstrate. But Edna does not merely return because it is where she wants to be, but also because she receives a letter about St. Elmo's ordination. But Mr. Murray's ordination is only a means to an end, an end that is not totally evident to Edna yet. Even as Edna is celebrated during a going away party in New York, she still questions why she can not find true happiness: "How very grateful I ought to be. How much I have to make me happy, O encourage me to work diligently and faithfully. What more can I wish? My cup is brimmed with blessings.. Ah! Why am I not entirely

happy?"(361). Clearly Evans is indicating that Edna is still unsettled, still searching for happiness not found in the books she reads or the people who praise her. Only a few paragraphs later does Edna encounter who will bring true happiness—St. Elmo. Now reformed, and no longer the hypocrite that Edna once despised, St. Elmo represents everything Edna could hope for. Intelligent, gentlemanly, and most importantly Christian, St. Elmo can relieve Edna from her need to provide for herself. In one of the more quoted passages in the novel, St. Elmo makes it known that Edna has reached her proper place in life:

> Today I snap the fetters of your literary bondage. There shall be no more books written! No more study, no more toil, no more anxiety, no more heartaches! And that dear public you love so well, must even help itself, and whistle for a new pet. You belong solely to me now, and I shall take care of the life you have nearly destroyed in your inordinate ambition. (365)

St. Elmo thus assumes the role of the protector, and Edna the protected. But what is to become of Edna's public writing career? How will she be satisfied with just being housewife after her success? In Evans' mind, it is Edna's destiny. If it is not, then what has Edna learned from her experiences at all? From the very first time Edna leaves home till the moment she completes her journey, she is faced with ordeal great and small. Her greatest satisfaction comes from the emotional fulfillment she receives through St. Elmo, not from literary aspirations or her public fame. While she does receive great satisfaction through her relationship with Mr. Hammond and later Felix Andrews, her love for these two is quite different from the connection she feels with St. Elmo. With Edna in the

home, the lesson is complete, the transition from unsettled girl to beloved woman finished, and the traditions of southern womanhood preserved.

In the end, the novel stays dedicated to the idea that domesticity was just as an important concept as states' rights or individual freedom was to ensuring prosperity. Evans does not tackle some great social agenda or bring to bear some revolutionary idea that would cause her readers to think that a new era was upon them. Rather, Evans seeks to reassure her readers that the things they care for will remain unchanged. Whether or not things were to change was up to them as they learned from Edna and St. Elmo. While the reader probably did not interpret *St. Elmo* as a way to find the inner meaning to the moral tale, nevertheless one did take in the lesson that strength in times of adversity would make one stronger and more understanding. Readers probably related to Edna or St. Elmo not because of the allusion-filled analogies they choose to use, but rather because the struggles that many had experienced in the Civil War were not unlike the loss and renewal that Edna experiences. Women who read *St. Elmo* were perhaps inspired by Edna, taken by St. Elmo, and satisfied emotionally by the ending. What they probably did not realize after reading this simple tale was that they had received lessons aplenty. But if the numbers of people who were engaged with *St. Elmo* were any indication of the faith people put in traditional beliefs, then those beliefs were anything but endangered.

Chapter 6
Popular Culture and *St. Elmo*

St. Elmo was the first novel by a southern author to sell a million copies, according to the Encyclopedia of America Literature (340). Not only did *St. Elmo* continue to sell until the early twentieth century, it also was adapted for the motion pictures in two films by the same name. The first, produced in 1914, was a silent film produced in Hollywood. The most well known adaptation, produced in 1923, was made in Great Britain by Capitol Films. Much like the critics' disdain for the novel, the films were discounted as cinematic trash: "this British screen version of Augusta J. Evans-Wilson's sentimental novel and stock company perennial was often mentioned when citing the poor state of British filmmaking in the 1920s" (Wollstein). *St. Elmo's* popularity was also reflected in not only the fascination with the romantic and ideal settings in domestic novels, but also in characters themselves. For example, an untold number of boys who were born between 1867 and 1900 were named St. Elmo, and many a girl born during the same time was named Edna Earl. From Tennessee to Colorado, towns took the name St. Elmo because of the novel's hold on the readers. In 1886, Confederate Colonel A.M. Johnson and his wife Thankful Whiteside Johnson were surveying land near Lookout Mountain for farming. When the Johnsons were deciding on a name for their new town, St. Elmo was a natural fit. After all, not only was the couple quite fond of the book, but they also were aware that Evans had spent a number of her childhood years in the same region. In Colorado, the town of Forest City was renamed St. Elmo in 1880

when Griffith Evans (no relation), a city planner was reading the novel. All told thirteen cities were named St. Elmo. The impact of the novel on popular culture was tremendous; even cigars and punch took on the Byronic hero's name. Even today, the novel sustains itself as a cultural landmark. One need not search too far to find lingering interest in the culture surrounding the novel in the form of a St. Elmo historic neighborhood association in Tennessee or the St. Elmo mining encampment in gold rush era Colorado.

These cultural markers, reflective of the tastes of the time, serve as ways to understand the reading public of the time. During the period from 1860-1900, no other genre of novel sold more than the sentimental. G.W. Carleton, the original publisher of *St. Elmo*, maintained an extensive list of popular fiction. Both Mary Jane Holmes's (another popular woman writer of the mid nineteenth century) and Evans' works "consisted of heavy doses of mawkish sentiment and romance, along with a healthy measure of moral advice--one of the best-selling formulas in American publishing at the time"(Dzwonkoski, 84). The "heavy doses of mawkish sentiment and romance" captured people's hearts because of the beliefs of the time, as was illustrated in chapter 5 on Victorian culture in America. The reader of *St. Elmo* seemed to be very comfortable with the idea that he or she was receiving a moral lesson when reading the novel. The preaching tone of the novel was effective in inspiring some readers to rededicate themselves to the study of Latin and Greek, while others so admired the novel that they felt compelled to reexamine their own lives in the light of what *St. Elmo* taught them. Only when affected to this depth did the people pay tribute to the novel by naming their

child after Edna Earl or their latest drink after the fantastical, but ultimately admirable St. Elmo.

The historical impact of St. Elmo on popular culture can be set aside or dismissed if one attempts to explain the novel as a faddish, fleeting success with little to offer readers of serious fiction. Judging from the number of times *St. Elmo* or Evans is listed in literary anthologies, modern scholarship views her sentimental fiction as just that—faddish. A serious scholar of American literature might look at *St. Elmo* as a product of a time when sentimentalism in art was not scorned, but rather embraced. Understanding the attributes that made *St. Elmo* the tremendous success that it was, but fails to be today, are much one and the same. The language and style of the novel spoke well to the late nineteenth century reader, whose fascination with ideally successful characters and fantastical scenarios outweighed the idea that fiction should depict realism to the reader. The prospect of reading over four hundred pages about an orphan girl who falls in love with a dark hero the likes of St. Elmo was intriguing and exciting to someone who lived in an age of total certainty as to one's social position. While the reader may have become enthralled with the characters and the narrative, his or her recognition that the ideal character was a mouthpiece through which the author could attain a specific goal was not necessarily a given, but a definite possibility.

The genuine story line of *St. Elmo* was also instrumental in St. Elmo's popularity. Since the large majority of the readers of books like *St. Elmo* were women, it was necessary to focus the story on women's struggles. Edna's story works as a model of how women were to overcome their own struggles. In a time when some women did not

even leave the home in the course of the day, the story of Edna Earl and St. Elmo could be equated to the modern soap opera. As Markham Ellis writes of the sentimental novel in his book, *The Politics of Sensibility*, "The sentimental novel addressed women as much as men, and increasingly, those who belonged to the middle station of life, the social level between manual laborers and the gentry..." (2). Markham goes on to describe the audience of the sentimental novel as recognizing reading as "a pursuit of leisure" in the same way as "plays and periodicals" might function to offer pure enjoyment without the realism of life (2-3). The idea that St. Elmo represented for many women readers an escape from reality is not a novel idea. Women who had struggled with loss of family could identify with Edna. Girls who pondered whether or not they could become something greater than the norm would have found an ally in Edna. Even women whose decision to give up their autonomy through marriage could be reassured by the novel's conclusion.

St. Elmo was so popular that the very name of the title character and his lady became household names. Perhaps more a humorous aside to the novel's popularity than a true reduction of it, C.H. Webb wrote a parody of *St. Elmo* entitled *St. Twelvemo*, published in 1867. The premise of the parody was that the Edna character had inadvertently swallowed an encyclopedia when she was a young girl. In this case, truly, parody was the highest form of tribute. In 1954, some thirty years after Evans' death, Eudora Welty paid tribute to the popular author by naming her main female character in her novel *The Ponder Heart* after Evans' greatest heroine. These examples of fascination and tribute have also added to the novel's history.

The universal popularity of a book like *St. Elmo* casts it in a light that few other novels have achieved. Recently, a woman told me of perusing through some of her grandmother's keepsakes, and among some books and writing tablets, she discovered a writing tablet that on the front was a label with the name "Augusta Jane Evans." She went on to explain to me that the tablet was her grandmother's diary when she was a young girl. Not unlike the fame and admiration modern society has for popular actors, athletes, and other public figures, this artifact represents a true piece of popular culture. Among other stories I have been fortunate to hear while researching Evans and *St. Elmo* is the tale of how young girls used to read the novel by candlelight. Often, I was told, the girls read *St. Elmo* aloud to each other as well. These stories are first hand reminders that *St. Elmo* truly affected people and culture.

Even as Evans' career had all but ended by the first decade of the twentieth-century (Evans would write two novels in the twentieth-century), the general popularity of Alabama's most successful author still maintained an heir of matriarchal status. On July 14, 1903, the Mobile Register reported that, "Augusta Evans Wilson, perhaps the most sincerely respected and generally loved woman in Mobile, has been for some weeks a great sufferer from rheumatism. Sunday she was said to be much improved in health" (East, 2A). Near the end of her lifetime, Evans' celebrity status was as great as it ever was. Dignitaries and statesmen made it a point to visit Ashland, Wilson' luxurious home when in town. When the Alabama Hall of Fame was inaugurated in 1951 in an effort to recognize outstanding Alabama citizens, Evans Wilson was one of the first women to be

inducted. And while her nine novels have not garnered the same recognition in modern times as they did when published, her name is still very much a part of Alabama literary history. Evans' house continues to be a Mobile tourist attraction and even the name St. Elmo is alive today, in form of St. Elmo elementary school.

Determining why *St. Elmo* was so popular in its time is not difficult. The success story of Edna and the salvation of St. Elmo culminate in the happy ending that satisfies many a reader's expectation. The tribute paid to Evans demonstrates the effect her tales had on the public. And while the novel receives little publicity today, the overall significance of its impact of popular culture affords us a glimpse into a time when the people's tastes were peculiar. People's tastes were only matched by a hunger for the idyllic. Recognizing the depth of appreciation readers of the past had for *St. Elmo* opens doors for future readers to understand better the impact of the novel in its time.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

Despite all the popularity surrounding *St. Elmo* during the latter nineteenth century, from over a million copies sold, to its popular use as a name for towns, streets, and even for boys, the novel received little critical acclaim. In fact, most of the reviews of the book were critical of its sentimentalism and its many allusions. Critics continually debased Evans' novels because the subject matter was traditional and without great social or political cause. Recently, however, there has been an attempt to recover this important literary genre in order to reassess the value these works offer. Jane Tompkin's conclusion to her analysis of nineteenth-century American literature entitled *Sensational Designs* (1984) is especially pertinent in any discussion of how literary value was and is determined. In her final chapter, "Is it any Good: The Institution of Literary Value," Tompkins describes the way makers of popular anthologies throughout the twentieth century have included some works and excluded others. Based upon the guidelines set forth by literary scholars and the important cultural changes during the time the literary works are written, Tompkins believes that anthologies reflect a concerted effort by editors to "reformulate their notions of what an anthology should represent, and of what literature itself should be" (191). According to these guidelines, the sentimental novel was purposely left out for two reasons: its sentimentalism and its popularity. *St. Elmo* is just one of many examples of the sentimental novels left out of critical discussions to which Tompkins alludes.

The writers that are taught in the classroom today are not necessarily the most popular writers of their time, nor do they reflect a particular way of considering the world at the

moment at which they were written. While readers are not always drawn to the most personally reflective art, many readers are drawn to literature that strikes a chord with them personally. Here, we may recognize a specific difference in how academia categorizes art compared to the popular notions of what "good art" is. Laura Wexler explores the recent developments in reassessing sentimental fiction by noting:

> The direct and indirect effect of the widespread reading of mid-nineteenth-century sentimental fiction upon those who were *not* either critics or white, middle class, Christian native-born readers is by and large left out. This omission makes for a kind of repressed margin even within a critical discourse whose impulse it always was to examine seriously the composition and function of the fringe. (Samuels, 13)

Perhaps the greatest way to evaluate *St. Elmo's* place in American fiction as a whole is not to critique the prose or story line of the novel, but rather to look carefully at factors in *St. Elmo* that were reflections of the culture.

St. Elmo was very popular among readers in the nineteenth century. The novel should be added to the canon of important works of post-Civil war America. *The Companion to Southern Literature* states, "*St. Elmo* had sales at the end of the century that were only passed by [Harriet Beecher Stowe's] *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*" (16). The appeal to Victorian ideals of life and the pursuit of happiness made the novel a popular tale because of the way in which it attempted to

keep long cherished traditions from fading into the past. The novel was a commercial success. William Fidler notes that Evans was the first southern author to make over one hundred thousand dollars in her lifetime. The popularity of most domestic novels from 1850-1900 was due in part by the readers' fascination with the fanciful. The greatest example of this hunger for the idyllic in *St. Elmo* is illustrated by the exotic gardens described as part of the grounds found on Le Bocage. While most readers would not have the money to finance such grounds on their own property, it would not be too strange for anyone living in this time to dream of living in such luxury.

Readers of St. Elmo found it to be an intriguing and ultimately happy tale that could be told to someone who was fourteen or forty. However, while the tale succeeded in capturing the reader, the critics were not so taken with Evans' voice and style. In one of the earliest comprehensive guides to southern literature Carl Holliday writes of the balanced contrast between the allure the novel provided, and the condescension others felt towards such fiction:

> It is somewhat difficult to be fair to such a writer [Evans]. That her work is brilliant cannot be denied. It makes readers think and they enjoy the process; it contains beauty of sentiment; there is a certain aloofness from commonness; there is an ever-persisting effort to solve the higher mysteries. But there are such evident effects—the tone of unnaturalness caused by the too frequent reference to remote learning, "the dash of display," the undue amount of argumentation, and the "over-profuseness" of the conversation. History, mythology, and biography

> are, of course, good for fiction when used sparingly, but they should not cast weight upon every line of the narrative. (95)

Critics ask questions as to the value of a story in order better place the work in context with other literature written during the time. One of the measures of a literary work's greatness is whether it is inherently powerful because of the word choice or prose style. A novel may be shunned because it is too personal or too reflective. Or the novel may be considered artless because of high moral tone. In fact, the theological underpinnings of the narrative sometimes are the cause for both the novel's acclaim and its denigration.

The novel *St. Elmo* was chastised and derided for the author's take on high moral issues. It has a preaching tone. Yet Evans' success or failure cannot be gauged by the attention she paid to the development of her characters or the effort she put into analyzing the human condition, but rather by her emphasis on enlightening her readers as to how a life lived by the upright and the righteous can be rewarded on earth and in heaven. Both Jane Tompkins and her predecessor in the study of sentimental fiction, Ann Douglas (*The Feminization of American Culture*, 1977) discursively arrive at "an agreement that instruction of the literate middle class is the chief object and subject of domestic narrative" (Samuels 13). In the case of Evans, her specific purpose was to enlighten her readers to the ways of Christianity. Evans wrote to a friend, "It is my belief that art's greatest function is to guide its followers towards the gospel that Christ taught" (Fidler, 54). Her formula—the sentimental novel—was just the framework Evans needed to create her moral story. The didactic function of *St. Elmo* was and is to many critics one of the greatest keys to understanding the contemporary popularity and modern

disenchantment with such novels. Evans' statement about the purpose of the art indicates not only something about her belief in God, but it also says something about what she hoped to accomplish with her art.

Evans accomplishes her goal through her fiction by keeping the story simple, the plot structure minimal, and the narrative structure straightforward. In *St. Elmo*, the narrative is structured chronologically in a way to keep the reader well informed without confusion. Evans accomplishes the careful structure by limiting plots that make up the novel. Essentially there are only two. The plot most often in the fore concerns Edna. Her story is always the most important in the scope of the narrative. The second plot, while not developed as richly as Edna's, concerns the travails of St. Elmo. Evans does little with flashbacks or jumping around from location to location, but rather keeps her story on a straight line for the simple end. Throughout the novel, Evans completely controls the narrative so as to capture the readers' hearts and minds. The narrative structure rarely leaves the reader wondering in textual darkness. Instead, the story moves with a nice fluidity that is only hindered by the readers' task of stopping to ponder where the recently read allusion might have originated. Thus the story is a highly readable narrative that does not require the reader to keep track of multiple plots. Perhaps one of the reasons the novel was read by so many was due to Evans' ability to write a simplistic, yet strong narrative with great attention paid to the readers' desires.

There is difficulty in assigning *St. Elmo* a place in American literature. Tompkins makes a keen observation on just this point:

> The very grounds on which sentimental fiction has been dismissed by its detractors, grounds which have come to seem universal standards of aesthetic judgment, were established in a struggle to supplant the tradition of evangelical piety and moral commitment [domestic] novelists represent. (123)

Because Evans uses evangelism as an authorial tool to influence her readers she was subject to criticism. Not only was Evans trying to preserve a certain style of life, but she also wished to equip her readers with a better understanding of why the traditions of the Old South were important to maintaining order in the world. Such is the case with Edna's discussion of a woman's right to vote. In the novel, there are sections dedicated to the "woman question": what is the role of women in society, what opportunities should be afforded young women, and finally should women be given more social and civil rights? Evans addresses these questions. Evans' fiction provided a more accessible format for her to expound her stance on pertinent social questions. Through the story of Edna, readers may have found themselves wondering about what they might have done if the last of their family had passed on and whether or not they could become someone great. Today, the idea of a woman not being allowed to vote seems preposterous, but one hundred and fifty years ago, the issue was of some debate. It was one thing for a newspaper to publish an article about the benefits and pitfalls of women's suffrage; it was another matter for popular literature to take sides on such an issue.

Though criticized for making her novels double as moral lessons, Evans always believed firmly in her purpose and in fact rarely strayed from the format. Evans seems to have succeeded in the eyes of her readers. Not only did they take in the narrative of

the novel, but also they appreciated the moral lesson it taught them. In some critics' eyes, the numerous lessons taught by St. Elmo were a dark mark on the integrity of the novel. However, just as the woman question became an elemental part of creating Edna Earl and thus a way of preserving the traditions Evans wanted to save, the moral lessons became a way of enlightening readers to a better way of living, or at least reminding them of a higher calling.

While modern readers and critics may scoff at *St. Elmo* for its moral tone and the constant use of allusion, one of the true shortcomings of the novel is its lack of inclusion on the pertinent national question of slavery. Slaves and slavery are not even mentioned, much less discussed in a novel that is set some years before Emancipation. While Evans is so adamant about showing how the morality of her characters is intertwined to the consequences of the decisions they make, her choice not to question the morality and ethics of the institution that caused so many of the troubles of the South is perplexing. Part of Evans' decision is based upon her own personal beliefs that states had the right to make their own decisions about slave labor: "She...believed that the Southern way of life, including slavery, was inherently superior to that of any other civilization" (Fidler). But the major reason *St. Elmo* does not include commentary on slavery is based upon Evans' belief that women should not concern themselves with issues outside the home. This particular attitude is exemplified through Edna when she discusses the responsibilities of a woman in the home. It is not that Evans feels the issue of slavery is not important; it is just not one that should be decided by women.

The issues Evans felt pressed to write on were those that she believed she was ordained to speak about. As Kelley notes, the "[Literary domestics'] desire was simply to justify the lives of the lowly and claim superior moral influence over those who ruled them" (304). Instead of the domestic novels of the time exploring America's darkness, they were written with a clear purpose in mind—to provide readers with a good story, albeit an ideal and romantic one, that accentuated the trials of human life and redemptive qualities one could gain from them. In a recent interpretation, one critic writes of Evans' purpose:

> Wilson, like other authors of domestic fiction in Victorian America tried to justify her own "socially errant" behavior by providing readers with heroines who personified the superior spiritual nature of the female sex and with plots that illustrated how female altruism could bring moral improvement to a corrupt, materialistic society. (Perry & Weaks, 154)

This "corrupt, materialistic society" was by and large attributed to the liberalization of women's duties. Evans' goal was to stem the change by making her readers realize the value of the traditions that were already in place.

The works of writers of domestic novels were degraded as sensational and forgettable. But within the scheme of popular culture, works like *St. Elmo* became a reminder of the satisfaction readers found in the sentimental tale. Perhaps the work itself merits no great textual analysis for literary critics, but within the context of the culture and society of mid to late nineteenth century America much can be deduced from the novel. The idealism of Victorian America is in *St. Elmo*, from the struggles of Edna to the conversion of St.

Elmo. As Jane Tompkins has written, “Sentimental fiction was perhaps the most influential expression of the beliefs that animated the revival moment and had shaped the character of American life in the years before the Civil War” (149). To overlook this type of novel in the study of American culture and literature would be a mistake.

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