Women in an Evangelical Community: Oberlin 1835-50

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WOMEN IN AN EVANGELICAL COMMUNITY:

OBERLIN - 1835-50

Lori D. Ginzberg

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I. INTRODUCTION

Oberlin College is frequently mentioned in connection with women's education, women's rights, or the struggle for women's emancipation. The following passage from the 1834 First Circular is invariably cited: Oberlin's founders strove for "...the elevation of female character, by bringing within the reach of the misjudged and neglected sex, all the instructive privileges which hitherto have unreasonably distinguished the leading sex from theirs." Discussions seek to prove either that Oberlin is to be praised for its correct and "liberated" goals, or that it is to be condemned for hypocrisy in not going as far as publicized in the First Circular.

A brief survey of the literature concerning women at Oberlin clarifies what is lacking in the analysis. One strand of thought applauds the coming of coeducation for opening up new paths for American women. James Fairchild, at various times student, teacher, and president of Oberlin College, found himself the defender of Oberlin's experiment, and of coeducation in general. Twenty years after criticizing women who spoke in public, he became the spokesman for coeducation, on the grounds that it "worked."

Robert S. Fletcher, historian of Oberlin College, pointed
out Oberlin's positive influence on later decisions to educate women alongside men.⁴ "Joint education," as it was called until the 1860's, was a sharp departure from previous practice. Male college life, in places such as Harvard and Yale, bordered on being monastic. Women's seminaries, notably newly-founded Holyoke, strove for a more advanced education for women by introducing physiology and domestic science into their curricula. They did not, however, offer a college education on a level equivalent with men's. Fletcher acknowledged that a modern interpretation would reveal inconsistencies between Oberlin's alleged ideals and its policies regarding women, but his conclusion, which remains the standard assumption, is that Oberlin represents a significant step in America's progress toward sexual equality.

Recent "feminist" writers conclude otherwise. They emphasize a double standard at Oberlin, often citing clashes between Lucy Stone, Oberlin's famous feminist, and administrators. Ronald Hogeland, for example, shows the "masculine priorities" with which the experiment was implemented, and sees the women students as mere appendages to men.⁵ Jill Conway, in a more general article on women's education, remarks that women were brought into Oberlin because of the need for domestic labor, "duplicating in college environment the conventional role of the female."⁶

The data on Oberlin is little debated, and rarely is something new added to the body of facts. Clearly, one's
perspective determines one's position in the debate. I wish to redirect the discussion from circular nit-picking for "hypocrisy" as well as from combing the evidence for gleams of feminist light. Women's history as a discipline is beyond benefitting from this. Oberlin women must be removed from their allotted place in the supposedly linear development of feminist consciousness and ideals, and examined on their own terms. Oberlin was not a "feminist" experiment, for the concept of feminism did not exist. It was an evangelical project in which women were an integral part. Caught between conflicting currents of thought concerning the roles women should fill, Oberlin women sought to synthesize these in their own lives. How "successful" they were is ultimately a subjective decision. But it is more fruitful to investigate their lives than to debate the sincerity of male administrators regarding their role at Oberlin College. There is far more to evangelical thought and the role of revivalist religion in their lives than mere rhetoric manipulated for men's purposes. It is the attempt of this paper to understand the links between "Oberlinisms" in its various forms and these women's lives. Why did certain women come to Oberlin in the 1830's and 1840's and what did they find when they arrived? The answer to this may contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which particular women satisfied the demands and expectations placed upon their lives.

The second quarter of the nineteenth century is generally
discussed in terms of change, real or symbolic. It was, in broad outline, an early period of industrialization, of reform movements, of the ousting of an older "aristocracy" in favor of a new. However one categorizes Jacksonians, evangelists, abolitionists, frontier people, the period is characterized by transition, if not overt conflict. It was a period that saw the transformation of American society from a relatively homogeneous, community-oriented society to one relying on larger, more impersonal institutions. It is not the intent of this paper to try to understand all these changes, rather, to use Oberlin as a specific example of a community that reacted to these larger societal changes and effected change in the lives of a group of women.

Scholarship on women focuses on this period as one that transformed both roles and expectations. Gerda Lerner discusses the deterioration of women's status from the colonial period through the 1840's, due to the separation of workplace and home and the resulting ambiguity concerning women's contributions to society. She sees in particular a growing, and articulated, divergence between women of different classes. Lerner claims that women, in a period of expanded democracy, did not share in the egalitarian ideology's benefits or aspirations.

Barbara Welter, in her often-cited "Cult of True Womanhood," finds in popular culture a growing idealization of the lady. The lady became a virtuous goal, symbolizing "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity." Ann Douglas uses similar themes in arguing that there was a "feminization" of American culture at this time.
The image of the lady, the cult of domesticity, the moralizing and purifying power of woman—these attributes, articulated most cogently by Catharine Beecher, were central to the ideals of ladies seminaries, guides to women teachers, and religious tracts. They were widely defended and practiced during the years of Oberlin's founding. It is tempting to regard the relegation of women to their "sphere" as a loss of status, and the glorification of their role as a defense on the part of the defeated. The causes and results of the growing articulation are far more complex, however, and status and aspirations far less easily measured. The pioneers of women's education, and the women themselves, aspired to no less than purifying a changing nation through women's moral influence as wife, mother, and, increasingly throughout this period, teacher.

A counter ideology grew concurrently with this cult of domesticity. It would be pointless to argue which came "first," for the two were intertwined, often within the same person's thought. The cult of the moral (and therefore superior) powers of woman became an ideal at the same time that a theory of "rights" began to be espoused. The first feminists claimed "human rights," which they equated with political, legal, and economic equality with men. Alice Rossi believes that "well-worn grooves of political habit and experience were actuated as the American women took the step from personal discontent to organized social action." The involvement of women in movements for temperance, moral reform, abolition, and, later, women's rights,
was unprecedented, both in number and influence. The famous exchange of letters between Sarah and Angelina Grimké, who supported the human rights position, and Catharine Beecher, seems to exemplify the irreconcilable intellectual differences concerning women's role, and potential to change society.13

Yet it would be best to view these two theories as opposite sides of the same problem. A clear-cut dichotomy of thought is impossible when applied to action. Catharine Beecher's extension of women's moral sphere to teaching in effect extended it right out of the home and into public conflict, exactly what Beecher disdained in theory. In contrast, many of the most noted feminists, in crying for a woman's "right" to involve herself in a non-traditional sphere, used and believed the vocabulary of moral purification, and women's cleansing influence, to justify their position.

For this reason, confusion often arises among modern feminists who attempt to label "radical" ideologies. The two philosophies arose from a common source, and are rationalizations for similar needs. The antebellum years saw an articulation of gender roles and differences that arose from a dissatisfaction with their indefinite nature. The Grimkés claimed that women should assert themselves alongside, but morally superior to, men in the political realm. Beecher, disturbed by the influence of corrupt politics on a morally reprehensible society, chose a different course for women; she argued for an expansion of the traditional role. She wished to create, according to Kathryn Sklar, "a national
The Grimkés also called upon the public to respond to supposed female virtues, but by allowing women full participation in male domains. Their demand stemmed from their own experience, in being confronted by opposition to their activities in anti-slavery reform. Beecher, on the contrary, was unopposed in making her life work one of glorifying a role she herself did not adhere to; she never had to publicly defend her own right to develop a domestic cult. Sklar points to a continual struggle throughout the next decades between the two ideas and experiences. This struggle covertly went on in Oberlin in its first years.

It is not useful to merely seek sign of "feminist consciousness" as proof that women's lives change. The roles, status, and aspirations of women often change more subtly, and their experience is far more complex and interesting than a measure of "oppression" would indicate. Insofar as women's history, like more traditional fields, is interested in forces and aspects of change, it is important to look for change in women's lives, not only in their ideologies. What men, and popular magazines, thought women should be is indeed important in understanding the demands placed on them. It is more important, however, to understand what women did, and how they used these guides, in developing their own individual lives.

This paper will make use of these concepts in a particular case. In no way can Oberlin be seen as typical of any other place in the 1830's and 1840's. Yet ironically, it
embodied in microcosm one solution to the conflicts presented by the Grimkés and Beecher. Oberlin was a community more than a college. It had a clear and cohesive ideology, and intended to train "a band of self-denying, hardy, intelligent, efficient laborers, of both sexes, for the world's enlightenment and regeneration." Oberlin applied to men as well as to women what Beecher would have termed feminine values. It had no ideological pretensions to giving women "equality" in the masculine realm because it did not approve of this domain for any of its members. Yet it was criticized and feared by many; clergymen and more conservative abolitionists feared the unintended but inevitable result of educating women with men, namely, the demand of the former for equal rights. Legislators attempted through 1842 to rescind Oberlin's charter because of its co-racial and co-sexual identity; senators claimed it was "...dangerous to liberty, law and morality." Oberlin's practices, however, were logical extremes of a philosophy adhered to even by many of its critics. The women's resolutions of the conflicts surrounding them make it a particularly interesting study of these conflicts themselves.

The years 1835-1850 are not random dates for this study. According to Fletcher, "[t]hese were the years of 'peculiar' Oberlin....But the transition from the early radicalism began early. The period after 1850 was marked by a combination of fulfillment and conformity which...had translated Oberlin from its unique status." A marked trend
toward secularism is noted following 1850. This was coincident with the retirement of Asa Mahan as president, a retirement not altogether voluntary. Mahan can be considered the chief theologian of Oberlin's "peculiar" religious idea, namely perfectionism. His departure brought about (or was a result of) a lapse in theological strictness; students resumed the previously restricted study of the "heathen classics." It was also coincident with outside pressures toward conformity with other colleges and communities; increased (and increasingly heterogeneous) enrollment, an endowment, and a more general acceptance of previously bizarre Oberlinisms. In particular, the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the Kansas/Nebraska Act (1854) increased the respectability in the North of the "hotbed of abolitionism"; the beginning of a women's rights movement made "joint education" more acceptable; and the trend toward worldliness on the part of a drained reviveralist movement made Oberlin much like other communities and schools. In 1835, by contrast, it can be said that Oberlin was in a world of its own.

The Covenant of the Oberlin Colony, 1833, opens with this passage:

Lamenting the degeneracy of the church and the deplorable condition of our perishing world, and ardently desirous of bringing both under the entire influence of the blessed gospel, and viewing with particular interest the influence which the Valley of the Mississippi must exert over our nation, and the nations of the earth; and having, as we trust, in answer to devout supplication, been guided by the counsel of the Lord, the undersigned covenant together under the name of the Oberlin colony....
Why did these people come to the frontier? What of their world did they perceive as perishing? And what part did women play in its salvation? I wish to present the hypothesis that Oberlin was an experiment that extended to all participants the ideals of femininity, in its glorified moral sense. Values that Welter says American society associated with female weakness, "humility, submission, and meekness," were adhered to at Oberlin by men as well as by women. Insofar as women, and the "feminized" church, can be termed anti-political, so was Oberlin opposed to political means in changing the "perishing world." Oberlin's values and methods for change were also those of the moral woman's; both were to purify a sinful society by moral suasion and submission. Whereas women were to submit wholly to men for their earthly needs, so Oberlin students and colonists submitted, or tried to submit, to Christ. At Oberlin, men and women stood on a plane of spiritual equality, equally suppressing their wills to God's.

According to Welter, "[t]he Christianizing of the West, indeed the domesticating of the West, was probably the most important religious, cultural, and political event of the first half of the nineteenth century." Oberlin was an example of an essentially female morality trying to remake an evil world into a pure one. The decline of Oberlin's "moral optimism" and perfectionism coincided with the rise of both a women's rights movement and political antislavery. The changes of the 1850's acknowledged the futility of morality in eradicating sin. The individualistic approach to reform
contradicted necessary organizational arrangements for change. In the future, these people would adopt methods of change once thought sinful, those that depended on the power of institutions. Oberlin men could, if they chose, step relatively easily into the new role, but the women found themselves forced to rely on the old methods, no longer considered truly effective. By viewing Oberlin and evangelical Protestantism in this way, we can start to explain Donald Mathews' statement that revivalist churches "may have been the greatest organization and mobilization of women in American history."26

The sources on Oberlin leave no doubt, even to the most disbelieving observer, as to the sincerity of its founders and students. Fletcher notes, "The seriousness of early Oberlin is appalling. The consciousness of a wicked world and an approaching day of atonement clouded the spirits of students and teachers. Life was a serious business and death was momentarily awaited."27

One is struck primarily by the homogeneity of thought and feeling at Oberlin and the sense of moral mission. The founders were not theological heretics; they were all members of Presbyterian or Congregational churches. Their views were exceptional not in dogma but in their practical application. The Oberlin of 1835 was a community of no more than several hundred people. James Fairchild remarked, in 1879, that its very isolation and homogeneity encouraged extremes of doctrine and practice. "There was only here and there a sinner to be converted, hence the religious
activity naturally took the direction of the elevation of the standard of religious experience. "28 Perfectionism may have satisfied Charles Finney's religious priorities, but others at Oberlin saw promise in sanctifying the world. Firm in the belief that submission to God would save a slave-owning, alcohol drinking, "licentious" society, Oberlin students became ministers, teachers, missionaries and, by career or habit, social reformers. The "unity of moral action" possible at Oberlin, however, was not easily applied to the larger, more overtly sinful society.29 Feminine virtues did not overcome the aggressive character of an ambitious nation. Yet for a time, and with a singular intensity, some people, probably a majority of whom were women, believed in them.

Whitney Cross believes that women should dominate a history of revivalism. He claims to know little about the forces that urged them toward evangelism, but suggests several provocative hints. Similar conditions of status and expectation existed for women in all parts of the United States. It was in western New York, however, where the most intense period of religious revivalism occurred, that Oberlin and its ideology originated. In contrast to this area, the western frontier provided a life with too little leisure and too much drudgery to inspire women to put so much energy into religion. In the East, there was less need for religion as a fulltime occupation; if there was not more "status" in the larger cities, at least there
were more non-religious activities to fill women's days. "Woman," Cross stated, "made a nearly exclusive avocation of religion.... Perhaps only in the middle stretch of just-matured society, and within the belt of Yankee migration, could she attain the maximum concentration upon this one type of expression. Unconscious desires found outlet in revivals and in the busy campaigns for reforming crusades."  

Harriet Martineau, starting her two year tour of the United States in 1834, remarked, "[t]he way in which religion is made an occupation by women, testifies not only to the vacuity which must exist...but to the vigour with which the religious sentiment would probably be carried into the great objects and occupations of life, if such were permitted."  

Oberlin's founders were anxious to save society and, like idealizers of women's moral role, recognized this potential energy.

It is suggestive to take Cross' analysis one step further and apply a "status anxiety" concept to women. This status, however, is not solely with relation to class, but to men. Alice Rossi's description of the boredom and isolation in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's life in western New York illustrates the type of restlessness described by Cross. Stanton, as a young mother, "gave vent to her acute feelings of frustration and discontent" by seeing her own situation as shared with other women; she became a highly articulate feminist leader. It is feasible to consider emotional
religion, one that allowed women's full participation and that appeared to make "feminine" values universal, another outlet for similar frustrations. Rossi claims that "...the grounds for a women's sense of self-worth narrowed during the decades when men's expanded." Opportunity, which took on new meaning for men, did not exist for middle class women, in a society where status was to be achieved. At Oberlin, such status was disdained and avoided for moral and religious reasons. Self worth was to be attained by submission to God, and application of his law to a misguided society. Women and men at Oberlin responded to a supposed narrowing of opportunity by redefining, within a cohesive community, the grounds for their own self worth. They adhered to a religion that defined this worth in terms of a social commitment, and a relationship to the community.
NOTES

1 "First Circular," Oberlin Collegiate Institute, 1834, Robert S. Fletcher Collection, Box 5, Oberlin College Archives (OCA), Oberlin, Ohio.

2 James Harris Fairchild, "Women's Rights and Duties," 1849, Oberlin College Special Collections (OCSC), Oberlin, Ohio.

3 Fairchild, "Joint Education of the Sexes," 1852, OCSC; "Educational Arrangements and College Life at Oberlin," 1866, OCSC.


7 See David Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum, (Boston: 1971) for an examination of these themes with regard to the institutionalization in this period of care of the insane, criminal, and poor.


13 Sklar, pp. 132-137.
14 Ibid., p. 135.


16 "Prudential Report," Oberlin Evangelist, 3 December, 1851.


18 Fletcher, p. 886

19 Ronald Walters, The Antislavery Appeal, (Baltimore: 1976), p. 40. Walters suggests that it is the actual passing of religious intensity that spurs reform, but this does not fully explain the gradual transition from one to the other, nor their frequent concurrence. Whitney Cross, The Burned-Over District, (New York: 1965), p. 268, sees ultraism "quite suddenly collapsing" as early as 1836, but he emphasizes that most adherents continued in their beliefs for some time, unaware of the inherent paradoxes in their philosophy.

20 Fletcher, p. 488.

21 Ibid., p. 236.

22 "Covenant of the Oberlin Colony," 1833, Fletcher Collection, Box 11, OCA.


24 Ibid., p. 90.

25 "Moral optimism" is a phrase used by Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform (New York: 1957), p. 108.


27 Fletcher, p. 24.

29 Ibid., p. 21.

30 Cross, p. 889. Women's role in revivalist religion is discussed on pages 84-90.


32 Rossi, pp. 243-46.

33 Ibid., p. 252.
Religion formed the basis of life in the Oberlin community. To understand the motive force behind these people's actions, a general discussion of the forms of their religion is essential. Social circumstances made them responsive to certain beliefs; these beliefs, however, and, more, the intensity of belief itself, led directly to the creation of Oberlin's early social setting. I will not analyse in detail theological shifts and subtlties; rather, it is my intention to outline religious thought as it applied to Oberlin, and as it affected women in the evangelical period.

In the concept of sin lay the single most significant shift from Calvinism in the early nineteenth century. Orthodox thought held to original sin and individual election to salvation, and was increasingly at odds with the peculiarly American doctrine of individual opportunity and achievement of status.¹ According to Barbara Zikmund, "[t]hroughout the nineteenth century changes in theology increasingly emphasized man's freedom and the use of that freedom to improve the human situation."² The conflict was resolved by Nathaniel Taylor and Lyman Beecher, and the new philosophy popularized by Charles Finney, among others.
This new doctrine was better reconciled with a capitalist ethic, although many of its more ardent followers opposed the specific results of social growth. It replaced the concept of "sin" with one of "sinning."

The implications of this change must not be underestimated. Sin became a positive act on the part of the sinner. Voluntarism led directly to the idea of responsibility for one's actions, and, therefore, held out the potential for sinlessness. Society, viewed as a collection of responsible individuals, was not therefore intrinsically evil; an evil society was one composed of sinners. A pure society would be one in which each person renounced his or her sinful behavior. Helen Cowles was "led to wonder how the Lord can spare the people of the United States, when they are such a nation of hard-hearted sinners." However, as Cross notes, "[t]he dogma of American democracy, vigorously rising in Jacksonian days, contained a supreme optimism, a belief in the ultimate perfection of society through progressive improvement in humankind." In this optimism one finds the key to the American shift from Calvinism, for the indication that the Lord did "spare" even "hard-hearted sinners" left room for hope. A deep optimism also explains the extreme vigour with which evangelists attempted to apply their beliefs to the society at large.

The famed evangelist, Charles Finney, led Western New York through a period of intense religious revivals in the decade before Oberlin's founding. These revivals, and later ones at Oberlin, were intended to convert indivi-
duals to submission to God, and a commitment to sinlessness. The process of renouncing sin was long, and required total adherence to Christian living. Practicing this life at Oberlin meant to do so in an environment virtually free of blatant sin. The philosophy took on new extremes among this group of people. They isolated themselves in their practices and beliefs, and intended to convert the world, by example as well as by missionary activity. By its nature, however, their setting, and their established image as deviants, alienated them from the world they wished to save.

The doctrine and practice of Oberlin perfectionism answered the needs of a relatively small group of people. Yet its theories were a logical extension of more commonly held beliefs. Cross says that "[p]erfectionism was the highroad out of ultraism. That some of the more spectacular experiments in Burned-over District history occurred along its route does not prove that its exponents were irrational fanatics but rather demonstrates their superior ability to carry originally questionable assumptions to thoroughly appropriate conclusions."5

Perfectionism of the Finney variety, if not its application, seemed logical to a good number of people. He "did not deliberately attempt to make Presbyterianism palatable to the rising common folk, but his conclusions did just that. All he had to do was insist 'that the sinner's cannot is his "will not"," and the remaining determinism in the already watered-down Calvinism of his day disappeared."6
Oberlin's early days witnessed almost perpetual religious excitement. James Fairchild complained of Finney's "spiritual thermometer," and admitted to an "involuntary shudder" when Finney measured feeling. But he himself referred frequently to Oberlin's "state of feeling and the style of preaching," and he remarked on there being "more" piety at different times. Others wrote of the state of religion as "low," or of the Lord's doing good work at Oberlin, bringing revivals even in Finney's absences from the community. Conversions were reported in correspondence as frequent and significant, and the religious atmosphere was considered, above all, unique.

In these early days, Mahan developed Oberlin's unique theological contribution, the idea of "sanctification." In 1839, Samuel and William Cochran added to this a theory of simplicity. They stated the "impossibility of a divided heart in moral action." The sinner was utterly devoid of righteousness, and conversion became "entire consecration." Even among Oberlin Christians, therefore, "sinners" could be found. Consecration constituted a departure from evil living, and sanctification was impermanent, achieved continually through the exercise of faith in one's life and work.

Oberlin's doctrine was, above all, one of moral action. Fairchild wrote disdainfully of people who looked for sanctification in the abstract, rather than in detail; one must
purify each sin, he claimed, achieving sanctification through particular acts of obedience.\textsuperscript{10} A watchword for all members of the community was the scriptural quote found on the cover of Edward Weed's biography: "Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will shaw thee my faith by my works."\textsuperscript{11} A dissatisfaction with the world and with prior religious teachings brought people to Oberlin perfectionism. Cross frequently characterizes Yankees as having "the tender conscience, the intense concern for the community, the preoccupation with a perfected society, long grown in the Puritan tradition."\textsuperscript{12} Faith was of little use at Oberlin unless applied, literally and fervently, to deed.

Yet one finds remarkably little that might serve as a vision for the perfect society. People believed that the very denunciation of sin by all would purify the world. Individual regeneration was the key, and "one-ideaism" often a means of reform, at the expense of concrete plans for a changed society. There is a paradox inherent in the thinking of the ultraists. Concerned with individual souls, "their objectives -- rooting out sin, converting the world, and bringing forth the millenium -- would be approached only by concerted energies."\textsuperscript{13} The paradox was eventually resolved in favor of reform, and at the expense of religious fervor. Retrospective knowledge of this choice, however, in no way minimizes their sincerity. Whatever the change that must occur, all agreed that individuals' actions lay at the root of social evil. All were committed to strive for the perfect society.
Reverend Jonathon Blanchard lectured at the 1839 commencement on "A Perfect State of Society." Blanchard, who was more practical and more conservative than most members of the Oberlin community, criticized utopian dreaming. The millenium, he said, will end neither sickness nor death, nor the need for civil government, restraints on children, nor control of the insane. He challenged the assumption that God would fulfill the functions of "human police." People would not be exempted from strenuous labor, nor from "daily self-denial and painful struggle against sin." He urged students to resist hopes of heavenly earth, "[f]or though this world will be a far more comfortable place, men will not love it so well as they do now." He emphasized the soul's freedom in obeying God's law (the "law of labor as well as love") and warned firmly against slackness, particularly on the part of women, whose aversion to exercise was a potential source of corruption. "Such females...make up in subservience what they lack in worth." Above all, he urged that movements for temperance and anti-slavery be viewed as means to the greater end, the whole perfection of human society.

Although Blanchard chided Oberlin members for what he perceived as unrealistic and ill-formed views of perfectionism's possibilities, the students and colonists were not escapists from a sinful world, seeking salvation only through prayer. On the contrary, they strove to recreate a seemingly ir-
religious society, to redeem it from its errors. It is meaningless to believe that the Lane rebels, and other reform-minded members, had no particular concern for Oberlin's, or Finney's, "brand of religion." In demanding that Finney join them at Oberlin, the Lane rebels showed that different means and emphases were unimportant. Religion was inseparable from all other aspects of life. Theirs were identical values concerning the world. By whichever specific reforms individuals at Oberlin grasped most fervently, they sought to recreate this world in Oberlin's image.

It is useful to distinguish between the dogma of religious beliefs, and its effects on women's lives. One must not approach religious ideology as "oppressive", and assume that it was merely a means of blinding women to their own social position, although it can often be viewed as doing just that. It is equally dubious, when noting a particular religion's role in opening up new pathways for women, to question the sincerity of women's commitment to their religious belief.

Women at Oberlin believed in perfectionism as devoutly as did men. They tried to submit to God's will, and urged others to do the same. Evangelical women, and girls, experienced painful conversions; girlhood was directly associated with the "embrace of piety with qualities of submission and humility." But, as emphasized earlier, the application of faith to action was most important. Joseph
Kett remarks, "It is tempting to jump...to the conclusion that conversion reinforced feminine passivity, that it hammered down the nails on the coffin of domesticity." Oberlin's theology glorified "female" attributes, but it also required "aggressive Christian work." Women were called on to act, to exert themselves as moral agents in a sinful world. Oberlin evangelism considered women's virtues superior and more effective in purifying society. One's place in the world, and in God's eyes, was not predetermined, but earned. The world itself was not doomed by God, but was to be saved by people. According to Kett, "The fact that religious conversion opened up a number of avenues to women helps explain why young ladies were more prone than young men to undergo conversion experiences." How did a theology of social activism change women's lives, and how were these changes experienced at Oberlin? Oberlin members perceived the community as serving two functions: establishing itself as a model for a sinful society, and teaching students the means by which to perfect this society. Since the two functions affected women in different ways, they should be separated in approaching these questions about Oberlin women.
NOTES


4 Cross, p. 199.

5 Ibid., p. 258.

6 Ibid., p. 159.

7 James H. Fairchild to Mary Kellogg, no date (1838); 6 April 1839; 20 May 1839, Where Liberty Dwells, OCSC.

8 Mary Barnes to Laura Branch, 28 April 1843, Fletcher Collection, Box 7, OCA; Jane B. Trew to [father] Trew, 2 August 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 7, OCA; Warren Warner to Harriet Warner, 25 December 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 16, OCA; Hannah Warner to [family] Warner, 15 March 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 16, OCA.

9 Fairchild, "Doctrine of Sanctification," p. 14

10 Fairchild to Kellogg, 2 March 1839, Where Liberty Dwells.

11 James 2:18.

12 Cross, p. 323.

13 Ibid., p. 206.

14 Jonathon Blanchard, "A Perfect State of Society," 1839, OCSC.

16 See Chapter V, "Conclusion: Community and Individual" for a discussion of these themes.


18 Ibid., p. 76.


20 Kett, p. 78.
III MODEL FOR A SINFUL SOCIETY

The interest in Oberlin as a college obscures its significance as a religious community. Oberlin's founders set out for the frontier to create a model society, one that would demonstrate true Christian living to the "perishing world." The training of missionaries, teachers and reformers was a central purpose. More significant and unique was Oberlin's manner of applying female virtues to community life. All aspects of social interaction were governed by an ideology consistent with this function. It was a rare student in the 1830's and 1840's who went to Oberlin merely for an academic experience. The effects of Oberlin on women's lives are explained as much by female participation and role in the community as by purely intellectual experiences.

Community life was noted for several characteristics. First, and probably most significant, was the sense of community illustrated in letters and articles by members. The importance of a close-knit community, bound together by religious and social values, was central to these people's ideas. They believed Oberlin to be as near perfect as such a community could be. This helps explain Daniel Rohrer's suggestion that Oberlin be viewed as a part of the general
movement to form utopian communities, created, like others, by the interplay of social change and social optimism.²

A second characteristic of the Oberlin community was the influence of coeducation. Conway is not wrong in stating that Oberlin women duplicated in college life a female role. The fact that it was indeed college, however, precludes its being "conventional." The effects of joint education on men as well as women were frequently discussed at Oberlin, and are clear in the large number of marriages between Oberlin students, many immediately following graduation.

The community was noted for several "Oberlinisms," perceived by the outside world as extreme. Grahamism, manual labor, and clothing reform may seem peripheral to the larger discussion of women in the evangelical context, but they are basic to an analysis of the community's consistency, and the near unanimity of its members concerning Oberlin's noble mission. Finally, the Oberlin community can be discussed from the perspective of the "outside world"; and the relevance of its perceptions to the functions of that community.

The sense of community at Oberlin was one of shared values more than of a long-term closeness on the part of its members. Letters between women students and teachers express affection for one another, for Oberlin, and for its "privileges." Nancy Prudden, upon arriving in Oberlin
in 1837, remarked that "[t]he sisters all seem to love one another and of course are happy." It was common for women students to refer to a community of "sisters." Susan Irvine wrote, "I believe I love all my classmates with all the wisdom of a sister....I was speaking of the ladies in particular...." Ann Eliza Gillett left Oberlin with reluctance because she would miss her acquaintances of the two most pleasant years of her life. In Oberlin, she recalled, "[a]ll is peace, love, harmony, and good will."3

The sense of closeness is surprising given the nature of the student body. Frequent reference was made in the early years to people scattering. Financial reasons prevented many students from remaining at Oberlin to finish the course. Letters were exchanged when they left, filled with longing for Oberlin and for the friends made there. Harriet Tenney missed and loved her Oberlin friends, who were scattered, but thinking of returning. Often, a student would make the long trip home, as did Ann Harris in 1843, only to return to find few familiar faces: "I feel almost like a stranger here." The lack of continuity among students would seem to prevent a sense of community, but a member of the class of 1850 later remembered the "pride and unity of the college...[that]...entered into our souls." These people were accustomed to distance and separation; the ties with Oberlin remained strong.4

The transient nature of the Oberlin student population did not weaken the bond of shared values and goals. Once Tappan Hall had been constructed in 1836, the women lived
alone in the Boarding House, as Ladies Hall was called. Male students shared meals with them. The women lived closely, two to a "good size" room. Within the one building they attended classes and recitations, prayer and society meetings, meals, and did domestic chores. Some students lived and boarded with colonists, but it was considered desirable to live in the Hall, and was often difficult to get a room. The women voted on and enforced the Hall's rules. The college community was intensely close, indeed, often crowded; the group of people small, if fluctuating. The homogeneity and fervor of their beliefs, as well as the common bond of financial sacrifice to attend, made it much more than a college. Its influence on individuals extended well beyond the period they actually attended.

Oberlin's founders were not pioneers of women's rights. Their definition of a college did not require women students. Delavon Leonard claims that if not for the 1837 depression and the Tappan offer of funds, a separate institution for women might have been founded. This, however, is not a feasible argument. By 1837, women were firmly established as part of the college. John Chadwick states correctly that the decision to admit women was irrevocable. In addition, it must be remembered that the Tappans gave money to the school earlier than the depression which, in fact, injured them financially, and cut off much of their philanthropy. Their support came after the commitment to women's education, which had not been made on the basis
of financial contributions. Money matters played a role in the decision in two ways. The founder recognized an obvious demand among evangelical women for such an opportunity, and the poverty years did not permit serious consideration of a completely separate institution.

Frances Hosford believed that Oberlin "in sentiment and tradition...was conservative from the first....Its many new departures have never been upheavals or changes for the sake of something new. They have sprung from the efforts of earnest men to be loyal to the right as they saw it." Her analysis is helpful in understanding the admission of women. There was little real debate at the time, and less awareness of the storm of protest that would follow. Women were to be as much a part of the Oberlin College community as men. They served as models of virtue, and were therefore a necessary part of a virtuous model society. The supposedly radical innovation of coeducation can be said to have slipped by its founders.

Fairchild's two quite distinct arguments in support of coeducation were that women should be educated as human beings and that they would be a "civilizing influence" on men in public life. To consider the first of these "good" and the latter either irrelevant or oppressive, as Hogeland does, is misleading, for this view loses perspective of Oberlin as a community. If female virtues were to change the world, a society had to be created where their moral influence
would be strong. Oberlin was to be that society.

Charles Finney had less interest in educating women to be "equal" than he did in making immature women into "true vehicles of God's grace." In true Victorian fashion, he praised women for personifying "passionless love and innocence," and hoped that their influence would extend universally.14 "Equality" was irrelevant, as all people who strove for sanctification were equally submissive to God. Assertion of "right" on earth would involve ego and earthly needs which, at Oberlin, were seen as corrupting influences. Women, it was believed, were not subject to such desires.

The concept of women as civilizing influence is more complex than Hogeland's article suggests. It did not mean that women were brought to Oberlin on a pretext of superiority to "serve" men, do laundry, and become wives. An isolated male society, Finney felt, distorted reality, and gave men romantic images of the "female character."15 Faced with the "stark reality" of womanhood, men would be free of sentimentalism, and could proceed with their Christian duty. Women did not come to Oberlin to be useful to men. They came, as did the men, to fulfill a moral mission. Without women, Oberlin would have achieved only a part of its purpose. With women, it completed its primary function: the creation of a good society that would show the world the harmony and virtue of Christian living.
Men and women at Oberlin perceived no conflict between regarding women as elevating influences and treating them as persons. A community purifying the world by female virtues had to deal with the women who embodied them. Human perfection existed in neither men nor women; the reality of this imperfection was best confronted when people were in constant contact. This contact, in turn, inspired women to live up to the demands placed upon them. In this sense, the interaction of men and women might have caused doubt as to the superiority of feminine virtues. The fact that it did not is evidence of the power of their convictions.

The participants in the experiment believed that it worked. In 1836, two years after the school's founding, the faculty and trustees met to discuss joint education. They reported that the mental influence was mutually beneficial, that it cultivated "mind and manners, promote[d] real virtue, and correct[ed] frivolities, irregularities, and follies common to youth." They demonstrated that "no serious evil and much good" resulted from the association of the sexes, which was the true basis of human society.

Yet some conflict did arise between Oberlin women and the institution. In 1839, Mahan proposed that a large group of women be distributed throughout the college classes "expatiating on the good influence it would exert upon the young gentlemen." Twenty three women in the Hall petitioned against it, "from modesty and delicacy." Professor James Thome claimed that "it was false modesty, or delicacy, and that they would soon get used to it." It was reported
that Mahan told some of the women involved that they should "be quiet, and do their duty...It was...best for the gentlemen." The immediate resolution of this conflict between the female department and the institution was in support of the women's request. 18 In fact, the commitment to the well-being of the community did not generally cause such conflict, and, increasingly, women and men worked smoothly together, in academic as well as social matters.

As women's social responsibility expanded, their "sphere" was under discussion, in Oberlin as in much of the country. In 1838, Professor John Morgan delivered a speech to the college community in which he declared that as long as individuals feel dissatisfied with their sphere, they cannot fulfill their responsibilities. Women should see their role not as degraded, but as a noble calling. 19 It may be that Morgan responded to an articulated dissatisfaction, but it is more plausible that he spoke from an unarticulated fear of the effects of education on women's commitment to this "role." In either case, Oberlin women agreed with him in theory. In practice, their "sphere" had been enlarged almost beyond recognition. It included moral influence not only within a family, but to be applied to social activism. More significantly, this social activism was a calling, a central aspect of women's duties. It was not, as was later suggested, a conscious ploy to rationalize usurping men's realm. It was assumed at Oberlin that men could only bene-
The transition from the cult of the moral female to an entirely changed sphere for women is subtle in action, difficult in theory. The ambiguities between the two are evident in the following passage, written by Edward Weed in a letter to his first wife, Phebe Mathews.20

When woman shall stand forth in her glory, filling the sphere designed her, and clothed in her moral beauty, I shall think the millenium is near at hand. Let there be devised some means by which the intelligent, the philanthropic, the great, warm, gushing-hearted women of the nation, can be brought together to exchange views, take an inventory of the wants of their sex, and adopt measures to supply these wants, and to set up the standard of female education and moral action, where God placed it. Little yet has been done comparatively in the female world. It cannot much longer be overlooked or remain inactive. There must soon be a move upon this subject. What part think you, Providence has designed you to act? Are you to stand forth among the daughters of America, and exert an extended and holy influence in the education of your sex?21

A good deal of faith was required to assume that women would remain in their sphere once they "exchanged views" and "took an inventory of the wants of their sex." Weed shared that faith with most Oberlin women.

It was a large psychological step in the early years from a commitment to coeducation to support for "women's rights." Through the most intensely religious period, "rights" were irrelevant, for one sought only God. Political rights meant little to a community that rejected access to political means and values. Women were to serve
in their sphere and men in theirs; in practice, the two overlapped considerably. Women overstepped the relatively flexible bounds by developing a social calling that eventually redefined the sphere itself. Men, in turn, adopted means and values considered feminine by nature; namely, moral suasion, anti-political social activism, and religious education.

After 1840, the subject of women's rights began receiving attention at Oberlin and elsewhere. By that time the issue had been publicized by the activities of the Grimkes, and the split in the American Anti-slavery Society over, among other issues, women's participation.

According to Fairchild, in remarks to Kellogg, Elizabeth Prall gave "quite a pretty composition" in rhetoric class on Elizabeth of England. Toward the end of her essay, she remarked on "'women's rights,' as they are technically called." In England, she said, women could address men of state, and in Latin, "while here in liberty-loving America, she is not permitted to speak in her own tongue among the populace to defend her rights. No wonder Garrison, the friend of Equal Rights, comes forth so kindly to vindicate women." The men in the class laughed. Allusion to the Anti-slavery split, however, caused them to debate the issue. Under pressure, the "poor girl cried sadly," at which point Fairchild realized that she had not intended her comments as a joke. He concluded with an apology for "a long story for so trifling an event." 22
Theoretical discussion, however, is not a true indicator of change in people's lives. The very interaction between men and women on a daily basis made the college community unique. Women did domestic labor, just as men did manual and outdoor work, thus perpetuating traditional roles. Oberlin's founders never intended to upset those roles. Neither, in theory, did Oberlin women. The structure of their lives in an evangelical college community was the central cause and focus of change. The Oberlin experiment was created neither for men nor for women, but for the world's education and enlightenment.

The joint education of women and men, linked by so strong a moral bond, resulted in an extraordinary number of marriages among Oberlin graduates. The closeness of the community, and the intensity of shared experience and belief, made this inevitable. Students were forbidden to marry while attending school; each commencement, therefore, was followed by a long list of wedding announcements. Three of the four women who entered the A.B. program in 1837 married men of the first graduating class (1837) and the fourth married a man of her own class (1841). According to Louis Hartson, between 1837 and 1846, 97.5% of the Oberlin women graduates married. This contrasts with the statistics at Holyoke during these years, where 75.7% of graduates married. Sixty five percent of these Oberlin women married Oberlin men. Women who did not marry other Oberlin graduates tended to marry ministers and theologically-trained
teachers of like belief. Zeruiah Porter, for example, married Edward Weed, an Oneida and Lane graduate. After serving as an American Anti-slavery Society agent and then general agent to the Ohio Anti-slavery Society, Weed became a full-time clergyman. He devoted his life, with rather more single-mindedness than many, to converting sinners. Frances Hosford points out that "[i]f the 'single idea' was the cause of the very high marriage rate, it was bound to fall as soon as convictions and aims began to take on complexities."24 By the late 1840's, when the proportion of men continuing to Seminary had declined, and "complexities" arose, the pattern had changed.25 It is clear that the close interaction of college life, even under strict supervision, provided a common basis on which to build families. Further, the common lifestyle was in opposition to the norm, making the Oberlin experiment even more secluding, and in turn bringing participants together.

Marriage and family, like all other aspects of life, fit into a larger scheme of evangelical activism. Stability was desired in changing times. According to Ronald Walters, "[a]rticulated opinion about the family was changing in the 1830's and it was verging on worship."26 The family was the focal point of female virtues and influence, and was seen as "the one morally reliable institution in a fluid and diverse society."27 In an effort to preserve and extend stability, Oberlin students accepted marriage as a given.
It was considered a natural and inevitable result of close living between the sexes. Furthermore, the family was the model from which women's influence would be implemented in the larger society. Conscious emphasis was not placed on marriage as a goal for women, rather, as a base from which women and men would act. The family was the arena for female virtues, and society would take its lesson from that realm. Marriage and family were usable institutions, not ends in themselves.

Comments made at the time illustrate these ideas. Mary Kellogg reported from Louisiana that a man had offered marriage to her if he could accompany her to Oberlin. "But I knew he had a better opinion of me than that I would go there to be married." Helen Cowles, confronted with two proposals, planned to remain single if marriage would interfere with her becoming a missionary; she intended to "control affections." Weed married Porter in 1844 with the wish that they be a "holy couple."28

Affection, friendship and respect were evident in the marriages of Oberlin students. Helen Cowles grew happy in the "new friendship" once she had accepted "Mr. Kendall's" proposal and got to know and like his "ways, habits, thoughts and ideas." The correspondence between Kellogg and Fairchild is permeated with sincere affection, however formal it may appear by later standards. He affirmed his "regard" for her, even though he never considered himself "a victim of the passion so frequently described by novelists and poets." More important than passion, he placed "all confidence in [her] judgement" and attributed much of his growth to her
influence. Caroline Rudd's "courage slackened" when she thought of the winter months ahead, and without husband George Allen's companionship. The sense of trust and respect within these marriages is strong, and the reference to the love of family frequent. Edward Weed wept over his wife's letters while he travelled. He wrote that he wanted to go home, but followed Providence, controlling his "natural feelings and desires." 29

Marriages were made with the intent of sharing Christian labor. Weed's biographer remarked approvingly that Phebe Mathews married him "not to be ministered unto, but to minister." Fairchild, evaluating a prospective career as a minister in Michigan in contrast to teaching at Oberlin, told Kellogg that she would be more useful in Michigan; "there is not as much opportunity here for women to exert an influence, except in their own families." Circumstances finally led him to remain at Oberlin, but many Oberlin women did go further west with their husbands. 30 Perhaps frontier life was more appealing to women who were prepared for its rigours by a religious and social commitment. Frequently they set up Christian schools and churches, accordingly structured around female values, as well as the shared goals of missionary work and religious education. Oberlin women and men sought to continue their community after graduation. They left the relatively secure environment for the greater mission of regenerating the evil world. 31
Oberlin's famed manual labor system served several functions. First, the founders attributed considerable importance to the development of healthy bodies along with learned minds. Second, they emphasized the benefits of an economic system in which students could work for their tuition and board. It was a school, claimed Delia Fenn, where one could give one's children a good education while providing them only with their clothing.32

A great deal of discussion went on throughout the nineteenth century as to why American women were so "sickly." As late as 1874, Dr. Clarke wrote that coeducation was a "physiological impossibility" and was the major cause of ill health. His book was followed by a burst of criticism. Adelia Johnston countered his argument with data from Oberlin College. She showed that bad health was caused by society's creating an antagonism between mind and body and that women should strengthen both. Fairchild, in spite of a characteristic cautiousness, agreed.

There is a possibility that intense competition tells more upon the nervous endurance of the young woman than of the young man, and that anxieties and apprehensions in general take a stronger hold...yet it is not observable that a larger proportion of young women, who enter upon a full course, are turned aside, from failing health, than of young men.33

Women intended to serve as good Christian laborers would be of little use if perpetually ill. Manual labor and outdoor work were essential.
It quickly became obvious, however, that the labor performed by women in the 1830's did not truly serve the function of physical exercise. Women sewed, laundered, ironed, and prepared and served meals. They did not attend classes on Monday, devoting the day to laundry. Domestic chores were made scientific. Alice Cowles, as principal of the Ladies Department, gave required weekly lectures on physiology, as well as detailed "hints" on cooking, cleaning, sewing, organizing tables and kitchen, and scouring knives (this latter merited no fewer than eight "hints.")

Women were paid an hourly wage by the college, which in turn received money from male students for various services. Fletcher claims that, in 1836, sixty per cent of women's total expenses were paid for by domestic labor, and that "this economic relation between the sexes in the 1830's was much the same as that in any well-regulated family." Mutual economic dependence was largely responsible for offsetting the cost of education for both men and women. It also fulfilled a third role of manual labor, which was to perpetuate a stable community based on familial functions.

The ideals of purity and health led Oberlin's members directly to Grahamism. Sylvester Graham began his career as a temperance lecturer in Pennsylvania in 1830. He believed that certain eating, exercise, and sanitary practices violated "physiological laws." He extended temperance ideas to a far more general physical pattern, recommending vegetarianism, whole wheat products, frequent baths and
exercise, courses in physiology, and abstention from coffee, tea, sugar, and most spices. He made sensible recommendations for clothing reform, particularly for women, that were adopted at Oberlin. Women were to dress simply, wearing plain waists and high collars that preserved both health and modesty.  

In 1841 the faculty passed a resolution forbidding the wearing of corsets.

Oberlin students expressed unanimity concerning use of alcohol, and, at different times, coffee and tea were also prohibited. Yet Fletcher, in stating that "[m]ost Oberlinites accepted the radical health program," ignores many disagreements on the issue. The founders of Oberlin, as well as Mahan and Finney, were Grahamites. However, there was little unity among other students and faculty as to the merits of extreme Grahamism. In 1835, there were two tables in the dining room, one serving meat (that cost seven shillings per week) and the other vegetarian (for six shillings per week.) At that time there was no strict Graham table, although this fluctuated.

Some students felt that Grahamism injured their health. Warren Warner informed his family that he had modified his Graham diet because it made him too weak to perform labor; eating meat again, he apparently felt stronger. His sister Hannah decided not to carry Grahamism too far; she bathed only twice a week in winter rather than daily. Helen Cowles had a glass of tea, mostly sugar and milk, and found it bad for her: "too exciting." Students accepted Graham's pre-
mises concerning health and exercise; many, however, were unwilling to omit all food that was considered "impure."

Fairchild provides further evidence on the lack of consensus on Grahamism. He commented that a man who came to Oberlin in 1840 to convert all to Grahamism would have "quite a job." Later that year, Dr. William Alcott of Boston also came to preach Grahamism. He was "favorably impressed" with Oberlin but, if Fairchild is any representation, the feeling was not mutual. Although Fairchild conceded that there might be some truth to the principles, he thought there were no able advocates. "When [Dr. Alcott] came," he wrote sarcastically, "there were perhaps thirty of the boarders in the hall that used animal food and, when he left, there were about one hundred." 43

In spite of the lack of agreement on Graham's radical health program, Oberlinites believed that good food, exercise, and clothing that restricted neither movement nor health were essential for the good society. Women were closely associated with "physiological reform"; it tended to take on an extreme moral tone, and was linked with movements for temperance and moral reform. Despite their fervor, female students and their male counterparts changed their diet when they felt their health was adversely affected; strong bodies were as necessary for good work as "pure" ones.

The inclusion of black students in the Oberlin College community contrasts sharply with that of women. These inno-
vations played quite different roles in the functioning of the community, and served different purposes. The distinction between these two practices adds to an understanding of the goals of the community and the potential conflicts that the situation created.

The extension of abolitionist principles to community life, although causing a comparable uproar outside Oberlin, was the far more drastic move. It challenged the assumptions concerning community cohesiveness held even by abolitionists. The Oberlin (Men's) Anti-slavery Society had as its object "...the immediate emancipation of the whole coloured race within the United States; the emancipation from the oppression of the master, the emancipation of free coloured men from the oppression of public sentiment, and the elevation of both to an intellectual, moral, and political equality with the whites." The object of raising blacks to a level of equality with whites required education, which Oberlin supplied. The "law of love" upon which all this was founded required an acceptance of blacks into the community, a step few abolitionists were willing to initiate.

In December of 1834, Shipherd reported to the college that the students of Lane Seminary had agreed to attend Oberlin under certain specified conditions. The demand that Oberlin admit blacks was one of these, and caused a great deal of debate among the trustees. In desperate need of both funds and students, they finally accepted the demands.
At the same time, a vote was taken by students; twenty six voted for admitting blacks, and thirty two against. Among the twenty women who voted, only six supported integration. How does one reconcile this vote with the fact that Oberlin students were abolitionists, and with Fletcher's remark that women abolitionists, in supporting Garrison, were more radical than the men?

Fletcher placed too much emphasis on organizational and temperamental differences between Oberlinites and Garrisonians, and too little on basic shared values and experiences. True, men at Oberlin and Garrisonians held different views regarding women's public speaking; it is this, more than a general "radicalism," that explains the lesser antagonism to Garrison on the part of Oberlin women. Yet Oberlin's and Garrison's values were surprisingly similar. Both recognized the value of women's activism. Oberlin men did not as clearly define how this activism was to be expressed with relation to slavery, except in terms of moral "influence." Meanwhile, they supplied women with the very skills required for public speaking, and adhered to an ideology that required that they make use of these skills.

Fletcher claimed that "Oberlin and Garrison had nothing in common but their consecration to the freeing of the slave. Garrison was destructive, "ultra," and impractical; Oberlin was, in comparison, constructive, conservative, cautious, and practical." It is difficult to understand why the use of moral suasion at Oberlin was more practical than Garrison's
use of it. Furthermore, a commitment to anti-slavery in the 1830's was quite a lot to have in common. The similarities between the groups are what made them unique, and what made it possible for them to become abolitionists. Fletcher's analysis accounts for little of these similarities, which went further than simply viewing slavery as evil. The only people who could, in the 1830's, come out so strongly and absolutely against slavery were those who were willing to recognize it as an absolute moral evil. Only people who saw the eradication of sin as the goal of their lives could given themselves fully to a cause with no institutional solution. These groups shared the moral absolutism required of people who would initiate such a stand.

It is significant that both at Oberlin and among Gar­risonians anti-slavery activity required a "consecration." With abolitionism as with revivalist religion, commitment was total; Garrison and Oberlin members shared commonly, if cautiously, held beliefs, and carried them to their logical and extreme extension. Revivalism and radical anti-slavery shared, as Walters points out, grammar and tactics; they also shared and exchanged members. More importantly, revivalist religion was often a step on the way to anti-slavery activity. Walters claims that it was the passing of religious intensity that led people to reform. "Much of the appeal of anti-slavery lay in this ability to merge essentially religious impulses and spiritual discontent into a constructive, acceptable social role." Reform and good works were tests of faith.
It is in this connection between anti-slavery and religion that one finds the key to Oberlin abolitionism. Virtually all students at Oberlin opposed slavery, regardless of their fears of an integrated community. Slavery was merely the most blatant of many societal sins, and the prospect of integration, although too radical for many, was another test of faith. Oberlin members aimed to persuade slaveholders of their immoral actions, and therefore end the practice. James Prudden wrote his brother George that Oberlin's anti-slavery activity was "proof" that if the North united, slavery would "melt away." The technique for ending slavery, moral suasion, was identical to Garrison's; the difference lay in Finney's influence over Oberlin, and the preoccupation for some time with purely religious activity.

Oberlin students in general accepted Finney's belief that the best way to help slaves was to work for "Jesus' Kingdom." Meanwhile, influenced by the Lane students' work, they involved themselves in more direct anti-slavery activity, of which the inclusion of blacks in the community was the most radical example. Ambivalence toward the integration of essentially white communities remained among abolitionists for some time. Fear of integration, even at the expense of principle, existed among people who sought a cohesive and "pure" community. Apparently women in particular defined their role in terms of the preservation of such a community, but there does not seem to have been any
conflict over this issue once blacks were admitted. At Oberlin, blacks were admitted from expediency rather than principle on the part of the institution. To the Lane students, however, and those who followed, the integrated community was seen as logically consistent with their beliefs, and, therefore, a required act of faith.

Abolition and religion at Oberlin were almost indistinguishable. Weed reported of Theodore Weld's Utica meeting that "[m]any of the good people seemed to feel as though they had experienced a new conversion; and that an important revival of religion had occurred among them."\footnote{53} It was Weld, in emotional debate, who "converted" the Lane students to abolitionism. Barnes believed Weld's "genius resided in his evangelism, his power to make missionaries of his converts." Anti-slavery agents made anti-slavery "identical with religion."\footnote{54} For many, anti-slavery served as religion, the commitment part of a longer spiritual quest.\footnote{55} Abolitionist meetings and revivals served similar purposes, for "...many ostensibly public events served to identify and strengthen true-hearted reformers rather than to reach unbelievers."\footnote{56} Insofar as it was inseparable from Oberlin religion, abolition was far from a secular reform in the early years. By the later 1840's, however, people increasingly recognized slavery as an institution, and they sought institutional, or political, means to abolish
it. This was directly related to the drift away from moral suasion and revivalism. Abolitionism provided a cause for social action when moral suasion no longer fulfilled the spiritual need to do "good works."

The world outside Oberlin did not react to the model community as intended. The main source of information on Oberlin was Delazon Smith's *A History of Oberlin* (1837), a slanderous, first-hand account by an expelled student.\textsuperscript{57} The book, intended to harm the school's reputation, did just that. It described in detail the evil that allegedly arose from allowing women and men of both races to "comingle." Smith's book was followed by other tracts "revealing" the sinfulness of Oberlin's members, but subsequent works lacked the impact of his diatribe.

Oberlin's practices were perceived as threatening. Indeed, Oberlinites confronted the daily actions of other people, labeled them sinful, and, with increasing aggressiveness, tried to change them. In addition, they set up a model society that, combined with rumors of evildoings, caused people to fear their example and fervor.

Hannah Warner went to Avon, five miles from Oberlin, to teach during winter vacations. She taught of the love of Christ, but not "Oberlinisms," as people were bitterly opposed. Warner felt that she had to refrain from teaching of "smaller things," such as denying "superfluities of life," since such subjects reminded her students of Oberlin, for which their minds were not prepared.\textsuperscript{58} Mary Kellogg's
parents, although supportive of her decisions, were sus-
picious of Oberlin doctrines.59

Clarissa Humphrey, a resident of Mansfield, Ohio, requested
that her father send her all available copies of the "New
York Observer" for use at a temperance meeting. She said that
she must arm herself against the "fanaticks"[sic] and
"Oberlinites of course" who were sure to try to "bring the
good people" to teetotalism, not even to drink tea or coffee.60

People acted to lessen Oberlin's influence. James Fair-
child, and his brother Edward, were refused ordination by
the Presbytery because they would not join "in regarding
the influence of Oberlin as pernicious." They were told
that they might be ordained if they would spend a year at
Yale or Andover; they refused.61

Democrats in the Ohio legislature opposed the practice
of educating blacks, as well as activism on the part of stu-
dents and teachers, and attempted in six sessions to repeal
Oberlin's charter. When two black men escaped from jail in
1841, they automatically blamed it on "Oberlin[']s]fanatical
abolition anarchists...." Whigs in the legislature, reluc-
tant to risk identification with anti-slavery, were never-
theless forced to defend the charter because of Liberty party
activity in the community. Appeals to corporate privilege
and the realization that ending the charter might not harm
the institution, not an acceptance of Oberlin's practices,
led the legislature to give up their efforts by the mid-
1840's.62
Long after the institution and the community had conformed to a more familiar and less aggressive pattern, people spoke of the students as fanatics, and their influence as "pernicious." A member of the class of 1850 later drew a serene picture: "Oberlin was almost entirely free from the peculiar forms of temptations that beset the students of later generations. The club, the saloon, public games, social attractions were wholly unknown. Violence was a crime. However distorted the image of Oberlin possessed by outsiders, the view of a peaceful, secluded community is also misleading. Oberlin's members did not merely isolate themselves within their ideal community. In the final analysis, the community could not truly be perfect if surrounded by a sinful society. The fear of Oberlin was perhaps misplaced insofar as people overestimated its impact and effectiveness. It should be remembered, however, that the model was never intended as a sufficient end. Oberlin members did participate in instances of illegal actions on behalf of slaves, and they did attempt to control the meetings of other communities, in favor of their beliefs. Their community was intended as a guide for a world they were compelled to convert. More important in terms of understanding outside fears, they eventually left their community, and followed a calling to act.
NOTES

1 It may be that Lucy Stone was one of these few; this would explain both her notoriety and her dissatisfaction with the school's "double standard."


3 Nancy Prudden to George Prudden, 15 May 1837, Fletcher Collection, Box 11; Susan Irvine to Hannah Warner, 28 January 1845, Fletcher Collection, Box 18; Ann Elisa Gillett to Charlotte Fenner, 5 January 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

4 Harriet Newell Tenney to Angeline Tenney, 3 November 1837, Fletcher Collection, Box 7; Ann Harris to Laura Branch, 27 April 1843, Fletcher Collection, Box 7; "Reminiscences of the Class of 1850," Miscellaneous Files, OCSC.

5 Delia Fenn to Richard Fenn, 21 August 1835, Fletcher Collection, Box 5.

6 Fairchild to Kellogg, 20 May 1839; 1 July 1839, Where Liberty Dwells.

7 Two hundred students attended throughout 1835; it should be noted that not all of these attended each term of that year. For this reason, statistics on enrollment vary, and are questionable.

8 Jane B. Trew wrote her father, 29 May 1843, that the greatest trouble was lack of money. Fletcher Collection, Box 7. This was expressed frequently; students were self-supporting, and poverty appears to have been universal among them. Fletcher remarked that the only thing missing from Oberlin during the "boon times" was money; p. 190


See, for example, Fairchild, Oberlin: The Colony and The College, (Oberlin: 1883), section on coeducation, pp. 173-186.

Hogeland, p. 164.

Ibid., p. 163; 169.

Ibid., p. 166.

Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Trustees. Oberline College, Oberlin, Ohio, 9 March 1836.

Incidents did of course occur that could be construed as "evil." Two in particular received an enormous amount of attention in correspondence; the amount of discussion reflects their uniqueness. In 1839, a man was flogged by several students in what became known as the "Oberlin lynching operation." He had written impolite letters to several women, one of whom had shown it to her brother. Oberlin students, women in particular, joined to defend the "lynchers" from punishment. In 1843, another incident occurred, when two male students, without permission, carried a trunk into Anna Blachley's room while she lay ill. The faculty held seven meetings over this. Students of every class petitioned them to let the offenders remain, which they did—with the promise from all students that no favors be asked in cases of future transgressions. Mary Barnea wrote to Laura Branch (28 April 1843, Fletcher Collection, Box 7,) that she wondered what Oberlin was coming to. More common was the remark of Jane Trew (to father, 19 May 1843, Fletcher Collection, box 7,) that it was a thoughtless action, without regard for consequences, but also without immoral motive. More significance was awarded the incident by those seeking to discredit Oberlin than by those involved. Minutes from faculty meetings (Oberlin College, 1834-36, Fletcher Collection, Box 4,) report other dismissals, although these were rare. In spite of Delazon Smith's account of "cases of lewdness and extreme depravity," the informed consensus matched that of an article in Religious Intelligence, 1 October 1836: "grossness and vulgarity" of usual men's colleges were absent in Oberlin, and this was attributed to the presence of "ladies."

John P, Cowles letter in Cleveland Observer, 13 November 1839, p. 3. (Copy in Fletcher Collection, Box 3.)
19 Fairchild to Kellogg, 19 March 1838, Where Liberty Dwells.

20 Weed's second wife was Zeruiah Porter, Oberlin's first woman graduate, who completed the Literary degree in 1838.

21 Weed to Phebe Mathews, 16 November 1836, Faith and Works, (New York: 1853)

22 Fairchild to Kellogg, 29 June 1840, Where Liberty Dwells.

23 Louis Hartson, "Marriage Record of Alumnae for the First Century of a Coeducational College," The Journal of Heredity, XXXI, no. 9 (September 1940), p. 406. It is difficult to form statistics about non-graduates. However, they seem to have followed similar, if less consistent, patterns.

24 Hosford, p. 169.

25 Ibid., p. 122; It is interesting to note that Betsy Mix Cowles (Lit., 1840) was the first Oberlin alumna to remain unmarried. She was also the first committed feminist among the graduates.

26 Walters, p. 92.

27 Ibid., p. 94.

28 Kellogg to Fairchild, 16 March 1840, Where Liberty Dwells; Helen Cowles, entry in journal, 16 August 1849, Grace Victorious; Weed to Zeruiah Porter, 10 June 1845, Faith and Works.

29 Helen Cowles, entry in journal, 27 November 1848; 21 September 1849, Grace Victorious; Fairchild to Kellogg, no date, 1838; 11 October 1838; 2 March 1839; Caroline Rudd Allen to George Allen, 22 October 1845, Fletcher Collection, Box 2; Weed to Porter, 9 August 1850; 2 October 1850, Faith and Works.

30 Faith and Works, biographical comments (by "J.L."), p. 43; Fairchild to Kellogg, 8 February 1841, Where Liberty Dwells.

31 The best known and longest-standing of these was Mills College in California, run by Mary Atkins, an Oberlin graduate, whose goal was to "train healthy, companionable, self-reliant women -- those prepared to be useful and acceptable in the school, in the family, and in society." See Rosalind Keep, Fourscore Years, (California: 1931), p. 17.
32 Delia Fenn to father, 21 April 1835, Fletcher Collection, Box 5.


34 Alice Cowles, "Hints and Instructions for those connected with Domestic Duties of Oberlin College," Fletcher Collection, Box 4; Cowles was the principal of the Ladies Department from 1836-40, at which time Mary Ann Adams, a graduate of the department in 1839, replaced her.

35 Fletcher, p. 644. Women's hourly wage was 2½-5 cents in the first years. Men's were somewhat higher. However, women's fees for tuition and board were lowered accordingly; Fletcher, p. 640.


37 Cordelia (?) to sister, 24 April 1850, Fletcher Collection, Box 17; J.O. Beardslee to Clarissa Wright, 11 September 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

38 Hannah Warner to parents, 15 March 1841; Rohrer (p. 104) claims that women were "restricted" in their dress; no complaints from the women are found regarding these restrictions, and the advantages of comfort were frequently commented upon; Fletcher (p. 821) says that it was rumored in 1841 that a woman was dismissed for wearing a corset, but generally the women agreed with the regulation on such apparel.

39 Until 1856, liquor could be sold by license in town. (Fletcher, p. 547.) The fact that it was outlawed at so late a date is probably evidence of its infrequent use before; Oberlin members believed in temperance from the time of the community's founding.

40 Fletcher, p. 321.

41 Delia Fenn to father, 21 April 1835, Fletcher Collection, Box 5.

42 Warren Warner to family, 14 December 1841; 25 December 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 16; Hannah Warner to family, 3 December 1842; 8 February 1842, Fletcher Collection, Box 16; Helen Cowles, entry in journal, 5 July 1849, Grace Victorious.
Fairchild to Kellogg, 22 November 1839; 2 June 1840, Where Liberty Dwells.

Constitution, Oberlin Anti-slavery Society, 1835, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

Petition concerning admission of black students to Oberlin Collegiate Institute, 31 December 1834, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

Rohrer (p. 133) says that the Ladies Anti-slavery Society, founded in 1835, formed an alliance with Garrison. Since the records of this society do not exist, there is no way of knowing the nature of this connection, except insofar as several women graduates joined Garrison's organization. Sallie Holley, in the late 1840's, considered herself and her friend Caroline Putnam the only Garrisonians at Oberlin (Chadwick, p. 52.)

Fletcher, p. 265.

An excerpt from a letter from John P Cowles to his brother Henry illustrates the vague line between the groups, and the ease with which it was crossed by some.

"I look upon your ground as the right ground in reference to Anti-slavery. My own views and feelings have been of that cast for some years, though I could not go with Garrison -- but of late, he and the Abolitionists have been so much more sinned against than sinning, that I have pretty well cast in my lot with them, and should I stay in New England, you would hear of me as an open and avowed friend of immediate emancipation, and whatever else makes Abolitionists odious, except, I trust, causeless vituperation..." 8 January 1836

Walters, p. 46; 53.

James Prudden to George Prudden, 8 April 1837, Fletcher Collection, Box 11.

Fletcher, p. 252.

Male students commonly gave anti-slavery lectures throughout Ohio during vacations. In addition, anti-slavery meetings, lectures, and celebration of the emancipation in the West Indies, were frequent community events.

Weed to sister; 7 March 1836, Faith and Works.
54 Walters, p. 39; Barnes, p. 87, 104.
55 Walters, p. 52; 45.
56 Ibid., p. 23.
57 Delazon Smith, A History of Oberlin (1837)
58 Hannah Warner to parents, 24 December 1841; 28 January 1842, Fletcher Collection, Box 16.
59 Kellogg to Fairchild, 5 September 1838, Where Liberty Dwells.
60 Clarissa Humphrey to father, 19 March 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.
61 Fairchild to Kellogg, 21 September 1840, Where Liberty Dwells.
62 Ellsworth, "Ohio's Legislative Attack..."
63 "Reminiscences of the Class of 1850," OCSC
Oberlin differed from most model, or utopian, communities in one key respect; it provided a college education. Indeed, it was the only college education available to women. For this reason, women were likely to place great emphasis on the academic aspect of Oberlin. Clearly, not all evangelical women came to Oberlin, but those that attended recognized value in education, and the opportunity to do what had not previously been done.

Several facets of this education are particularly interesting in this context. First, to what purpose did women intend to put their intellectual achievements? Welter claims that anti-intellectualism was implicit in the cult of the lady. This is true only insofar as there was a clear dichotomy between moral power and intellect. Nancy Cott points out that coeducation was unreasonable "as the canon of domesticity froze the contrast between the occupations of the two sexes." This dichotomy weakened in a community that shared moral values based on women's role.

The period under study witnessed an increasing number of female teachers, as well as a rationalization for claiming the field of teaching as an extension of women's sphere. The conflicts inherent in this were played out in Oberlin among a unique group of intellectually capable and socially conscious women. These women were expected to both use and
deny their intellect in cleansing the world through the education of others.

The daily experience at Oberlin illuminates these conflicts. The school, carefully regimented, taught them how best to use their lives. At the same time, it opened up previously closed options. Oberlin women were clearly conscious of the opportunity, and worked hard to prove themselves intellectually capable. The actual academic experience reveals the contradictions between demands placed on them and the leeway permitted in fulfilling those demands.

Oberlin women's societies have received a good deal of attention. The organizational, rhetorical, and conceptual skills acquired at Oberlin both fulfilled and implicitly challenged expectations of these women. As stated before, Oberlin women did not wish to break down traditional roles; they took advantage of their unique situation and made those roles more flexible and, therefore, more usable. They changed the forms of their activity more than the "sphere" itself, and in a manner consistent with Oberlin theory. Daniel Scott Smith states that "[t]he existence of protest...is not an index of oppression, but rather a measure of the ambiguities and weaknesses in the system of control." So long as women's values were dominant in the Oberlin community, and their importance in society glorified, most women perceived their needs as consistent with what Oberlin provided. Through the early period, Oberlin women were not
in conflict with Oberlin; they shared, rather than chal-
lenged, the community's basic assumptions.

The education of women was subordinate to the goals
of an evangelical college. The main outlet through which
women were to spread female virtues was teaching. Through-
out the nineteenth century, the number of women who taught
elementary school rose steadily, along with the growing
emphasis on common schooling for all Americans. Women,
to be sure, were paid less than men. The idealization of
teaching as women's sphere served not only to inspire women
to follow their "calling," but rationalized the use of a
cheap and convenient labor force.

The schools in which Oberlin women taught were make-
shift. Oberlin students often held sessions in colonists'
rooms. S.J. Willard, for example, held a school for twenty
"scholars" over Mrs. Mahan's shed. Other women students
tutored, and many supported and trained themselves by
teaching during vacations.

Teaching was not considered a temporary career. In 1836,
fourty three young women were asked to record, among other
personal facts, their future intentions. The plans of those
who responded are illuminating. Nine women simply wrote
"teach," with Jane Strong adding "and translate Scriptures." Ten women planned to be a "missionary" or "home missionary,"
often adding "if the Lord wills" or "where God in His Provi-
dence directs." Five other women specifically wished to be
"foreign missionaries," while three others planned to either teach or perform missionary work. Catherine Gillett demonstrated the close connection between the two, in writing that she "hope[d] to become qualified for instructing the ignorant." Nine other women intended to "prepare for whatever station the Lord directs," "labor more efficiently in the vineyard of Christ," or labor in "some sphere of Christian usefulness." Clearly, these women perceived themselves as following a calling to be useful in the education of others. 10

The coherence of the contemporary literature on women teachers contrasts with the schools themselves. The subject was under much discussion in the period, seen as part of the cult of the moral female. Catharine Beecher founded schools to train frontier school mistresses. She sought to elevate the role of teacher, by making it solely woman's. 11 Through teaching, women would be "fostering the nation's social conscience." In lectures to groups of women, she stressed religious education, domestic economy, and good moral habits. Through her, young women "learned how to be moral examples that the rest of the community could imitate." 12 Zilpah Grant Bannister of Ipswich Seminary felt that "our object should be, not simply, to raise up teachers, but educators -- characters of a much higher grade than mere teachers." 13 Teaching was explicitly linked with women's call to higher social action.
The feminine values that idealized women teachers fit in well with the Oberlin ideology. Women students frequently discussed their role as teachers. Samuel Read Hall summed up these values as applied to teaching in a series of lectures published in 1832. Hall intended the book more as a practical guide than a philosophy on teaching, but the latter is clear throughout. The conflicts within middle class, Protestant America concerning universal education are also apparent. Widespread education was considered proof of democracy, but it was also a means for purifying an increasingly complex society. Teachers were not to leave the forming of "right habits" to parents who presummably sent their children to school to learn morals. Children must be taught to be useful, not "unrestrained in their passions." They must "submit to wholesome authority" and be accountable "to the Author of their being."

The more practical aspects of Hall's lectures were also consistent with Oberlin theory. Children should not be forced to sit still for too long, for confinement made them suffer in health and in spirit. Competition among them was unnecessary in keeping their attention, and possibly harmful. Reference in all school matters should be made to impartial justice. The woman teacher was to recognize her employment as a means to elevate human character, thereby purifying society at large. Teaching was God's work and, therefore, noble. "The question...is not whether
you are competent, but whether you are called." 19

The guidelines for Oberlin women's particular calling formed the basis of their education. "The Course of Study of the Ladies Department is designed to give Ladies facilities for thorough mental discipline and the special training which will qualify them for teaching and the other duties of their sphere." 20 "Aggressive Christian work" for women meant teaching, a form of social activism and an extension of their more traditional sphere. Educated women at Oberlin were also to involve themselves in reform of a different nature, although avoiding public speaking before "promiscuous" audiences. The line between the two was vague, especially for women who shared their academic lives and social values with men who became ministers and public speakers. Equally important, their academic training taught these women the assertion of independence and rational thought. The education typically received by women caused dissatisfaction among some: "The clear understanding of whatever branch they pursue is necessary, not simply as a matter of knowledge, but also, as a matter of mental discipline....Many ladies...who can show their testimonials of having completed a course of study, have never learned to think." 21 This was not the case at Oberlin, where women were taught to think in order to live useful lives. Alice Cowles answered the question "How shall we attain that elevation of character which originally belonged to woman?" by ex-
plaining that women "must abide in Christ" and "must be well educated." Later, she told women students that "[t]wo obstacles [are] in the way of your performing the duties which devolve upon you....Selfishness and ignorance." 22 These people, dismayed at most women's lack of critical thought and social commitment, stressed a disciplined mind. They did not intend, however, that the education of women lead to a commitment outside the definition of their traditional, if expanded, role.

Oberlin women spent their time in a large number of activities. They rose following a 5 A.M. bell, at which time each prayed privately for one half hour. At 6:30, breakfast was served to two hundred students in the dining hall. A bell signified an end to noise, prayer was given, and people ate "with cheerful countenances and happy hearts." 23 Conversation between men and women was generally on literary or religious topics at meals. Within an hour following the meal, the ladies did the domestic work and returned to their rooms for study. At nine they met in the Ladies Assembly room for the daily exercise, given by a member of the faculty. 24 At that time, Alice Cowles asked for trudy women, and read their names. 25 Preparation for dinner began at 10:30, and the meal served at 12:15. In the afternoon, there were more classes. Elizabeth Maxwell, with a touch of annoyance, described her afternoon schedule. Beginning at one, she recited
Greek, followed by arithmetic, composition, writing in Oberlin Hall, history of Rome, and, finally, at 5:45, "practicing."

There were prayers again at six, supper at 6:30, and society meetings in the evening "if one wishes." The ladies retired at ten, although Maxwell indicated she was "almost tired out" at 7:30. In addition, all students had to attend church twice on Sundays, and a weekly religious lecture on Thursday. Each class had a weekly religious exercise on the English Bible. Students also conducted prayer meetings on Monday evenings.

Women in the College and the Ladies Department participated in these activities together. The distinction between the two parts of the institution was far from clear at the time. The coursework was almost identical; the main difference was that the Ladies' Course did not require Greek or Latin, and placed more emphasis on religion and Christian education. It was not equivalent to eastern seminaries, for it did not offer "decorative arts," and placed more stress on math and history. From the first year of the college, women attended classes with the men "whenever the course of study admits of it." The college assumed that women were not qualified upon entering Oberlin to compete for an equal degree with men, for most women did not receive as much formal education prior to entering Oberlin. In fact, women and men took classes together and fulfilled virtually the same requirements.
In 1837, four women entered the college course. Three of them received the A.B. degree in 1841. It is unclear why they chose the course. The pride later expressed in their achievement indicates that ambition alone might have inspired them to take the course. There was a good deal of discussion over the idea of women officially enrolling in the men's course, but the school adapted quickly, as the resulting practice was little different than the previous one. Mary Hosford expressed pleasure in noting that even Alice Cowles, once adamently opposed to women entering the college course, advised all capable women to take a "thorough course."

The immediate significance of this change was symbolic. Women at Oberlin became as conscious of their role in the coeducation experiment as they were of their part in the evangelical project. They worked hard to demonstrate their competence as well as their moral superiority. Mary Hosford was relieved when the trials, "toil and fatigue" of the first two years had ended, and "we have succeeded beyond our own expectations....Sometimes I feel like weeping tears of joy over those young ladies who are now making their way through the same path that we have trod, peaceful and un molested." Sometimes the opportunity was appreciated only in retrospect. "I have wished many times," wrote Achsah Colburn, "that I could say to young ladies in Oberlin Collegiate Institute, 'how great are your privileges! Will you not improve them better than I did? When you leave
there, and the last hope of ever enjoying them, is fled, you will know how to appreciate my feelings'.”

Women at Oberlin demonstrated ability to achieve high academic standards. In spite of having received less formal education prior to entering Oberlin, they did as well as the men in college. Fairchild, then a tutor of Hebrew, remarked that the ladies did as well or better than the men, one woman being second only to one man in the class. Earlier he had hesitated, in spite of Kellogg's strong opinion, to endorse women in the college course.

Most young ladies have such delicate constitutions that it is perilous to think of sitting down to hard study for six years or more. But those ladies of the junior class have endured the effort, I think, better than their classmates, and the ladies of the present freshman class have their lessons better and it seems to me with more ease than the majority of the young men. Perhaps they were further advanced when they entered...for the ladies, such a course is extraordinary, hence none but extraordinary young ladies will take it. There, I am a little proud of that logic.

Kellogg, who regretted that she herself had had to leave Oberlin without completing the course, responded,

I do not think study injurious to the constitution...and it seems that the continuing for so long a period under the same influences, in the same course, would give stability to the mind...not that I am yet willing to admit that ladies are naturally inferior, but it is a novel thing for a woman to be equally advanced in letters of any kind. They may, therefore, independent of any other reason, be accounted quite superior.

Superiority is a difficult thing to measure. It is enough to state that Oberlin women attempted and succeeded
in a course of study more rigorous than that offered in other schools for female students. This is not proof of superior intelligence, but rather of an ability to make use of unique circumstances. Education expanded women's interests and capabilities as religious activity extended their "sphere." The immediate change was subtle, however, and should not be exaggerated, for it occurred without significant protest, and without explicit challenge to the accepted roles. Oberlin members disclaimed appraisals such as that in the American Annals of Education (October 1838), which stated that "[t]his discovery [that coeducation works] is one of the most important ever made. The benefits which are likely to flow from it are immense. Woman is to be free. The hour of her emancipation is at hand. Daughters of America rejoice!" For the most part, there was little rejoicing over coeducation. Women were educated in order to fulfill their responsibilities, to have the capacity for critical thought, and to be competent in purifying society. The community did not aspire to the broader society's definition of success. This term, therefore, had little meaning to the women incorporated into the community. They did not, on the whole, leave college to confront a world of limited opportunities and options for women, one in which the dichotomy of workplace and home confined women to a limited occupation. Their roles were well-defined within the community, and their "sphere" extended to the larger society. They were to be teachers of virtue and molders of
Rita Saslaw, in "Student Societies: Nineteenth Century Establishment," notes that student societies did not oppose faculty authority and did not organize for social reform. She briefly discusses women's societies, concluding that their value lay in literary and rhetorical skills developed, rather than in social change. Men's societies, in contrast, had no social effect. She equates a lack of "calls to direct action" with an absence of intention to use the societies to initiate change.

The flaw in her argument lies in a narrow and too modern conception of social change. Men and women at Oberlin did not consider "direct action" the proper means by which to act. Saslaw sees the college society as a mere debating ground, ignoring the effect moral suasion and education were presumed to have. Yet student societies fit in well with the general theory of change, which held that "the only reliable means of initiating social progress appeared to be by strengthening individual character." To Oberlin members, everything was subordinated to the call to moral activism; no other justification for a society would have sufficed. In this light, the distinction between "individual growth," which Saslaw brushes off lightly, and "social change" breaks down.

The women's societies enabled Oberlin females to acquire organizational and oratorical ability. Oberlin women,
due to the general antipathy to women's public speaking, were not permitted to read commencement essays at the College ceremony. Until 1858, female College graduates participated in the Ladies Department commencement.\textsuperscript{44} This was the most controversial issue surrounding coeducation, and remains the particular aspect of college life that recent critics have emphasized in discussions concerning Oberlin "hypocrisy." Trustee-appointed committees looked into the matter throughout the period without resolution. Yet with their other activities, women were proficient in the necessary skills by the time they were allowed to speak publicly.

Saslaw assumed that the acceptance of faculty "authority" negated students' role in the societies. Oberlin students, for the most part, were not in opposition to the faculty, but to the world outside their community. In addition, the Lane students brought with them a commitment to free speech which was applied, within the limits of "decorum", to the college. The college authorities, although not overly enthused about the founding of the women's literary society, did not consciously influence the internal discussions.\textsuperscript{46}

Student societies aided in the education of missionaries and teachers. In 1835, there were four women's societies: the Oberlin Young Ladies Anti-Slavery Society (YLASS)\textsuperscript{47}, Female Society for the Promotion of Health (FSPH)\textsuperscript{48}, the Female Moral Reform Society (FMRS), and the Young Ladies Association of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute, which soon changed its name to the Young Ladies Literary Society (YLLS).
The Young Ladies Anti-Slavery Society had eighty six char-
ter members. The original list of names following the Ober-
lin Anti-Slavery Society Constitution (December 1835) in-
cludes those of sixty nine women, all of whom were crossed
off. It is reasonable to assume that these women were
among the original members of a general Oberlin society,
which split in deference to decorum.

On 21 July 1835, a group of women convened the first
Young Ladies Literary Society, which aimed to promote the
appreciation of literature and religion. The structure
of the group was similar to men's societies. As previously
noted, it provided an opportunity for women to express
themselves through public speaking within the group and
debate social questions that pertained to their lives.

A common theme, reflected in topics like "The Woman Demanded
by the Present Age," (1845) was the definition of the
nature of women's duties in the various roles Oberlin women
intended to fill. They also discussed pertinent educational
issues: "Should women take the college course?", "Should
the same advantages of education be had by women?", and
"Why do we study?". Concern about women's position in society
was evident as early as 1850 when it was "resolved" that
women should get the vote. This indicates parallel trends
toward secularization and a consciousness of "rights."
Philosophical debates were frequent, as "A Search for
Happiness," (1848), "Cultivation of the Sympathies," (1846),
"Chains of Existences" (1841) indicate. Discussions of poverty
and social rank were also common. Other topics included "Is it right to deck the brow with pearls?" (1846) and "How far shall we conform to public opinion?" (1847). Oberlin's ideas about manual labor influenced the Society in essays such as "Toil and Be Strong" (1847) and "Labor is Pleasure" (1849).

Certain topics are significant in their absence. There is almost no mention of governmental affairs, which were not considered to have a direct effect on these women's lives. However, Oberlin's "universal alienation to the Federal government" after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law inspired discussion on whether England was preferable to the United States. In contrast, there were no patriotic debates over these years.

Women debated how best to end slavery, not whether it should be ended. Rohrer suggests that people viewed abolitionism as dogma that required no debate. Lucy Stanton's essay of 1850, "A Plea for the Oppressed," was similar in tone and content to speeches given at public meetings of committed abolitionists; it spoke to "Reformers," "ye that advocate the great principles of Temperance, Peace, and Moral Reform..." Similarly, the fundamental religious beliefs inspired no debate, beyond discussion on particular religious issues. These included "The Qualifications of a Missionary" (1846), "The Female Missionary" (1847), and "The Influence of Spirituality on Intellectual Discipline" (1845).
The Society aimed to understand the relationship between religion and "actions of man" and applied this to its own world.  

Both Robert Lillich and Rohrer comment on the achievement of the YLLS in promoting women's intelligence, and developing their skills. Lillich sees the Society as an attempt on the part of the College to preserve modesty while making concessions to women's brains. Both writers display mild contempt for the Society's limits. Lillich remarks that, with the shift to secularism in the 1850's, the Society placed more emphasis on oratorical "technique" and debated "less serious" topics. He blames popular interest for this, noting that attendance rose with the increase of "silly" subjects. Rohrer calls the Society's topics "shallow," concerned with accepted virtues.

Oberlin accepted these virtues in opposition to much of the country, and most women at Oberlin were not "radicals" within the community. The YLLS was one forum in which women worked out the conflicts in their responsibilities, roles and education. Contrary to Rohrer's comments that the debates did not deal with "central issues," appeals to moral reform and morality were integral parts of their lives, and the Society served to strengthen their commitments. The supposedly "silly" topics of later years reflected the concerns of the next decade of Oberlin women. They, too, had to define their roles, but without the same sense of moral urgency or social cohesion. It is not sur-
prising that the first women in Oberlin spoke within the range of the community's values. Given the homogeneity and seclusion of that community, it is more surprising that they demonstrated what Rohrer terms open minds, and a rejection of pat answers to their questions. 61

The Oberlin Female Moral Reform Society represented, with characteristic fervor, women's role in the moral mission. Moral Reform was the central focus of this role. The Constitution of the OFMRS states:

Whereas the sin of licentiousness in all its forms, with all its horrors, exists throughout the length and breadth of our beloved country, poisoning the fountainhead of morality and virtue -- sapping the lifeblood of domestic happiness, And believing as we do, that it is the imperative duty of all females to combine their influence for the suppression of this vice, Therefore we have resolved to form ourselves into a society. 62

Oberlin's unique situation gave the society a slightly different emphasis than the national organization. The original aim, to end prostitution, raise prostitutes to a "high moral level," and punish their patrons, was not literally applicable to Oberlin in the early years. To raise the level of purity at Oberlin required that extremely high standards be set. The Society intended to "promote and sustain moral purity among the virtuous -- pledge to refrain from all licentious conversation, to cultivate and promote purity of feeling, of action and dress..." 63

The Annual Report of 1840 expressed fear that members felt that there was little work to be done in Oberlin, "as the vicious did not seek a house here." However, the absence
of extreme vice was not to be mistaken for sinlessness, or for an excuse to relax their efforts toward reform. 64

Women's Moral Reform societies in general, and Oberlin's in particular, placed more blame on "licentious" men than on the "fallen" of their own sex. Oberlin women pledged to exclude such men from their company. They believed that knowledge of evil would aid in the struggle against it, and had lecturers list "facts" about societal sin. In addition, they obtained pledges of purity from a large number of women and men. 65 They pledged, among other things, to speak of the marriage institution in a manner to maintain its honor, and criticized the public idea that women should be kept ignorant of men's ways and character: "Ignorance is not purity." 66 Impurity was extended to include not only blatant prostitution, but balls, theatres, novel reading, and casual conversation. These amounted to nothing short of "seductions." 67

Moral Reform sought to redress the sexual double standard, but women were not to be "like" men. Rather, men were to repress sexual instincts in favor of a pure society. To this end, mothers were to teach children, especially, but not exclusively, boys, of the evils of licentious behavior. 68 There is evident in this more antagonism to men than in any other framework of the time. The hostility to men and their sphere emphasizes the high value placed on women and theirs.

The tone of the meetings ranged from criticism and an
obsession with weeding out evil, to sympathy for the impure. The dominant tone, however, was that of duty. "What kind of spirit should we feel is manifest toward a fallen female?... She has forfeited our esteem; she has sinned. We know it all, but as Christians, should we cast her from our society or should we take means to reform her?"69 A visiting lecturer from New York, Sarah Smith, addressed the Society in June of 1840. She pointed out that "immense responsibility rests upon young ladies here, surrounded by such a flood of light and enjoying privileges probably superior to any in the world."70 They insisted on total purity of dress and manner, guarded against invitations to walk with young men, and sought to teach others of the potential evil in such activities. They combined a sense of moral superiority with a fervor that called on them to impose their morality on others. This relatively sinless community had a definition of evil that was extreme. The Society demonstrated hostility to those people, men in particular, who did not, or could not, rise to its standard of perfection.

Female Moral Reform was not peripheral to Oberlin's theory. On the contrary, it was a central aspect of social change, in that it was oriented toward women, and relied on moral suasion to purify individuals. In 1837, there were two hundred fifty Female Moral Reform Societies in the North, of which Oberlin's was the fourth largest local chapter.71 Virtually all women at Oberlin, students and faculty, joined
the Society at some point. There is hardly a woman student's name that is not on membership lists or mentioned in the minutes. Whereas the YLLS was founded with a membership of about a dozen women and reached only eighty in 1846, the OFMRS was founded with three hundred eighty women, both students and colonists. Throughout these years, membership included approximately twice the number of students as of married women. Many of these students were more than marginal members, in that they read essays, and participated in meetings. A surprisingly large number of students became officers and committee members. Although women faculty members, some of whom were active in the national society, played leadership roles in the OFMRS and remained a strong influence, there is no indication that students were any less fervent or committed to the cause. The Society exemplified the values of the entire community, and the moral urgency of its work.

Women's societies were integral aspects of all students' lives. It was not at all uncommon for a student to join several societies, including the coeducational Musical Association. These societies encouraged skills that would better prepare women for their lives' work; they also provided an opportunity for students to begin that work at once.
NOTES

1 Cordelia [?] to sister, 24 April 1850, Fletcher Collection, Box 17; Kellogg to Fairchild, 10 July 1839, Where Liberty Dwells. Both women remark upon the intellectual benefits of Oberlin, which seemed to them to justify any difficulties in being there.

2 It should be noted that, from the beginning, the number of women who applied for admission far exceeded the available space. For this reason, Sheffield and Austinburg auxiliary preparatory schools were created, although they lasted only for a short time.


6 Women teachers began to replace men in eastern schools in the 1830's, before the benefits of the shift were discovered by school boards. By 1888, 63% American teachers were women; 90% of the teaching force in cities were women. Sklar, p. 180.

7 Conditions were increasingly ad hoc the further west one went. Conditions such as those described in New England of a slightly earlier period were similar to those in the west in the 1830's and 1840's. See Cott, pp. 30-35.

8 S.J. Willard to Laura Branch, 11 April 1843, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

9 Very young women had a large amount of responsibility. Fairchild was amazed upon hearing that Kellogg had charge of a school with an enrollment of one hundred eight boys and an average attendance of eighty five. Fairchild to Kellogg, 15 January 1839, Where Liberty Dwells.
10 "Autobiographies of young women students," 1836, OCA (no file)

11 Sklar, p. 173.

12 Ibid., p. 178.

13 Zilpah Grant Bannister to Emily J. Bancroft, letter IV, Hints on Education (Boston: 1856)

14 Nancy Prudden to George Prudden, 16 May 1837, Fletcher Collection, Box 11; Helen Cowles, entries in journal, 1849, Grace Victorious; Hannah Warner to parents, 28 January 1842, Fletcher Collection, Box 16.

15 Samuel Read Hall, Lectures to Female Teachers on School-Keeping, (Boston: 1832).

16 I do not mean to imply by this a simple nativist analysis of the growth of widespread education. However, as has been shown in the rather extreme case of Oberlin, many white Protestants feared society's growing complexity, and interpreted unfamiliar actions as "sin." Education, a form of moral suasion, was to rectify this, and recreate a cohesive community. The issue of how cohesive colonial America had actually been is somewhat irrelevant; to these people, the world seemed to have lost its simplicity and purity. See Michael Katz, The Irony of Early School Reform, (Boston: 1968); Cott, pp. 96-97.

17 Hall, p. 21; p. 25; p. 31.

18 Ibid., p. 109; p. 166; p. 21.

19 Bannister to "a lady...", letter V, Hints on Education.

20 "Course Listings and Requirements of Ladies Department," Miscellaneous File, OCSC.

21 Bannister to "gentlemen," letter I, Hints on Education.

22 Alice Cowles, Lectures to young ladies, Fletcher Collection, Box 4.

23 Ann Elisa Gillett to Charlotte Fenner, 5 January 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.
24 Ann Elisa Gillett to Charlotte Fenner, 5 January 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 4. Gillett mentions Dr. Dascomb's talk on "phiseology" [sic] for one. Notes from Alice Cowles' lectures indicate a wide variety of topics concerning women's role, duties, dress, conversation, religion, etc.

25 When the women decided on the Hall rules, they agreed to report themselves if negligent. The time for such reports may have varied over the years.

26 Elizabeth Maxwell to parents, 25 September 1842, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

27 Gillett to Fenner, 5 January 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 4.

28 Maxwell to parents, 25 September 1842, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

29 Chadwick, p. 50, 54, claims that Sallie Holley was the only Unitarian in the late 1840's and was not required to attend Oberlin services. There is no discussion of early exceptions, however.

30 A year of Latin may have been required for entrance into either department: Thomas Woody, A History of Women's Education in the United States, (New York: 1929), vol 2, p. 231; Irene Ball's letter of admission, however, in which she states her academic qualifications, does not mention Latin, unless it is assumed to be one of the "solid branches" in which she was "advanced." Ball letter of admission, 2 May 1836, Fletcher Collection, Box 7.

31 "Course of study of Female Department," 1838, Miscellaneous File, OCSC.

32 Mary Kellogg did not complete the degree. She left Oberlin in 1838 for reasons concerning her family. Mary Hosford, Elizabeth Prall, and Caroline Mary Rudd received the degree.

33 Mary Hosford to Mary Kellogg, 24 June 1841, cited in Frances Hosford, p. 64.

34 Hosford to Kellogg, 24 June 1841, ibid., pp. 77-79.

35 Achsah Colburn to Hannah Warner, 17 August 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 16.
36 Cross states that, in western New York, where most Oberlin students had been raised, the "overwhelming majority of girls...did go to school for some part of each year...", p. 89. Few native-born Americans in that area were illiterate at that time, a rarity for the 1830's in other parts of the country, p. 93. It should be noted that grades were not given at Oberlin in these years, and faculty reports on students no longer exist.

37 Fairchild to Kellogg, 2 November 1840; 7 February 1840, Where Liberty Dwells.

38 Kellogg to Fairchild, 16 March 1840, ibid.

39 American Annals of Education, October 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 3.


41 Ibid., p. 29; 91; 35.

42 Cott, p. 96.


44 Fletcher, p. 295; There was no official Ladies Department ceremony until a faculty decision of 7 August 1844. In 1841, Mary Ann Adams, as principal, purposely changed the YLLS anniversary to coincide with men's commencement, so that the women would have their own ceremony; F. Hosford, p. 51.

45 Apparently women did read out loud in coed classes. See Fairchild's anecdote about Elizabeth Prall's causing the men to laugh. In addition, men attended YLLS ceremonies, where the women read their essays. Fairchild to Kellogg, 22 November 1839; 17 March 1841, Where Liberty Dwells.

46 In 1836, there was an incident that caused some uproar. In a skit about slavery, some YLLS members blackened their faces for the sake of "realism." Mrs Cowles and other women faculty were appalled by this insult to "good taste." Alice Cowles to Henry Cowles, 6 January 1836, Fletcher Collection, Box 3. I can find no indication that any action was taken on this.
This should not be confused with the Female Anti-slavery Society, which was also founded in 1835. The latter organization had forty eight charter members, mostly older women. Mrs. E.P. Ingersoll was its secretary. The married women of the town also formed a "Maternal Association" in that year, with Mrs. Esther Shipherd and Mrs. Eliza Stewart as officers.

I can find no information on this organization, except for Fletcher's reference that it existed, p. 320;322. He claims that they believed traditional dress and diet retarded physical, intellectual and spiritual growth.

There are no known records of this organization in its early years. It is interesting to note, however, with regard to comments made earlier with regard to abolition, that Angeline Tenney, the organization's secretary, signed her name as opposed to the admission of black students the year before.

Lillich claims that nine women met; Hosford and Mrs. A.G. Comings, "Pioneer Women of Oberlin College," Oberlin Alumni Magazine XIII, no. 7 (April 1927), p. 10, claim that twelve or more met, although they name only four officers (Emily Ingraham, Mary Williams, Sarah Capen, and Elizabeth Leonard) and six other members. A 1935 Centennial Celebration skit by Society members (Miscellaneous File, OCSC) recounts the founding with fourteen members.

Sources on the Society are scattered. In Jubilee Notes, 1888, Charles Conkling of the class of 1850, claimed that he had the notes of the first meetings, in Mary Ann Adams' writing (she was his wife and a founding member.) F. Hosford, Father Shipherd's Magna Charta, says that their daughter had these documents, and shared the information with Comings' for the latter's article, but they can no longer be found, p. 44.

In 1840 the Society changed its name to the Young Ladies Literary Society (YLLS) and I have chosen to use that name in this paper.

By "debate," one generally means conflicting views and discussion. Rohrer points out that many of the topics were considered objective, not open to true debate, p. 123; Lillich says that the floor was open for discussion but there was little participation, whether from modesty or because the subject matter did not inspire disagreement. I tend to the latter explanation. A common topic was "Is discussion worthwhile?"

Unfortunately, we must rely on topics covered after 1845 for this information; although not exact, the late 1840's probably indicate a general range of topics previously covered.
52 Rohrer, p. 185; 189.

53 Ibid., p. 158.

54 Ibid., p. 199.

55 Lucy Stanton was the first black president of the YLLS, elected in 1851.

56 Rohrer, p. 178.

57 Ibid., p. 168.

58 I disagree that the topics were trivial. There continued to be an abundance of essays on morality, religion, women's rights, justice for blacks, social roles, and education.

59 Rohrer, p. 217.

60 This must be emphasized because of the attention given Lucy Stone, Antoinette Brown, and Sallie Holley. These women were exceptions, each in her own way outside the Oberlin norm.

61 Rohrer, p. 174; 173.

62 Constitution of the Oberlin Female Moral Reform Society, 1835, Minutes and Records, OCSC.

63 Ibid.

64 Annual Report of the OFMRS, 1840, Minutes and Records.

65 Men at Oberlin also had a Moral Reform Society, which is indicative of their general support for values associated with women. The Advocate of Moral Reform (New York, 1835) complimented them on their example for other men, suggesting only that they put more emphasis on blaming men for licentiousness. "It is hoped that virtuous men will be willing to look upon the impure of their own sex with as much disrespect as they look upon the impure of ours." (AMR VIII, p. 57)

66 Minutes, July, 1842; 19 December 1843, OFMRS Records.
Minutes, 13 May 1836, OFMRS Records; Kellogg to Fairchild, 15 June 1840, wrote guiltily that she had read some "immoral" poetry, including Scott, Shakespeare, Heman and Sigourney; Fairchild to Kellogg, 25 August 1840, writes that she probably won't be harmed by it, Where Liberty Dwells; Helen Cowles, 21 June 1849, entry in journal: "Was accompanied home by one who, I am sorry to say, smokes tobacco. Would not choose to walk with a tobacco-smoker, but could not well avoid it at that time." Grace Victorious.

Minutes, 13 May 1836; 12 October 1838; June 1840, OFMRS Records.

Ibid., 19 December 1843.

Ibid., June [?] 1840.


Rohrer, p. 44; It's popularity increased in the 1850's.

Annual Report, 1840, OFMRS Records.

Alice Cowles, for example, was vice-president of the national society until her death. Ties between the local and New York branches remained strong and loyal in spite of splits in the larger organization over the years.
"Are the young ladies in all things as they should be? or are there 'roots of bitterness' springing up to trouble you?" It is difficult to answer this question posed by Achsah Colburn after leaving Oberlin. The uniformity of thought and belief during the early years minimized display of personal conflict. Oberlin's moral fervor and community values dominated all actions and decisions; the fervor itself was sustaining to members. Women and men sought sanctification through submission to God, which would lead to social purity. They demanded of themselves and others complete adherence to God's law. This involved total subordination of the self, and of egotistical action. Women as well as men were to fulfill their own and, by extension, society's, needs by denying earthly forms of fulfillment.

Catharine Beecher's cult of domesticity required of women a submissiveness identical to that required of all at Oberlin. In submission itself lay the greatest power. Beecher "advocated self-denial not as the means of personal salvation, but as the means of social cohesion. The
self was given over to the society.\(^2\) The individual was to be instrumental in changing the world, by denying his or her very worldliness. Members of the Oberlin community struggled with these values in an age when society dictated individualism and self-advancement. They tried to achieve a society of selfless individuals. Their goals were universal, their means personal. The paradox in this became apparent by the 1850's; complete submission to God failed to solve the problems of the world, or the stubbornness of the unconverted.

Emphasis on the homogeneity of public belief does overshadow the complexity of private experience. Many women and men at Oberlin, firm in belief, thought themselves lacking in submissiveness. Their letters and journals reveal conflict not with their values but with their perception of their own worth. They sought perfection, and were constantly and painfully aware of their own faults. Their often obsessive self-criticism and guilt may appear stereotypically feminine, but men as well as women experienced feelings of inadequacy. The future of society rested on their shoulders; the imperfections, therefore, were largely attributable to their personal failings and their incomplete submission. Perhaps the acceptance of their imperfection led them to understand the imperfectability of human society, and to attempt more realistic change.
The letters and journal of Helen Cowles illustrate clearly the extreme extent of these feelings. Often introspective, she exhibited dissatisfaction with herself. Five days before her seventh birthday, her mother remarked that it would be "pleasant" to have Helen "turn to the Lord" at so young an age. The child responded that she did not wish to wait until her birthday, for she did "wish to get rid of [her] sins." At the age of fourteen, Helen experienced conversion, and "gave up her will to God." Throughout the rest of her short life, she was constantly on her guard, lest she relax her fervor and become once again susceptible to sin. Her spiritual state was marred by perpetual insecurity. "I wish what knowledge I have was better classified and arranged," she remarked. "I wish I was intellectually all that I might be; and last, though not least, that I had the love of God in my heart. I should then feel that I had a place in the world, and was worth something." She felt unable to be the "simple Christian" she admired. Wishing to cleanse her conscience, Cowles worried that she did not recognize sin and guilt as she ought. What religious feeling she had, she wrote, was used by Satan to lead her to destruction. Certain that if she were "with Christ" she would feel safe, she "consecrate[d] herself anew" on different days and struggled against being a "grieveous backslider."
Helen Cowles, however, found submission impossible. As an intelligent and strong-willed child, she was often disobedient and untruthful. She was caught between her own impulses and her desire to conform to demands placed on her by herself and others. "How can I choose holiness instead of sin?... If I have got to love God voluntarily, there is no hope for me." At seventeen she compared herself to a "perfect" cousin and complained that it was too much to expect her to be a grown woman. Although she sought the approval of family and community in conversion, she did not believe she could be pure so long as she was concerned with the impression she made on others. Discovering that some women whom she respected found her too full of self-confidence and independence, she struggled to overcome these characteristics. At age twenty, anxious about her "spiritual state," she became ill. It was only when she realized that she was dying that she ceased expressions of self-condemnation and attained the previously elusive state of submission.

Helen Cowles' life was especially tragic, but her sense of inadequacy was far from unique. Mary Kellogg, who made a far more successful adjustment to earthly living, expressed similar awareness of perceived faults. Although hoping to "be a Christian" since childhood, she thought she would probably never be one, and thus warned Fairchild that she was incapable of sharing a "responsible station" with him. Kellogg referred to her student days at Oberlin
as lacking energy and ambition and she feared returning because of her own inadequacies. Since she would never feel happy or complete, she advised Fairchild to decide on his future without reference to her judgment or opinion as she "had none whatever." Love for him included a belief in her own inferiority: "I love you, that you are superior and more worthy than I am. Did you stand upon an equal footing,... I could but hate you." Others expressed like sentiments. One woman believed since childhood that people regarded her as somehow less than others. Mary Adams five-minute visit to one student caused a stir: "[She sat down] as if she wasn't a great deal above me." Another considered her heart to be full of sin, and could not "feel a Christian." Elizabeth Wakely reviewed the fifty years since her graduation from Oberlin and decided that "I have not realized my early ideals. The extent of my public labor has been to lead a woman's mission and teach a Bible class." A more practical woman accepted her conflicts: "I have had some trials of mind this spring, though nothing more than I suppose is common to pilgrims." Zeruiah Porter (Weed), in times of turmoil, was "still troubled with the shadows of unbelief." She was not reconciled to her husband's death, or comforted by his assurance that the Lord would care for her.

Such expressions of inferiority and disbelief make Hannah Warner's affirmations of pure faith seem rhetorical. She experienced the "sweetness of total submission to God"
and confided in him as a child to parents. She had been "reclaimed" in 1839 and had for two years experienced almost total communion with God. She challenged her young sister to live as a Christian and hinted that there might yet be selfishness in the other's heart. Such was the standard set before Oberlin Christians, and it was strenuously enforced by the shared commitment to the good society.14

Men too sought humility and recognized the value of submission. Fairchild prayed that he might be able "to avoid obstinacy and self confidence." He feared that he was not holy enough to preach gospel, and admitted privately to a lack of faith.15 He strongly desired to do his fellow men some good and to direct their "affections" to God, but recognized a "secret consciousness" that his soul did not feel the powers of the truth he held in theory.16 Similarly, the public image and private experience conflicted in other "pure" people. Weed's biographer admired his behavior upon the death of his first wife; he "sorrowed like a man.... submitted like a Christian." When his baby died, Weed himself admitted "[m]y heart bleeds over the spoils death has won."17

Oberlin members demanded of themselves and their community an impossible standard. This in itself led them to find blame, not with their ideology, but with themselves. Their view of society as an assortment of individuals required that they seek social betterment in individuals.
Yet, in adopting submissiveness as their method, they were confronted with a paradox. If individuals were the key to social purity and cohesiveness, how could they subordinate their individualism for the community? If social cohesion was the desired goal, how could they rely on each individual's purifying him or herself to achieve a collective good? In general, how was one to reconcile the values of individualism and collectivism to best benefit both?

This conflict appears frequently throughout American history, and is of particular interest regarding women. The term "conservative" is often applied to people who value a sense of community over an individualistic ethic, which is assumed to have triumphed. As a modern, capitalist order became dominant in society, the values of family and community were increasingly relegated to women, who were to be the "bearers of culture."

The nineteenth-century American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forebears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt that he had turned this new land, this temple of the chosen people, into one vast counting-house. But he could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage, not only to fortune, but to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly.

Women did not participate fully in the individualistic ethic or its benefits. They adhered to individualist values in measuring status or success, yet they were not allowed or encouraged to achieve such individual status themselves. Individualistic values were indeed dominant
in the culture, but reflected predominantly male, and specifically white male, status and achievement.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké wished to extend democracy's supposed benefits to women. America was not intended as a hierarchical society, and infringements of political and legal "rights" were inconsistent with the accepted values. Catharine Beecher recognized a hierarchy within American society, and structured a social role for women that depended on its continuance. She acknowledged that men had been given a role superior to women, but insisted that women's social responsibility was as necessary a part of societal change as was men's. The characters of the two sexes should be recognized and clearly differentiated, and both should be instructed as to their functions in the well-ordered society. ¹⁹

Through the nineteenth century, Beecher's ideology and method were the more successful, "possibly because [she] prescribed less dramatic cultural changes, spoke to real American anxieties about the pace of change, and introduced important stabilizing factors into the national ideology." ²⁰ As emphasized earlier, her ideology was inseparable from her practice, which was to educate women to teach and to exert a moral influence in society. That influence was "conservative" in that its ideal was a cohesive society based on a familial pattern. It contrasted sharply with the dominant values of the "masculine" world,
which glorified "progress" and growth. The price of men's activity in their realm seemed to be the dislocation of a close-knit society. Women were to regain and preserve that sense of society within the home, and to extend their influence to the larger community.

The belief in women as a purifying force did not simply fade with the acceptance of women's education and their participation in political activity. Women justified female suffrage as well as their entrance into the professions by claiming that theirs would be a positive influence on these bastions of male dominance. As women left the home to spread their influence, the distinction between the two realms became less clear, but the rationale behind women's public activity has remained constant. The "bearers of culture" were not to err as men had in their involvement with the industrial society; rather, they were to purify it with domestic values and regain community stability through their efforts.

Oberlin members were never able to truly reconcile their self-imposed separation from American society, because their conflicts were largely shared with the mainstream culture. People at Oberlin were, in the early years, antipathetic to an individualistic society, yet their response to collectivism was to create, or regain, a community by individual means. This required a fervor on the part of individuals that changed focus by the
1850's, when anti-slavery took on a new emphasis. Prior to that time, Oberlin's values were women's values, adopted by people in search of a stable community based on a familial order. Increasingly, men at Oberlin conformed to American social and political norms, which included more worldly activity outside the family. The sphere left to women through the nineteenth century revolved around the responsibility to preserve, by non-political means, the family and the community. Consistent with early Oberlin ideology, women were to minimize personal interest in the greater interest of family, or community, cohesiveness and stability.
NOTES

1 Achsah Colburn to Hannah Warner, 17 August 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 16.

2 Sklar, p. 172; This is not to imply that adherence to a socio-religious doctrine did not serve to satisfy personal needs. Indeed, it could well have been from a sense of unfulfillment that some were drawn to the doctrine and to moral action. However, the psychological background cannot be explored thoroughly here. It must be assumed that, given certain social circumstances, adherence to a set of values and their culture fulfilled an otherwise unanswered personal need.

3 Helen Cowles was the eldest child of Alice and Henry Cowles. She was born in 1831, moved to Oberlin in 1835, and attended the Preparatory Department of Oberlin College from 1845-48 and the Ladies Department from 1849-51. She died in 1851.

4 Alice Cowles, entry in journal, 6 August 1838, Fletcher Collection, Box 4.

5 Minerva Cowles, biographical remarks in Grace Victorious, p. 27-32. Minerva Cowles was Helen's stepmother; she married Henry Cowles soon after Alice Cowles' death in 1843.

6 Helen Cowles to Grandmother Welch, 4 May 1847, Grace Victorious.

7 Helen Cowles, entries in journal, 22 April 1849; 26 June 1849; 30 January 1848.

8 Helen Cowles discussion with family, recorded by Minerva Cowles, Grace Victorious, pp. 28-29.

9 Helen Cowles, entries in journal, 30 January 1848; 18 July 1849.

10 No cause of death is stated in Grace Victorious. Minerva Cowles seemed to think that her spiritual state was far more significant, and, in biographical remarks, she stated: "Through the tribulation of immense suffering, it pleased the Lord to mature her graces and ripen her piety for heaven... In this state of unbroken calmness she passed the closing weeks of her life," p. 224-25.
11 Kellogg to Fairchild, "Tues. evening", sometimes in 1838; 11 January 1841, Where Liberty Dwells.

12 Kellogg to Fairchild, 21 August 1838; 8 February 1841; 16 March 1840, ibid.

13 Cordelia [?] to sister, 24 April 1850, Fletcher Collection, Box 17; Elizabeth Maxwell (Monroe) to parents, 31 March 1841, Fletcher Collection, Box 7; Harriet Tenney to Angeline Tenney, 16 April 1837, Fletcher Collection, Box 7; Elizabeth Wakely (Patchin) to Alumni, 1896, Miscellaneous File, OCSC; Jane B. Trew to father, 9 May 1843; Weed to Porter, 22 November 1850; Porter to T. Weed (EW's brother), January 1851, Faith and Works.

14 Hannah Warner to parents, 28 January 1842, Fletcher Collection, Box 16.

15 Fairchild to Kellogg, 21 September 1841; 22 November 1839; 17 March 1841, Where Liberty Dwells. In this last letter, Fairchild confides that he has a good deal of faith in her, where he lacks faith in God.

16 Fairchild to Kellogg, 30 May 1841, ibid.

17 Weed's biographer's notes, p. 127; Weed to Porter, 7 July 1845, Faith and Works.


19 Sklar, p. 132-37.

20 Ibid., p. 137.
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