

Travel and Feminine Rebellion in Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and Martha Finley's *Elsie's Girlhood*

Just after Lucy Carrington invites Elsie Dinsmore to spend a holiday with her family in Martha Finley's 1867 novel, *Elsie's Girlhood*, Elsie retreats from her Southern plantation to read in the open air. She cradles her new book, Susan Warner's 1850 *The Wide, Wide World*, and she is "so full of sympathy for little Ellen that tears were dropping upon the page as she read" (65). While Elsie is "fully absorbed," her cousin Arthur sneaks up on her, beats her, and sneers at her and her "namby-pamby girl's story" in the process (65). It is no accident that Elsie picks up Warner's book in between significant moments in the novel—one where she is asked to go somewhere and another where she is placed in danger. Both wildly popular, *The Wide, Wide World* and *Elsie's Girlhood* served as handbooks for children who were making the most significant journeys of their lives—the journey from girlhood to womanhood. Yet the two protagonists do not merely conduct metaphorical journeys; they undergo real ones. At a time when "travel . . . was deemed inappropriate for a lady," both girls trek to an aunt's house in the rural countryside, enjoy a vacation with well-bred friends, and set sail for Europe (Siegel 2). In this paper, I will argue that the protagonists' geographical moves in *Elsie's Girlhood* and *The Wide, Wide World* unlock key recognitions to the young women about their larger quests for self-discovery. Though they live in a hierarchical world, the girls learn how to manipulate institutions, such as Christianity, class, and even patriotism for their benefit. That is not to say the girls did not believe in the power of these institutions but that they understood how to maneuver them in times when they were left to face the world alone and claim charge of their lives—times when they were travelling.