

What Would Elsie Do?: Educating Young Women About Moral and Academic Power in Martha Finley's Nineteenth-Century *Elsie Dinsmore* Series

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Abstract This article examines Martha Finley's immensely popular, postbellum Elsie Dinsmore series. As a teacher, Finley was concerned with the best methodology to educate young American women, a topic much debated in the nineteenth century because of the proliferation of conduct books like the Elsie series and the simultaneous advent of common schools. Even today, homeschool societies and Christian publishing houses like Vision Forum Ministries have picked up and endorse the Elsie books as heralding good Christian values and solid academic reading for the young women within their folds, indicating that Finley's proselytizing influence is not relegated to times past. Ultimately, this essay suggests that a fusion of moral and academic education became a source of subversive power for young, Evangelical women readers who learned how to cite confidently their scholarly authority because they felt they shared a unique relationship with God that superseded other oppressive structures impressed upon them.

Keywords Martha Finley · Elsie Dinsmore · Girls' Series Fiction · Homeschool · Common school · Evangelicalism

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I recently taught the first novel of Martha Finley's twenty-eight book *Elsie Dinsmore* series in an upper-division American Novel to 1900 course. The Elsie series began in 1867 and then continued into the first part of the twentieth century. My students naturally bristled at the pious, tearful, and all-too-perfect protagonist of this didactic, Evangelical Sunday School tract, whose spiritual journey seemed to have no relationship with their postmodern sensibilities. They scoffed at her tears, and her blind submission to her overbearing and abusive father, Horace Dinsmore.

I asked at the beginning of term if anyone had ever read or heard of Elsie; they all claimed not to, and seemed surprised when I shared that Finley's books have had significant impact ever since their initial publication.¹ In fact, two Christian publishing houses, Mission City Press and Hendrickson Publishers, have editions of the Elsie Dinsmore series available today. I asked the students to ask around to see if they knew anyone who had encountered the series growing up, to add context to our class discussion.

One student was surprised to find that his sister had converted to Christianity because of the Elsie Dinsmore series. As she told him about Elsie, her eyes had filled with tears. Another student offered that she, too, had come to Christian faith because of reading and rereading the Elsie series many times in her youth. She had been embarrassed to share this earlier, because of the scorn the class exhibited for the young heroine. Although anecdotal, my classroom experience with the Elsie series may shed light on how Martha Finley's work has retained its spiritual potency nearly 150 years since its initial publication. The book has remained in use in the contemporary college classroom, the nineteenth-century schoolroom, Sunday Schools past and present, and the contemporary homeschool setting.

In my view, Martha Finley was aware that her novel would be used as an Evangelical teaching tool, but she was likewise providing commentary on the state of nineteenth-century education by portraying the highs and lows of Elsie's intellectual pursuits in light of her spiritual journey. This article will concentrate on the first two books of the series, *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867) and *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* (1868), because they chronicle Elsie's formative years and are the best exemplars of Elsie's character and journey to educational independence. In these books, Elsie becomes a champion of holistic education, modeling how a Protestant Christian girl might take charge of her own education and spirituality, no matter her current circumstances or background.

Elsie is introduced as an unloved, emotionally abused heiress who has lost her mother and is ignored by her young father and his family until her demonstrated

¹ In *The First Hundred Years: The History of the House of Dodd*, Edward Dodd (1939) discusses the Elsie series' immense popularity during its initial publication with Mead Dodd, reasoning that "The Elsie books over a period of seventy odd years have sold about 5,000,000 copies. Suppose each book in libraries and in homes for nearly three generations have been read on the average of five times that makes 25,000,000 readings" (p. 15). The initial attraction of the Elsie books was unprecedented for a girls' series. Though the books' impact seemed to dwindle during the mid-twentieth century, their scope was not lost. Educator Mary Hill Arbuthnot, in her influential 1947 text *Children and Books*, affirms, "To this day sensible women remember weeping over Elsie's sit-down Sabbath strike at the piano," (1947, p. 22). Likewise, when Janet Elder Brown published her master's thesis, *The Saga of Elsie Dinsmore: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Sensibility* in 1945, Elsie's name was still commonplace in American households (p. 471).

virtue earns their favor. She evangelizes and converts those around her. According to Gregory Jackson (2013), the series is homiletic at its core; nineteenth-century educators used it to reinforce theological doctrine. Jackson (2013) asserts that books like the *Elsie* series were “parabiblical and extraliturgical... specifically didactic texts and practices intended to engage believers in the development of their faith through models alluding to but moving beyond the Bible itself” (p. 453). Educators used texts like *Elsie* to cast a narrative about how children should think and behave.

The Bible, in Finley's series, was so very “constantly in... [Elsie's] hands that it seemed almost a part of her” but in the external nineteenth-century world it was not able to sustain children's attention spans as fiction could (*ED*, 2011/1867, p. 189). Thus, while the Bible was relied upon first in the schoolroom, so, too, were novels and poetry, which were more easily digestible. Educators hoped their young readers would perceive other children heeding the call of Jesus and respond similarly. Notably, Martha Finley was herself a schoolteacher from 1851 to 1860, when her school closed due to the Civil War (Johnson, 2015). Finley then decided to write, publishing novels and Sunday School tracts geared toward children. As a teacher, Finley would have been well aware of the debates surrounding America's educational system in the mid-nineteenth-century—debates that had reached their height at the exact moment she had been forced to find work as a single young woman whose father had died and left her without financial support.

Like many other nineteenth-century white women, teaching and writing were for Finley her only means of attaining recognition and financial stability.² Finley's writings reflect both her background as a teacher and her devotion to Protestant Christian faith. Significantly, for this discussion, Finley's teaching and religion were immensely intermeshed. Whereas contemporary Americans speak proudly of the separation of church and state and are constantly battling encroachments of religion on secular education (and vice versa), public education at its outset was embedded with a spiritual charge. Thus, for Finley, educating young people and espousing the Evangelical mission of the Presbyterian church melded together as one common goal, a belief then pervasive in American society. Horace Mann, perhaps the most vocal supporter of public school education in America in the nineteenth century, avowed that school must have a moralizing agenda. He argued in 1840: “The germs of morality must be planted in the moral nature of children, at an early period of their life” (1840, p. 81). Mann's work to increase access to education was largely mission-focused, and teacher training based almost entirely on ensuring a new teacher could successfully inculcate religious dogma into children. In his foundational work on the history of American schooling, *Pillars of the Republic*, Carl Kaestle (1983) claims that education became synonymous with building an

² In *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*, Dana Goldstein (2014) discusses at length how women became associated with the profession of teaching. Her first chapter, *Missionary Teachers: The Common School Movement and the Feminization of American Teaching*, speaks both to what Finley probably experienced as a teacher in mid-nineteenth-century America as well as provides an astute overview about what the profession offered women along with the challenges that it set forth. Teaching was one of the only avenues through which women could provide for themselves outside of marriage. Authorship was another such avenue, and in her role as writer, Finley proved wildly successful. In the 1890s, she was making \$10,000 annually in royalties alone, translating to approximately \$250,000 annually by 2018 standards (Brown, 1945, p. 75).

ideal moral republic for future citizens. The establishment of schools was “entirely compatible with... central tenets of Protestant ideology, and... had clear education implications: schooling should stress unity, obedience, restraint, self-sacrifice, and the careful exercise of intelligence” (p. 81). This list of the ideological tenets that helped spur public education in the United States runs parallel to the overall themes of the Elsie series, a union of Evangelical precepts with education that is no accident.

For instance, *Elsie's Holiday at Roselands* centers on a battle of wills with Elsie's father, Horace, over his daughter's refusal to read a secular story on a Sunday. During this battle, Elsie is torn from the affection of her family and struggles with whether to obey scripture or her father. She sacrifices the worldly pleasures her father takes away because she believes she is punished for perhaps loving him too much and putting him above God in her life. In a moment of epiphany, Elsie thinks to herself, “Was she not suffering for [God's] sake? Was it not because she loved Him too well to disobey His commands, even to please her dearly beloved earthly father, that she was thus... subjected to trials that wrung her very heart?... She was bearing suffering for His dear sake, and here she was taught that even to be permitted to suffer for Him was a privilege” (p. 141). Returning to Kaestle's description of the moral doctrines behind the burgeoning school system in America, “unity, obedience, restraint,” and “self-sacrifice” are listed first—in *Holiday*, Elsie unifies her family through her faith, struggles with whom she should obey (her Heavenly or earthly father), restrains herself from caving into her father's secular whims, and sacrifices those financial and emotional “comforts” she mentions above for a higher reward. These themes recur frequently throughout the Elsie series.³

For mid-nineteenth-century educators, teaching morality was a key element of classroom teaching, and Finley's books testify to this harmony of thought. In his book, *Moral Education in America: Schools and the Shaping of Character from the Colonial Times to the Present*, B. Edward McClellan (1999) observes that in the nineteenth century, “The primary task of the female teacher was to exercise a strong moral influence on the child,... by serving as model and eliciting proper behavior from the child... In the daily routine of the classroom, teachers paid special attention the behavior of their children, carefully encouraging good habits and punishing bad ones” (p. 24). McClellan also notes that teachers were often hired even if they lacked a strong educational background, so long as they believed in these moral dictates. The evangelical bent of the Elsie series reflects the ways in which education was being constructed in its very first foundational moments in America when attempting to convert child readers was deemed part and parcel of education. What is important to note, though, and what many critics neglect to mention in their treatments of the Elsie series, is the last tenet of what Kaestle alluded to as being integral to America's first schools—teaching children an “exercise of intelligence.” Scholar Allen Shepherd (1982) discusses how he was

³ While *Elsie's Holidays at Roselands* describes Elsie's refusal to read a non-religious story on the Sabbath, the first book in the series ends with her refusal to sing a non-religious song on the Sabbath, demonstrating the repetition of thematic elements in the series. Whether Elsie should obey her earthly or her Heavenly father is underscored again as a moral frame and reinforces Kaestle's description of the lessons that public schools were promulgating.

first exposed to the Elsie Dinsmore series in fourth grade when his teacher, “Miss Smith... would read us another chapter... if we had been good all week, or even if we hadn’t” (p. 57). His judgment of Elsie’s behavior, as both an academic and past youthful reader, is that her actions are obedient to a fault: “with a few minor exceptions, [Elsie] struggles pathetically (or masochistically) and makes patient Griselda look positively willful” (Shepherd, 1982, p. 59). While on the surface this may seem true, Elsie is unafraid to pit her intellectual knowledge against her elders’, which sets up the conflict that drives the first two books of the series.

After all, Evangelical indoctrination did not automatically result in changed behavior: children were expected to examine their motives and actions and use their knowledge of Biblical principles to guide morality. This collision of religious principles with an intense understanding of when to invoke them (even in defiance of secular authority) is the doctrine that speaks to the popularity of the Elsie books in the nineteenth century (and arguably today), even as scholars deride their simplicity and overt Evangelical missionary focus. As Jacqueline Jackson and Phillip Kendall (1978) point out in their essay, “What Makes a Bad Book Good: *Elsie Dinsmore*,” the conflict over reading a non-religious book on the Sabbath translates into an allegory of good versus evil. They conclude that “the contest is not really between Elsie’s will and her father’s will, but between God, through the vessel of Elsie, and God’s vice-regent on earth... Satan,” through the vessel of Horace (p. 56). Elsie’s childhood strife reaches well beyond her seemingly small world. The idea of a young girl being used as a powerful vessel for God on Earth could very well prove attractive to child readers of any generation.

Elsie balks at her father’s wishes to act contrary to scripture; her decision to (as per Kaestle) “exercise” her own ideas against Horace’s infuriates him, especially as Elsie’s is often shown as the superior mind in their battle of wits. For example, on one occasion, her father’s friend (and her future husband), Mr. Travilla comes to check on Elsie and is horrified to hear of the split between father and daughter, as he sees the pain and disunity it causes:

“I am afraid, my dear,” said Mr. Travilla gently, that you are perhaps a little too much inclined to judge for yourself about right and wrong. You must remember that you are but a very little girl yet, and that your father is very much older and wiser.”... “Oh, Mr. Travilla!” replied the little girl earnestly. “My Bible teaches me better than that, for it says: ‘Every one of us shall give account of himself to God’;... So I know that I, and not papa, nor anyone else will, have to give account for my sins.” “I see it will never do for me to try to quote Scripture to you,” he remarked, looking rather discomfited, “for you know a great deal more about it than I do.” (*Holidays*, 2013b/1868, p. 91)

When Travilla tells Horace about this conversation, he explains that Elsie quite bested him with her scriptural arguments until “he really had no more to say.” In turn, Elsie’s father “looked displeased” and vowed that he would conquer his daughter’s “will” no matter the emotional cost to her or to himself (p. 93). In this passage, Elsie articulates her moral beliefs without the guidance of an older guardian like her father, and she does so through scriptural recitation and its application to her life—the eight-year-old protagonist is clearly in the right. This

ability to quote scripture and use it to bolster one's arguments is directly derived from early Evangelical educational procedures. "The practice of reading the Bible in schools without offering any interpretation or gloss" became standard in Protestant conceptions of what American common schools—the name for the first standardized public schools—should look like (McClellan, 1999, p. 32). Students would read the Bible daily, with the aim of applying it to every decision. As will be explored more later, this Protestant belief in the sacredness of the Bible was installed in the nineteenth-century American schoolroom setting in part to resist Catholic influence in the public school system. Catholics "were accustomed to studying the Scriptures only in light of other teachings in the church, and the Protestant habit of letting the Bible speak for itself was entirely alien to their tradition. In their view, Scripture-reading unaccompanied by other instruction revealed only partial truths" (McClellan, 1999, p. 37). Without the church's teachings and the knowledge of history and tradition, Catholics believed that scripture alone could be easily misinterpreted. For Elsie, reliance on scripture provided her a definitive means to show herself as particularly erudite in the Protestant educational vein, and in doing so, she modeled to Finley's young audience how to transfer what was learned in school to "real life" situations and contexts.

That Finley is commenting on America's educational system manifests itself most plainly in the numerous scenes that take place in the schoolroom. In fact, the first Elsie book opens with a description of the classroom at Roselands, where Elsie lives with her cousins until the end of book two. Rather than having a model teacher who aids Elsie's intellectual and spiritual development as would be expected, Elsie is not treated well by her instructor, Miss Day. The child is often persecuted because the teacher is overworked and frustrated with her position. The teacher's "patience was by no means inexhaustible," Finley informs her readers (*ED*, 2011a/1867, p. 8). As Elsie's father has left his child to be raised by relatives, she is left without a protector for the first part of the novel; in fact, Miss Day "[is] always more severe with Elsie than any of her other pupils" because she knows no one will reprimand her for her harshness (p. 11). Thus, the first few pages of *Elsie Dinsmore* describe how Elsie is unfairly denied an outing to the fair because she is unable to complete her assignments, having been purposely distracted by her cousin Arthur (p. 9). Rather than listening to any explanation as to why Elsie's lessons are not perfectly completed, Miss Day simply calls her student "careless" and "disobedient" (p. 11). "You have failed in everything," she reprimands (p. 11). Elsie's cousin Lora tries to explain that Elsie was not at fault, but Miss Day remains "determined to vent her displeasure upon her innocent victim" (p. 14).

Here we have an immediate example of a school system failing to teach morality via its female instructor. The only spiritual guidance Elsie seems to receive is from the Bible itself, and her learning comes from her own work ethic. She thoughtfully applies the textbook and scriptural knowledge she has been provided, even when most students in Elsie's situation would have lost interest. After all, regardless of Miss Day's lack of care for her and her disappointment that she is to be left at school while the other children attend the fair, she still "turn[s] to her book" and "trie[s] to study," trusting that her books will offer her some solace and hope (p. 14). Though

ill-treated, then, Elsie proves herself industrious, possibly the most important, most lauded trait a child could exhibit in mid-nineteenth-century America. Kaestle (1983) establishes in his study that “The necessity of hard work was a central message of schoolbooks and children’s fiction in antebellum America... [There was] a conviction that social order and social morality depended upon individual character and that the chief badge of character was work” (pp. 82–83). Perhaps the most famous male version of this ideal in a children’s book is found in Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches stories. *Ragged Dick*, Alger’s fourth and most renowned book, about hard work overcoming all hurdles, was published the same year as *Elsie Dinsmore*, a cultural confluence that cannot be disregarded. Alger’s name has become “shorthand for someone who has risen through the ranks—the self-made man, against the odds. The prevailing form of this discourse in the United States concerns strong-willed, courageous individuals who struggle against the odds and triumph” (Nackenoff, 1994, p. 4). Elsie, though an heiress, is similarly described as self-made: she has no familial support, comfort, or love. The only way she gains relational status and access to her own finances is by acquiring for herself those characteristics that should have been part of her schooling, when the institution itself, in the form of Miss Day, refuses to meet its obligations. Elsie, like the heroes of Alger’s story, learns through self-education and an innate productivity how to make the institution she is in work as it should for her despite all difficulties.

Finley’s readers could very well read Elsie’s story as mapping how to become the “self-made woman” in the nineteenth century. Her books, alongside Alger’s, potentially show girls rather than boys in the nineteenth century how to work within the confines of their circumstances and achieve the highest results. In Elsie’s case, she is eventually able to become beloved by her family, enjoy incredible wealth, later marry and begin a family of her own—achievements that young female readers would have seen as gauges of Elsie’s success.

The schoolroom is where Elsie can begin to achieve these goals: while it is not ideal because of Miss Day’s failings, it still produces the basic structure Elsie needs to rise. Whereas the boys in Alger’s narratives must navigate the urban, public space, Elsie must navigate her domestic space—the schoolroom represents an extension of that space for her. In the South, public common schools were not as prevalent as in the North, and schoolrooms inside a plantation home were much more the norm. Often, just as Finley describes, wealthy families would band together and find one governess for a group of local children. This governess would almost always be a transplant who had received her education and training in common schools from the North. Likewise, “the over-whelming dominance of the northern printing industry meant that nearly all school textbooks originated in the North, were written by northern authors, and contained northern-centric content” (Groen, 2013, p. 23). Hence, education for well-to-do Southern white children did not differ in any substantial way from their Northern counterparts.⁴

⁴ There is an underlying assumption in the Elsie series that Miss Day hails from the North. When Miss Day leaves school and gives her pupils a vacation, Finley writes that “Miss Day went north, expecting to be absent several months” (p. 160).

Elsie's classroom is at Roselands, where she feels like an outsider in her own home; she struggles to find a place in the family sphere that feels comfortable. Indeed, when at last "happy days had come to the little Elsie" near the end of the first book, it is because she has finally triumphed over Miss Day's and her cousin Arthur's machinations and found protection and love from her father (at least briefly) (p. 159). Notably, Elsie's goal in self-education is an extension of her hope to make her home environment a safe space where she feels accepted as part of a family. Toward the end of the first book, Arthur once again sabotages Elsie's hard work, blotting her copybook when no one is around and while he is aware that "Miss Day, to be sure, knew the appearance of Elsie's copybook quite as well,... there was [little] danger of her interference" (p. 147). When confronted, Miss Day as usual does not protect Elsie, and it is not until Elsie's father thoroughly investigates what happened that Elsie is exonerated.

Miss Day fails Elsie in that most crucial job of modelling the good behavior she should want to instill in her students. She does not value Elsie's hard work, nor does she outwardly portray Christian principles by protecting the innocent. According to Dana Goldstein (2014), schools were supposed to be "secular churches: community centers where any child could be improved—even religiously 'saved'—through education. Teaching was the female equivalent of ministry," thus it can be interpreted that Miss Day's hypocrisy undermines the entire educational experiment in America (Goldstein, 2014, p. 5). In my view, Elsie ultimately supplants Miss Day to become the educator that her family—and Finley's young readers—supposedly need.

Hence, Finley self-consciously fashions an Evangelical girl protagonist whose overall purpose is to teach and personify the objectives that Miss Day should have had: to save children, exemplify the value of hard work, and impart Evangelical moral precepts as an ideal way of life. It is also central to the novel that Elsie must step into the role of mother in the household as well. A child's education was supposed to begin at home with her mother; the schoolteacher ideally reinforced beliefs that the mother had already inculcated. Samuel Goodrich (1838), a prominent author of parenting manuals and children's morality tales, pleaded in one of his treatises that mothers understand the value of their roles: "You who gave it birth, the mother of its body, are also the mother of its soul for good or ill... Look at the innocent! Tell me again, will you save it? Will you watch over it, will you teach it, warn it, discipline it, subdue it, pray for it?," he asks (p. 15).

The melding of the mother's with the schoolteacher's role speaks to the feminization of the nineteenth-century educational system. Its ideology placed the raising of children squarely on women's shoulders, expecting that they would mold youth in both intellectual and moral pursuits, with the primary focus always the child's soul, as per Goodrich. According to Kaestle (1983), "The education of young children fell to the mother, not just because more fathers were now away from home all day, but because women had an emotional, biological and spiritual propensity for children" (p. 86). Since Elsie lacks both mother and faithful teacher, the responsibility falls to her to understand and apply Biblical principles. The Evangelical reliance on scripture ultimately becomes Elsie's only path to empowerment, and the young protagonist's story embodies the ideological

underpinnings of the educational system so much so that it becomes ultimately impossible for those around her not to give her the due respect that her Protestant values evoked in the nineteenth-century, middle-class American mind.

Elsie's saving of her father, Horace, is the best indicator that while she was supposed to be his student, she was in actuality his teacher—as he had not remarried, he, too, lacked an appropriate female figure to guide both Elsie and himself. The father/daughter power struggle is based in good and evil, but it goes beyond the battle between Horace and God for the stewardship of Elsie's soul. Horace believes he should be the sole influence on Elsie's moral being, and views her love of God as interfering with her daughterly compliance. When Elsie says she will do all he says as long as he does not “bid [her] break God's commandments,” he responds “in a tone of severity,” insisting, “I will have no if in the matter—nothing but implicit, unconditional obedience” (*Holidays*, 2013b/1868, p. 97). As a nineteenth-century man, however, Horace cannot be Elsie's ideal teacher, and readers also know that Miss Day fails in this role. Elsie, then, must save and educate herself and, as the most moral female in the book, it rests on her to do the same for those around her. In a 2014 article, Rebekka Mehl argues that Elsie's obedience to God offers the child a “spiritually inspired independence” over her patriarchal father and that “while one could claim that Elsie's obedience to God is a continuation of her submission to a masculine deity, closer examination of her religious experience demonstrates that her spirituality is uniquely feminine” (2014, p. 91). Elsie's reliance her own interpretation of scripture allows her to transcend her father's earthly authority as well as his strictly masculine view of the world.

Elsie ultimately survives and thrives by invoking those nurturing principles that give educational institutions their authority and reaffirming Protestant public school values. She transposes the father/daughter role as well as the teacher/student role, demonstrating that the right values in the right person (i.e., Evangelical and female) are needed for America's moral and educational leaders. Without this combination, the republic will not reach the heights it should, and cannot claim any real hope of a bright future. Kaestle (1983) reminds us that the American “nation was born in revolution and had weathered decades of anxiety that the system would collapse because of the insufficient virtue of its citizens... The morality of the social system as a system was beyond question; the moral quality of the society was therefore to be improved by improving the moral quality of individuals” (p. 81). The educational system was in place to do just that, to “improve” citizens' sense of morality, and religious women were needed at its helm. Horace Dinsmore, then, with his strict, secular, masculinist views would never work as a national ethical guide, and he could never instruct a young woman like Elsie without outside feminine influence. Elsie's external demonstration of goodness ultimately serves as a standard for child readers of the series who learn from her what they should be seeking in their parents and teachers—and how to tell when those figures do not have their best interests (from an Evangelical Christian standpoint) at heart.

Horace's shortcomings as an educator for Elsie are directly tied to his secular tendencies and his lack of respect for the burgeoning public American school system, a system with women illustrated rightfully at its helm. The climax of Elsie's *Holidays at Roselands* is, quite distinctly, spurred by an educational debate about

public versus private school. Horace knows Elsie's biggest fear is to be sent to a Catholic school, and he uses this as his final ultimatum to have Elsie bow to his wishes, even if those go against her spiritual conscience. Elsie's aunt gives her niece the bad news. "I wish I could save you from it," she says, "[Your father] says that if you continue to obdurate, he has quite determined to send you to a convent to be educated" (p. 161). Elsie's reaction is violent, and while her aunt "knew that much of Elsie's reading had been on the subject of Popery and Papal institutions... [she] was hardly prepared for the effect of her communication" (p. 161). Finley describes Elsie's reaction:

"On, Aunt Adelaide!" almost shrieked the little girl, throwing her arms around her aunt's neck, and clinging to her, as if in mortal terror. "Save me! Save me! Oh, tell papa I would rather he kill me at once, than send me to such a place... They will try to make me go to mass, and pray to the Virgin, and bow to crucifixes; and when I refuse, they will put me in a dungeon and torture me!... Beg him not to put me there! I shall go crazy! I feel as if I were going crazy now!" (p. 162)

Through all Elsie's troubles, this is the first moment when she loses control. While her "temper" is described as "quick," "it was seldom, very seldom, that word or tone or look betrayed the existence of such feelings, and it was a common remark in the family that Elsie had no spirit" (*ED*, 2011a/1867, p. 12). This outburst, then, reveals a side of Elsie that has never been allowed to surface, and yet if we are to read Elsie as an ideal Christian, then we are also to believe that such a reaction is justified. Like Jesus' one angry outburst against moneychangers in the temple, Elsie's outrage does not mar her otherwise perfect selfhood for readers. Rather, her response is seen as justified, and would have been encouraged by nineteenth-century educators and their textbooks, which were filled with anti-Catholic sentiments. For example, in an encyclopedia from the Public School Society, we find this passage, even *after* the society had claimed to work to renounce prejudice against Catholics in their textbooks:

Huss, John, a zealous reformer from Popery who lived in Bohemia, towards the close of the fourteenth, and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. He was bold and persevering; but at length, trusting himself to the deceitful Catholics, he was by them brought to trial, condemned as a heretic, and burned at the stake. (qtd. in McCluskey, 1964, p. 72)

Elsie's fears of torture are justified because she would have only read Protestant-biased children's books. Her aunt understands Elsie's fears, acknowledging that much of the young girl's "reading had been on the subject of Popery and Papal institutions," including "the terrible tortures of the Inquisition, and stories of martyrs and captive nuns" (*Holidays*, 2013b/1868, p. 161).

It is not surprising that soon after Horace's threat to send her to Catholic school, Elsie falls into a stupor, at times waking up with nightmares crying out, "'I cannot be a nun! Oh, papa, Save me! Save me!'" and "'Don't, don't! Take it away! I will not bow down to images!'" (p. 177). Her father cannot save her, of course, as he is the one who has damaged her. Further, he himself obviously has not been saved in

the Evangelical sense, or his threat would have never occurred. It is Elsie who must save her father, and educate him about how he must treat and guide her. While Elsie is sick, her doctor refuses to let Horace see her, afraid her father's presence might exacerbate her stress. The one time he is permitted in the room, she does not recognize Horace, and instead screams that her father wants "to torture me because I won't pray to the Virgin'" (p. 187). These musings are dismissed as hallucinations, but they have validity; Elsie's father had been attempting to set Elsie on a path toward Catholicism and away from Evangelical education, and it is only when she is supposedly out of her wits that she brings him to the "agony and remorse" he should have felt (p. 187). Perhaps it is only when Elsie is severed from the role of obedient child that she can truly show her father his fault and speak openly about the possible ramifications of his decision about her schooling. In the end, Elsie transforms Horace:

As he thought of [Elsie's] pure life, her constant anxiety to do right, her deep humility, her love of Jesus, and steadfast adherence to what she believed to be her duty, her martyr-like spirit in parting with everything she most esteemed and valued rather than be guilty of what seemed to others but a very slight infringement on the law of God—as he thought of all this—and contrasted it with his own worldly mindedness and self-righteousness, his utter neglect of the Savior, and determined efforts to make his child as worldly as himself, he shrank back appalled at the picture, and was constrained to cry out in bitterness of soul: "God be merciful to me, a sinner." (p. 188)

This dramatic conversion takes place just a few minutes after Elsie accuses her father of torture. Horace realizes finally that it is Elsie who has always presented an ideal for how one should act, not himself. He borrows Elsie's beloved Bible and reads through "the many verses marked with pencil, and many pages blistered with tears... Hour after hour, he sat there reading that little book," using his daughter's markings to instruct and guide him (p. 190). Through her pedagogic help, his morality is thus readjusted away from the secular paradigm he had possessed earlier to a specifically Evangelical Protestant one, shifting to embrace the same driving spirit of America's newly-formed common schools.⁵

It also bears mentioning that it is impossible to compare Elsie's character to the qualities sought in female schoolteachers and mothers in nineteenth-century America without also likening her to Jesus, the epitome of the Protestant moral educator. In an 1855 book titled, *Evangelical Life as Seen in the Example of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, preacher John James tells readers that "We shall... follow him by emulating his courage, and by scorning the praise of man... we look with love and gratitude to Jesus as the great Teacher" (1855, p. 246). The rhetoric of Jesus as educator was embedded in nineteenth-century Protestant culture, and Elsie's model

⁵ That Elsie's goal in refusing to obey her father's secular demands on her soul is rooted in a desire to save him in the Evangelical sense is made manifest in an earlier discussion Elsie holds with Mr. Travilla's mother in *Holidays at Roselands*. "It may be, Elsie dear, that you, by your steady adherence to the right, are to be made the honored instrument in bringing your father to a saving knowledge of Christ. You would be willing to suffer a great deal for that child, would you not?" questions Mrs. Travilla: "Ah, yes, indeed!" she said earnestly" (p. 137).

behavior in this homiletic text, combined with her long-suffering Christ-like characteristics are arguably needed so she can overcome the masculinist, secularist figure of Horace Dinsmore. Significantly, Elsie literally dies in the second book and miraculously comes back to life. Her illness, torment, and death directly lead to that conversion process that spurs her father to dedicate his life to Protestant Christianity. Once Elsie has saved him through her death, she is resurrected, presumably to continue her “teachings.”

While in the nineteenth century, stories of what Anne Tropp Trensky (1976) has termed “saintly children” abounded—that is “the confrontation between the innocent child and a corrupt society”—Elsie’s story is unique in that, unlike others such as little Eva who dies in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, her emulation of Christ goes further in that her physical body is restored (p. 389). Rather than appearing blasphemous, this narrative turn is accepted as routine in the novel, and the adults do not act surprised at Elsie’s return from the dead, but merely relieved. Gregory Jackson (2013) asserts that nineteenth-century readers of the Elsie series were invited to imagine, “through a subjunctive structure of identification keyed to the reader’s progress how their lives were framed by a pattern that itself diurnally modeled a modernized *imitatio Christi*” (p. 472). In other words, just as Elsie was imitating Christ, her young readers were imitating her, learning from her how best to behave, which mirrors Elsie’s father’s reaction to his daughter’s piety. Thus, the “What Would Jesus Do?” refrain of Evangelicals in 1990s America can be transferred quite easily to Finley’s aim for her young readers, who she hoped would ask, “What Would Elsie Do?”

The *Elsie Dinsmore* series not only comments on the state of education in nineteenth-century America, affirming the Protestant mission-centered model, but also provides a metacommentary for child readers about how to use books as educational tools in and of themselves. Just as nineteenth-century schools “promoted child-centered education and the nurturing of students’ moral and personal development,” so, too, did the Elsie series (Rousmaniere, 2013, p. 120). Elsie herself acts as the prime exemplum of how children ought to behave, offering a parabolic interpretation of scripture that readers responded to fervently over the course of 28 books.

To return to the anecdote that opened this essay, Elsie’s evangelical, instructive influence has not been relegated to the past alone, and in contemporary American society her books have become common among Christian homeschoolers. Considering the historical roots of Finley’s series, it is perhaps not surprising that the series has been appropriated by those who want to continue to merge Protestantism with education, although this aspiration now must be accomplished outside the public school system rather than within it (a turn Finley would likely have found horrifying). On a homeschool alumni blog posted in 2013, Lana Hope writes of her experience reading all the Elsie books with her family: “I loved it because I identified with Elsie. She struggled to breathe in an authoritarian home, but unlike me, she handled it with ease and poise... I wanted to be Elsie” (2014, para. 6–7). The series continues to invite young readers, especially young female readers, to transcribe their stories onto Elsie’s, and intriguingly, the demonstrated power struggles that helped readers defy patriarchal structures in the nineteenth

century may continue to hold resonance in Evangelical households that retain similar power structures today.

Mission City Press, one of the contemporary Christian publishing houses of the Elsie series that caters to homeschool students, has actually gone beyond reprinting the Elsie books to create study guides and advice books for girls centered on the Evangelical principles found within the novels. For example, in *Elsie's Life Lessons: Walking in the Fruit of the Spirit* (2011), the opening pages address why readers today would want to study this dated series. Elizabeth DeBeasi (2011), the book's creator, advises readers that "Our hope for you as you learn God's Word and discover more about walking in the fruit of the Holy Spirit through *Elsie's Life Lessons*, is that you will enjoy this study and enjoy being close to God... If you are ready to begin, take some time to memorize Galatians 5:22–23, the first key verse for this entire study guide. Be sure you have memorized it 'by heart' before moving on to the first chapter" (p. 11). The study guide, which includes Bible verse flash cards, encourages the nineteenth-century practice of relying on scripture, without interpretation. Mission City Press even emphasizes the use of Scripture to aid in subverting existing power structures: "When we tend to please everyone, when we're popular in all circles and mix well with this world, chances are we're not standing up for God." (p. 145). Some, like Joann Brown and Nancy St. Clair (2006) attest that Elsie's story is no doubt "problematic" and is being used by the "religious right to sustain its agenda" (p. 85). However, the ideology seems likewise to teach young women to disobey authority in certain instances. It persists and offers solace for students like Lana Hope, whose schooling is not yet divested from a nineteenth-century moralizing mission and who are introduced to the Elsie series with the expectation of discovering significant moral and intellectual truths.

As historical documents, the *Elsie Dinsmore* series presents scholars an inroad into understanding more fully the books and educational practices that shaped America's first public schools. Moreover, Finley's series also gestures toward how Evangelical girls could rise up and overcome restrictive environments, whether those environments were created from lackluster institutions, families, or hostility toward a girl's religious inclinations. While our public school system is now fairly secular, not everyone's experience in America reflects this shift. In Mission City Press's *Dear Elsie* (2001) advice book, for example, "witnessing at public school" is one concern that "Lindsey, age 12" asks "Elsie" to help her address (p. 114). Thus, respect for the secularization of schools is questioned in this contemporary Elsie offshoot, challenging the shifts America has made in its educational system and gesturing back to an earlier time when religious and academic education were fused.

Furthermore, the fact that a substantial subset of American Christian girls are homeschooled and using the Elsie series indicates that Elsie's evangelizing mission has not been consigned to an earlier, bygone age but is still being adopted today. In *Missionary Positions: Evangelicals and Empire in American Fiction*, Albert H. Tricomi (2011) discusses the concept of a "usable past," one in which authors depict a world that they believe will present an idyllic future if the principles from the fictional piece are employed in real life. He writes:

When we speak of American novelists creating a usable past in their fiction, we are not primarily referencing the novel's historical explanations, a retrospective act, but rather the novelist's persuasive powers in fashioning a convincing, persuasively imagined past on which a future vision depends... the American missionary novel is future oriented, since by virtual necessity it articulates a historically situated vision of an evangelizing America. (p. 2)

The *Elsie Dinsmore* series may not be missionary in the traditional series of the word, but Finley's ideas have traversed the American landscape in the number of people the author has reached and the time period her work continues to span. Hence, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Finley as a nineteenth-century author remains an evangelist whose conception of how young women ought to be educated is indeed being co-opted as "a usable past," one in which her ideas about the moral make-up of America's girls remain rooted in history yet persist as a teaching tool for shaping America's future.

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